

From the desk of Fr. Tim

A CATHOLIC VIEW OF THE BIBLE PART 1: A MODERN DILEMMA

by Fr. Tim Church

Although it was not motivated by an accurate understanding of things, I can remember that as a child I thought there were two kinds of Christians: those who believed in the Bible and those who did not. Catholics were in the latter group. This might have been one of those “urban myths” that was created in order to make Catholics look bad or good, depending on whether you believed in the Bible. It is a great surprise to find out that not only do Catholics believe in the Bible, but they had the primary role in writing, preserving and protecting it. There were actually other kinds of Christians in the days of writing the New Testament, but very few of them would have promoted its reading. St. Paul wrote most of his letters against them, and the Gospels were written in order to correct incorrect understandings of Jesus and his teachings. Those that passed the Biblical text on to subsequent generations were Catholics, many of whom, like St. Lawrence whose feast we kept a week or so ago, died to defend copies of the Gospels from being destroyed.

Even if we acknowledge the truth that the collection of books that we call the Bible is dependent on the Catholic Church, we feel certain that there is a difference between the way Catholics view and use it and the way others do. Over the course of the last 150 years there has been an amazing awakening among Catholics with regard to the important place of Scripture in our daily life. Beginning at about that time, Protestant biblical studies had developed a way of studying the Scriptures that called into question the validity of its teaching. Many of these scholars claimed that the teachings of the Bible were so severely colored by particular historical world views that they could not be relied upon in our generation. We can certainly see how this idea could surface as the concern over so called creationism and evolution, a concern that continues in our time. As people become better educated, the six days of creation in Genesis seems to be merely a myth in comparison to the scientific data at our disposal.

At first, the critical study of the Bible was regarded suspiciously by the Catholic hierarchy. It is understandable if the conclusions that were being made rendered the Bible as being useless. In fact, many of our Protestant brothers and sisters have concluded that, while the Bible is a token of the faith of a past age, it cannot be an authority for the establishment of moral or even theological principals in our time. Many have attempted to modify the Bible to meet the needs of the new age by ignoring the actual words of the original texts and creating what is in fact a new book, although it continues to bear the traditional title. More dramatically they have accepted new moral teachings as legitimate, even if the Bible teaches that they are incorrect.

Faced with observing the effect of a new understanding of the Bible, the Catholic Church expressed skepticism in this approach. More importantly, as this has come to chiefly impact their understanding of morality; the Church has dramatically reaffirmed the important place of Scripture in the life of the faithful. “*God speaks through the Bible, revealing himself and pointing out a solid basis and sure orientation for human behavior.*” (**Address of John Paul II to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2004**) It might be noted that Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was the president of this commission. As the new Pope, his address to the commission members is an expansion of those by Pope John Paul II:

“A somewhat paradoxical situation is plain for all to see: contemporary people, disappointed by so many unsatisfactory answers to the fundamental questions of life, seem to be opening themselves to the voice that comes from Transcendence and is expressed in the biblical message. However, at the same time, they are growing more and more intolerant of requests for behavior that corresponds with the values the Church has always presented as based on the Gospel. So we are faced with the most varied attempts to separate biblical

Revelation from the more binding proposals of life. In this situation, listening carefully to the Word of God can provide answers that are fully expressed in Christ's teaching."

It seems proper to understand that the authority of the Holy Scriptures to form our life is discoverable in a partnership between the Bible and the Church. If the Bible stands alone, it cannot withstand this modern attack. The Bible is properly placed within the life of the Church where it is interpreted and its truth protected and passed on to all people in all generations. The Church is the guardian and protector of the revealed truth found in the Bible.

Next time: Scripture and Tradition