

From the desk of Fr. Tim

The Catholic View of the Bible Part 2: Scripture and Tradition (1)

by Fr. Tim Church

When reflecting on the role of the Bible in the life of the Church it is of first importance to acknowledge that we are dealing with the subject of Divine Revelation. The Catholic Church teaches that by God's gracious mercy he has revealed to us the truth. While many things that we would claim as the truth are things that can be gained by the use of human reason, there is a point at which our reason falters and can go no farther. We can examine the world and the universe through which we travel and we can discover much with our human powers. We can even know something of God, that he is the origin and cause of all things and that he is the end to which life is directed. We realize, however, that our powers of investigation are limited.

It is also important that we know that our religious study, including our study of the Bible and, more directly, our study of God has a very specific goal. While the science of religion may be an interesting enterprise, knowing about God is not the goal. Knowing God and knowing about God are two different things. Especially, in order to experience a relationship with God, he reveals the truth about our life. This revelation consists of the manifestation of God himself and is the foundation of our hope for salvation.

“Man's faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God. But for man to be able to enter into real intimacy with him, God willed both to reveal himself to man and to give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith. The proofs of God's existence, however, can predispose one to faith and help one to see that faith is not opposed to reason.”

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 35)

The Bible is the revealed word of God but it is different from other ancient documents. There might be a temptation to reduce it to a book of rules or a useful tool for correcting the faults of others. It should be remembered that the Bible is the written record of God's word to mankind but it is in many instances incomplete and partial. Ultimately this truth is fully disclosed by Jesus Christ: *“In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe.”* **(Hebrews 1:1-2)**

We can say, therefore, that Jesus is the origin, the author and authority of the truth about God and his creation. The question before us concerns how this truth is transmitted to us. Quite obviously, the only scriptures that the first disciples possessed were what we know as the Old Testament. These proved valuable in seeing the foundation that God laid for the full revelation of his truth in his Son, Jesus Christ. But the knowledge about Jesus was “inscribed on their heart.” The first written text that eventually became part of the New Testament was St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, written in 51 A.D. St. Mark's Gospel was written at the earliest in 65 A.D. The last entry into the New Testament, the Revelation of St. John, was added just before the turn of the century, about 95 A.D. Actually, completed collections of all the books of the New Testament were relatively unusual until hundreds of years after the books were written. Many generations of Christians could have been born to the Church during this time, all fully functioning within the context of God's mercy but without the Bible. This is not to say that the Bible is unimportant but only that there is another way that God has devised to transmit his truth to us called Sacred Tradition.

To be continued...