

Lesson 3

Apostolic (Sacred) Tradition as a Source of Catholic Theology

Scripture, tradition and the Magisterium: Tradition (*paradosis* in the Greek Bible), is something handed down from one generation to the next. We are familiar with secular traditions or customs. Examples are eating roast turkey at Thanksgiving, toasting the bride and groom after a wedding, throwing wedding rice, lighting candles on birthday cakes and saluting the flag. Some traditions like advent candles, the May crowning and wearing ashes on Ash Wednesday have religious significance. But Sacred Tradition is different. It is the oral teaching of Jesus Christ handed on to the Apostles and the Church, which carries equal weight with the Church's book, the Bible. It is everything – other than Sacred Scripture – which was received by the Apostles from Jesus Christ, which was handed on by them to their successors and the Church. Sacred Tradition is the living and growing truth of Christ contained in the common teaching, common life, and common worship of the Church. Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. “Therefore, both sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same devotion and reverence” (*Dei Verbum* 9). Like a three-legged stool, the trinity of divine revelation, namely, Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the *Magisterium* (Christ-given and Spirit-guided teaching authority of the Church), makes sure that the Word of God is faithfully handed on to each succeeding generation. Since sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture come from one and the same divine Source, there is a close connection between them, for, taken together, they form one sacred deposit of the word of God. Neither of them is complete without the other. As the words themselves imply, SACRED SCRIPTURE is the written word of God, divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit; and SACRED TRADITION is divinely guided “*handing down*” of that revealed truth entrusted to the apostles, and passed on **written** or **unwritten**.

Living tradition and origin of Sacred tradition: The teachings of Sacred Tradition are not necessarily written down. Rather, these teachings are present in the world as they are lived out. They are, thus, handed on by the lives of those who have lived according to these teachings, as they themselves followed the example of Christ and the apostles (1 Corinthians 11:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:15). This perpetual handing on, or transmission, from one generation to the next of the teachings of Tradition is called a living Tradition. The Council of Trent explains how we got Sacred Tradition: “*Such truths and teaching are contained in written books and in the unwritten traditions that the apostles received from Christ himself (John 20:30; 21:35) or that were handed on, as it were from hand to hand, from the apostles under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and so have come down to us*” (Council of Trent, *Decree on Sacred Scripture and Tradition*: Denziger 783 [1501]). The Second Vatican Council teaches that “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture

form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, committed to the Church.” (*Dei Verbum*, 10). For Catholics, Sacred Tradition stands with Scripture in forming the one single deposit of the Faith. They complement and confirm one another. "Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity" (*Dei Verbum* 9). Scripture cannot be in conflict with Scripture, and one of the ways this is guaranteed is by Sacred Tradition.

The Catholic and the Protestant views: Our Protestant brothers and sisters, based on 2 Tim. 3:16, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable (useful) [Martin Luther deliberately translated it as "Sufficient"] for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work," argue that the Bible alone is intended by God to be the source of doctrinal truth, and its interpretation is left to the individual Christian. The Catholic Church, however, teaches that "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God . . ." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 97), and Christ established a living teaching authority (*Magisterium*) to safeguard the integrity of the gospel message, and to apply it with divine authority to succeeding ages. The Catholic Church explains that a) "The apostles left bishops as their successors and gave them their own position of teaching authority." (CCC 77). b) "This living transmission, accomplished through the Holy Spirit, is called Sacred Tradition..." (CCC 78). c) "Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence." (CCC 82). Since the Catholic doctrines on the veneration of Mary, her Immaculate Conception and her bodily Assumption into heaven, Transubstantiation at Holy Mass, praying to saints, the auricular confession, purgatory, etc are derived from Sacred tradition, Protestants don't accept them. The truth is that the Bible supports Sacred Tradition where Tradition supports the teachings of the apostles (2 Thess. 2:15), and is consistent with biblical revelation. Jesus insists that Sacred Tradition should not "transgresses the commands of God" (Matt. 15:3). In other words, it should be in harmony with biblical teaching and not opposed to it in any way. Though the Catholic Church officially states that Sacred Tradition should not and does not contradict Scripture, Protestants accuse Catholics of following doctrines based on tradition, without any foundation in the Scripture. Interestingly, Protestants today accept the Catholic "Tradition" of 27 books of the New Testament as divinely inspired. Protestants also accept the Catholic Tradition of meeting in the churches for worship on Sunday, rather than the Jewish custom of meeting on Saturday.

Sacred tradition and the Church: Through Sacred Tradition, "the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that

she herself is, all that she believes" (*Dei Verbum* 8, paragraph 1, quoted in CCC 78). "The sayings of the holy Fathers are a witness to the life-giving presence of this Tradition, showing how its riches are poured out in the practice and life of the Church, in her belief and her prayer." (*Dei Verbum* 8, paragraph 3, quoted in CCC, 78). The commission of preaching given by Christ to the apostles was faithfully fulfilled by the Apostles who, by their oral preaching, by example, and by observances, handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with him, and from what he did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled, also, by those Apostles and apostolic men who, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing. (*Dei Verbum*, 7). Sacred Tradition is expressed in and grows from the Church's creeds, the records of the Church's liturgy, the writings of the great Fathers of the Church, the decrees of popes and councils and the prayer and faith of the people. Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition (the common apostolic teaching, life and worship handed down to us in written and unwritten form), and the magisterial authority of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church are as inseparably united as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Sacred Tradition is handed down both by word of mouth and by letter. In Scripture, as we have it today, "*Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God*" (Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 1963, [referred to from its opening words as *Dei Verbum*] 10), so that the Bible is part, not the whole, of the apostolic *paradosis* (tradition). The teaching authority of the Church or the *Magisterium* has a role in interpreting the Bible and deciding authoritatively which truths are the parts of sacred tradition. In other words, the apostolic task of authoritatively and definitively passing on and applying revelation already received *is* carried on by the Pope and the bishops as successors to the apostles.

New Testament on Sacred Tradition: St. Paul, in his writings (1 Corinthians 11:23, for example), states very forcefully that he is "handing on" what was "handed on" to him. Biblical texts prove that the apostolic Church accepted Tradition as a norm for faith and practice. For example, 2 Thessalonians 2:15 states, "*So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter*", and 2 Thess. 3:6 asserts, "*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.*" 1 Cor. 11:2 reminds us, "*Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.*" (Confer also 2 Tim. 1:13-14). Besides, the Bible explicitly says that not everything Jesus did and taught was written down (John 20:30; 21:25). It is true that Jesus criticized the Jewish tradition (Matt.7:6, 15:3, 15:6-9), but that happened only when the tradition contradicted Scripture. In addition, Christian tradition, as explained above, is different from Jewish tradition which consisted of

interpretations of Torah given by the Jewish rabbis. That is why St. Paul praises both oral and written Christian traditions: *"Therefore, brethren, stand fast; and hold the traditions which you have learned, whether by word, or by our epistle."* (2 Thessalonians 1:14). *"The things which you have heard from me through many witnesses **you must hand on to trustworthy men who will be able to teach others**"* (2 Tim. 2:2).

The problem of Jesus criticizing the Jewish traditions: "You hypocrites!" declared Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees. "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men'" (Matt. 15:6-9). (Confer also Mark 7:8-9; Colossians 2:8). What inspired this harsh rebuke was the scribes and Pharisees' attack on Jesus' disciples for their failure to observe the religious custom of the ritual washing of their hands before eating. The object of Jesus' criticism was the tradition of Korban - the custom of dedicating one's belongings to the Temple, while retaining their use. This practice allowed one to forego familial obligations to support one's elderly parents by claiming one's property was dedicated to the Temple and therefore inviolable. Jesus declared this interpretation contrary to the commandment to honor father and mother (Ex. 20:12). Jesus' criticism of Korban did not mean that Jesus rejected all religious tradition, but only those which were contrary to the Scripture. We have Biblical texts to prove the apostolic Church accepted Tradition as a norm for faith and practice (2 Thessalonians 2:15, 1 Cor. 11:2, 2 Tim. 1:13-14), and that the Bible explicitly says that not everything Jesus did was written down (John 20:30; 21:35). Furthermore, Catholics distinguish capital "T" Tradition, which comes from God, either through Christ or the apostles (Luke 10:16), from lower-case "t" human traditions or customs. While the latter may (although need not), contradict the Word of God, the former cannot, and it is capital "T" Tradition about which Catholicism is principally concerned. Jesus not only didn't attack the Catholic view - the idea of Tradition as the authentic understanding and application of the Biblical message. By citing the commandment to honor father and mother, Christ not only subordinated a human tradition to the written Word of God but offered an infallible interpretation and application of a scriptural text, thus establishing the precedent for the apostles and their successors, the bishops, to follow. The apostles did the same thing when interpreting the Old Testament or explaining the teaching of Jesus. Apostolic teaching was the standard for the early Church. The interpretative and teaching function of the pope and the bishops who share in the teaching ministry of Christ and the apostles (the Magisterium), follows this pattern.