

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:  
*Which Came First - The Liturgy or the Bible?*

Non-Catholic Christians often ask me to defend this or that Catholic belief from the Bible. I am very happy to get this request, and I always make an effort to show that Catholic belief and practice are consistent with Holy Scripture. But often, the request proceeds from a false premise, namely, that the Bible is the only authentic source or bearer of divine revelation. This is a premise that Catholics rightly reject. So, whenever I am asked to defend my faith from Scripture, I also want to challenge the questioner, "Why should I defend my faith from Scripture alone? Shouldn't I appeal to *all* the authorities Christ gave us?"

Usually, the non-Catholic responds that only the Scriptures are inspired. Church Tradition (he claims) is of merely human origin. Fortunately, disproving this claim is the easiest thing in the world. All I have to do is ask, "What provision did Christ make for handing on the Christian faith? Did he point us to the Scriptures alone? Or to some other source?" The truth is that Christ never mentioned the completed canon of Christian Scriptures. Instead, he pointed us to sacred Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church. I would like to address Christ's teaching on the Magisterium in another article. Here, I want to focus only on Sacred Tradition, especially a tradition that all non-Catholic Christians accept implicitly: the Tradition of the Church's liturgy.

We find the oldest account of the Mass in St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. In this letter, Paul points back to a tradition that predates the Scripture, a tradition He received from the Lord Himself:

The tradition which I received from the Lord, and handed on to you, is that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was being betrayed, took bread, and gave thanks, and broke it, and said, Take, eat; this is my body, given up for you. Do this in remembrance of me. (1 Corinthians 11:23)

In this passage, we have the preeminent example of what the Church means by Sacred Tradition: something received orally from Our Lord, handed on through the apostles by His command, and received by the Church as a Sacred Trust to be celebrated "until he comes again." This is clearly how the apostle Paul understood the liturgy. He wrote, "I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you. (1 Corinthians 11:2)

When Paul addressed the Corinthians, much of the New Testament was still unwritten. And yet, the apostle believed that Church was able to maintain this tradition just as she had received it from the Lord. He also affirmed the principle of Catholicity - that, the Liturgy should be celebrated the same way in every place. (1 Corinthians 11:16) And, he clearly understood the Liturgy as a bearer of divine revelation, an authoritative proclamation of the Lord's death and resurrection. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:26)

Paul's account agrees with what we read in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Before one jot or tittle of the New Testament had ever been written, Jesus had authorized *a tradition* (i.e., something to be

handed on) which was not only the central act of the Church's worship, but also the primary means of handing on the faith. When the Scriptures finally were written, it was precisely in the context of the Liturgy that they were meant to be used and understood. Put simply, the Liturgy came first, not the Bible.

The Scriptures are divine, of course, but they cannot be set over against the authority of Christ's tradition. The Second Vatican Council expressed it this way:

There exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. (*Dei Verbum*)

If the case for Sacred Tradition is so strong, why do so many non-Catholics claim to defer to Scripture alone? The truth is that most non-Catholics cannot give a reasoned response to this question, and certainly not a Biblical response. Ironically, most of them hold their beliefs about Scripture simply because of their own tradition. They believe what pastors and parents have handed down. So the next time you get asked to defend your faith from Scripture take heart and turn it around. All Christians receive some tradition. The important question is, "Which tradition? Do you receive the traditions from Christ? Or those from the teaching of men?"