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God's Books

An article on the relationship between Sacred Scripture and the Church's Tradition. "The Bible did not 'fall' directly from heaven, but it is the Church who presents it to us, assuring us that God speaks to us today through Sacred Scripture."

05/31/2020

Any human community naturally tells stories about its own origins. A family gathering or anniversary is often the occasion to recall some significant event, such as an

anecdote about the grandparents or the merits of some illustrious ancestor. These narratives are not simply a nostalgic exercise of memory. They contribute to forming the identity of the family or group. Thus the younger members discover where they come from and understand better who they are.

This is how the people of Israel learned about themselves and passed on the marvelous works of the Lord from generation to generation.

Things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us.

We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders which he has wrought.^[1] The

Church, the new People of God, is also a family that recalls and constantly makes present the events that led to her origin: the history of

ancient Israel and above all the death and resurrection of Jesus.

These family or communal accounts are sometimes put into writing, and can even come to be considered reference works for the community in which they were born. Some ancient peoples attribute a divine origin to these writings. For them, these books have been written directly by their own gods. But when the Church states that “God is the author of Sacred Scripture,”^[2] does she mean to say something similar? How does the Catholic faith understand the origin of the Scriptures? What is their relationship with the Church?

Is God the author of the Bible?

Faith proclaims to us a God who has created heaven and earth and who respects the autonomy of his own creation. He does not seek to enslave the intelligence or freedom of his

rational creatures. Nor does He impose salvation on us; rather He offers it, so that if we choose to accept it we can welcome it wholeheartedly. Analogously, in making Himself known to us, He has wanted to employ a language that is comprehensible to us, since the language with which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit communicate eternally among themselves – the “divine idiom” – is inaccessible to us. Hence the Church tells us that God makes known his love for us and carries out his plan of salvation by acting and speaking “through men in human fashion.”[3]

In the light of the mystery of Jesus Christ, who “completed and perfected Revelation,”[4] it is easier to understand this divine way of acting. Jesus is true God and true Man. His Humanity is the way to come to know the mystery of God. Nevertheless, He has wanted to share

in our human limitations, except for sin. Not only did He suffer hunger and thirst and tiredness, but He also experienced the effort involved in learning to read, to practise the trade that Saint Joseph taught him... Jesus was God, but He did not renounce the limitations intrinsic to human nature.

Jesus wanted to speak to us with human words. He communicated to us his message of salvation with the ways of expression of a particular era. Analogously, when the Church speaks to us about the “divine inspiration” of Scripture, while stating clearly that the Holy Spirit is the principal author of the sacred books, this does not imply that they are exempt from the limitations proper to any human literary work. In Sacred Scripture, “the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the

eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men.”[5]

The human dimension of the Bible makes the Word of God accessible to us. But it also means that in reading it we encounter certain limitations. Some people have an excessively simplistic notion of the Bible, and leave no space for any kind of imperfection. As Saint John Paul II said, such people “tend to think that, since God is the Absolute Being, each of his words has to have an absolute value, independent of all the conditionings of human language.”[6] This might seem more respectful of God’s greatness, but in reality it means self-deception and the rejection of “the mysteries of scriptural inspiration and the Incarnation, tying oneself to a false notion of the Absolute Being. The God of the Bible is not an absolute being who crushes everything He

touches, cancelling all differences and shades of meaning.”[7]

By adapting Himself to our smallness, God manifests his mercy, in the love that leads Him to accommodate Himself to our ways of expression, to show Himself in a lovable way, so that his greatness will not impede our approaching Him. We see this way of acting in the work of Redemption, and also in the way He makes himself known. “When He expresses himself in human language, He does not give each expression a uniform value, but rather uses all the possible shades of meaning with great flexibility, also accepting their limitations.”[8]

In order to avoid an overly simplistic notion of the Bible, it is helpful to recall that the books which make it up were written not only at different periods of time, but also in three different languages: Hebrew,

Aramaic and Greek. The texts were written by human beings through whom God acted, without their ceasing to be true authors of their books.[9] For example, when Saint Paul expresses his indignation in strong words, saying *O senseless Galatians!* (*Gal 3:1*, cf *3:3*), it is he who is angry, not the Holy Spirit. Certainly, Saint Paul's warning is inspired by the Holy Spirit, but he uses a way of expressing himself in keeping with his own character and the linguistic turns of phrase then in use.

Tradition, an addition by the Church to the Bible?

Another consequence of the human and divine character of Sacred Scripture is its relation to the Church. The Bible did not “fall” directly from heaven, but it is the Church who presents it to us, assuring us that God speaks to us today through Sacred

Scripture. As was said above, the people of Israel and the Church are the family or community in which the narratives, prophecies, prayers, exhortations, proverbs and other texts that we find in the Old and New Testaments were born, took shape and were passed on.

Strictly speaking, the source or origin of Revelation is only God, who manifested himself fully in his Son made man, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Revelation of God. His life and teachings, especially his passion, death and resurrection, which took place “according to the Scriptures” (cf. *1 Cor* 15:3-4), make up the message that He himself commands the Apostles to preach throughout the world. This good news, the Gospel, which is transmitted in a living way in the Church, is the fundamental content of the apostolic Tradition. When written down it gives rise to the New

Testament; but it is also transmitted in the life of the Church: in the way she teaches the faith, the form her prayer takes in the liturgy, the lifestyle she sets forth when speaking about morals.

Tradition is the very life of the Church insofar as she passes on the Gospel. Therefore it is not correct to understand it as if it were only a part of Revelation, made up of the truths that do not appear clearly in the Bible. Nor is it reduced to the formulas and practices that have been added over time, nor to the teachings of the Fathers or the Councils. This confusion was found in some authors who spoke about the Bible and Tradition as if they were “two sources” of divine Revelation. Some truths of faith would be known thanks to Scripture and others thanks to Tradition. For example, the primacy of Peter is found in the Gospels (*Mt 16:17-19; Lk 22:31-32; Jn*

21:1-19), while the Assumption of our Lady does not appear explicitly in the New Testament. This seemed to be a simple scheme that resolved many problems. Nevertheless the idea that we have two sources of Revelation, as though God speaks to us through one or the other, does not correspond to reality. The Bible reaches us *within* the Church's Tradition, forming a part of it, not in a separate way.

By the very fact of living and spreading their faith, all Catholics are active subjects of Tradition, just as all the members of a family share in some way in communicating its identity. The holy life of those who follow Christ manifests the different facets of the Gospel. As Pope Francis said: "Each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel."[10] The Second Vatican

Council taught: “The Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes.”[11]

Why read from within Tradition?

The Church’s Tradition is alive. This contrasts with the view sometimes held of “tradition” or “traditions” as something of the past: the ancestral traditions of a people, traditional feasts or even traditional dress. In the Church, Tradition comes from the past but does not remain in the past. Benedict XVI uses an illuminating comparison in this regard: “Tradition is not the transmission of things or words, a collection of dead things. Tradition is the living river that links us to the origins, the living river in which the origins are ever present.”[12]

Within this living river, which is born in Christ and brings Christ

himself to us, the Church receives and passes on a collection of books that are given to her as an inspired testimony of divine Revelation, that is, an ensemble of Writings that communicate what God himself wanted to be written down for our salvation. “By means of the same Tradition the full canon of the sacred books is known to the Church and the holy Scriptures themselves are more thoroughly understood and constantly actualized in the Church. Thus God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse with the spouse of his beloved Son.”[13]

Tradition, which is the “home” where Sacred Scripture is born, also becomes the path for understanding it better. Something similar happens in the effort to appreciate a literary work in all its richness. A single reading is not enough; we need to focus on the context in which it was written, the intellectual outlook of its

author, the community in which it originated. Thus when the Church says that the living Tradition is a criterion for interpreting the Bible, [14] or that “the primary setting for scriptural interpretation is the life of the Church,”[15] she is telling us that a reading carried out in communion with all those who have believed in Christ opens to us all the riches of Sacred Scripture. Of course, any person can read and to some extent understand the Bible, even if they have not received the gift of faith. The difference is that, when a baptized person reads the Scriptures he or she is not simply seeking to decode the content of some ancient texts, but rather to discover the message that God has wanted to leave written down there and now wants to communicate to us.

Hence we can also appreciate better why, in order to understand the Bible, recourse to the Holy Spirit is so

strongly recommended. Before going to his death Jesus announced to his disciples that the Holy Spirit would teach and remind them of everything He had said to them (cf. *Jn 14:26*), and lead them into the fulness of the truth (cf. *Jn 16:13*). The reading of Sacred Scripture is a privileged moment when this promise becomes a reality. The Holy Spirit, author of the sacred books, helps us to understand better the life and teachings of Christ recorded in the Gospels, announced by the prophets and explained in the apostolic preaching. The Holy Spirit is the bond of love between believers, and thus brings us into communion with the Church of all times. Through the Holy Spirit, “the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church – and through her, in the world.”[16]

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[1] *Ps* 78:3-4. Cf. Pope Francis, *Apost. Exhort. Amoris Laetitia* (19 March 2016), no. 16.

[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 105.

[3] Vatican II, *Const. Dei Verbum*, no. 12.

[4] *Ibid.*, no. 4

[5] *Ibid.*, no. 13. Before *Dei Verbum*, this analogy had been set forth by Pius XII in the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (30 September 1943), no. 24 (EB 559; EB=Enchiridion Biblicum). Later on it was also used by Saint John Paul II in the Address *De tout Coeur*, 23 April 1993, nos. 6-7 (EB 559), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 101) and Benedict XVI in *Verbum Domini* (30 September 2010), no. 18.

[6] Saint John Paul II, Address *De tout coeur*, 23 April 23 1993, no. 8 (EB 1247).

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Cf. *Dei Verbum*, no. 11.

[10] Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et exsultate* (19 March 2018), no. 19.

[11] *Dei Verbum*, no. 8.

[12] Benedict XVI, General audience, 26 April 2006.

[13] *Dei Verbum*, no. 8.

[14] Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 12.

[15] Cf. *Verbum Domini*, nos. 29-30.

[16] *Dei Verbum*, no. 8.

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