

Tradition

by Sebastian R. Fama

The Catholic Church is often accused of placing a higher value on tradition than it does the Bible. The implication is that Catholics prefer to observe their own customs rather than the teachings of Christ. This, of course, is a false charge. The Bible speaks about two kinds of tradition; one is condemned and the other requires belief. Jesus was very clear in describing the type of tradition He condemned in Mark 7:8-13:

"You leave the commandment of God and hold fast **the tradition of men.**" And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep **your tradition!** For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'... but you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "what you would have gained from me is corban" (that is, given to God), then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus **making void the word of God through your tradition.**

The Scribes and Pharisees deliberately ignored the plain meaning of the Commandment and replaced it with a meaning that was more to their liking. Since it was not from God it was a "tradition of men." Sacred Tradition, which comes from God, requires belief. The apostle Paul tells us to: "Stand firm and **hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter**" (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Notice how Paul puts oral tradition on the same level as written tradition. He tells us why in 1 Thessalonians 2:13: "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when **you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God....**"

The oral and written teachings of the Apostles were both considered to be the word of God. And of course, that is perfectly natural as they were the appointed leaders of Christ's Church. Paul is even more explicit in his first letter to the Corinthians: "I commend you because you remember me in everything and **maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you**" (1 Corinthians 11:2).

It is sometimes claimed that the oral traditions that Paul is speaking of are the teachings that he would eventually put into writing. Writings that would later become Scripture. But the Early Church never mentions any such thing nor does Scripture indicate as much. In fact, the testimony of the Early Church Fathers around the time that the canon was finalized indicate otherwise. Basil of Caesarea, who was recognized as a doctor of the Church in the east as well as the west wrote the following in the year 375:

Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church **some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us "in mystery" by the tradition of the Apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force.** (*On the Holy Spirit* 27).

John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople said pretty much the same thing a short time later:

So, then brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word, or by epistle of ours" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). **Hence it is manifest, that they did not deliver all things by epistle, but many things also unwritten,** and in like manner both the one and the other are worthy of credit. **Therefore, let us think the tradition of the Church also worthy of credit. It is a tradition, seek no farther** (*Homilies on Second Thessalonians* [circa A.D. 400]).

How can we distinguish the traditions of men from Sacred Tradition? Well, if a tradition cannot be traced back to the early Church it is man-made. To believe otherwise would be to imply that God didn't get it right the first time. What Catholics call Sacred Tradition can be traced back to the early Church. The same cannot be said of those beliefs that are uniquely Protestant. Protestantism was the creation of men. It first appeared in the sixteenth century. We

even know the names of the men who started it. Names like Luther, Calvin and Zwingli. If men started it, it is a tradition of men and not of God.

When something is classified as a tradition it has no bearing on its legitimacy. It is merely a description of the method of transmission. When it came time to determine which books should be included in the New Testament, one of the criteria for determining inspiration was agreement with the Church's doctrinal traditions. **The Church values Scripture and Sacred Tradition equally** as "they both flow out of the same divine wellspring, making up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 2:9,10).

Whether they realize it or not, all Christians accept at least some of the Catholic Church's Traditions. All Christians agree on which 27 books belong in the New Testament. All Christians believe that Mark wrote the second Gospel (his name does not appear in any of the manuscripts). All Christians believe that public revelation ended with the death of the last apostle. And yet none of these things can be found in Scripture. The bottom line is that we know all these things because they are a part of what Catholics call "Sacred Tradition."

Long before Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom, Fathers of the Church were stressing the importance of Sacred Tradition. In the year 200 AD Tertullian wrote, "Wherever it shall be clear that the truth of the Christian discipline and faith are present, there also will be found **the truth of the Scriptures and their explanation, and of all the Christian traditions**" (*The Prescription Against Heretics* 19:3).

A few decades later, Origen writes, "**That alone is to be believed as the truth which is in no way at variance with ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition**" (*Fundamental Doctrines* 1, preface: 2, circa 225 AD).

Before the first page of the New Testament was written, the Gospels themselves were oral traditions. The apostles and their disciples preached what they were taught. If it was found that someone was teaching falsely, the Church, in its authority, would correct it. We see this happening at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-33). Jesus gave His Church authority and she exercised it. That same authoritative Church exists today (Matthew 16:18).

The Church pre-existed the New Testament and so did her teachings. Her purpose in putting the New Testament together was not to present a complete and detailed catalogue of Christian doctrine. At the time there were many writings being circulated among the churches. In determining which books would comprise the New Testament the Church was simply saying; these books are inspired, and all the others are not.

I can imagine that this is a horrifying thought for some. And that is because they have abandoned the teacher (the Church) but kept the textbook (the Bible). Without the teacher you lose access to her wisdom, experience and perspective. As the Catholic Encyclopedia points out: "It is the living Church and not Scripture that St. Paul indicates as the pillar and the unshakable ground of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). The truth has always come to us from God through the apostles and their successors to the faithful. Undoubtedly, Scripture has been a part of that. But not the only part. For if that were the case we would have needed the printing press in 33 A.D. and not in the fifteenth century.

Take away the Church and all you have is the Bible. "Bravo" says the Protestant. "I have need for nothing else." And so, he goes on his way cutting a path that differs from the rest of his Protestant brethren. And this of course is a strict violation of 2 Peter 1:20: "First of all you must understand this, **that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation.**"

The Bible is the Church's book. And contrary to the claims of her detractors, there is nothing in Sacred Tradition which contradicts its writings. When used properly the Scriptures promote unity. When used by those who reject Catholicism it becomes an instrument of disunity. That may not be their intent. However, when you separate the textbook from the teacher it is practically inevitable. It is only when we embrace Scripture and Sacred Tradition that we have the complete Word of God. And as Jesus once said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by **every word** that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).