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SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION: REVEALING GOD'S PLAN

Led by the Spirit, the Church grows in understanding God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ—God's Word become flesh. Both Scripture and Tradition find their source in God's Word. *by Margaret Nutting Ralph, PhD*

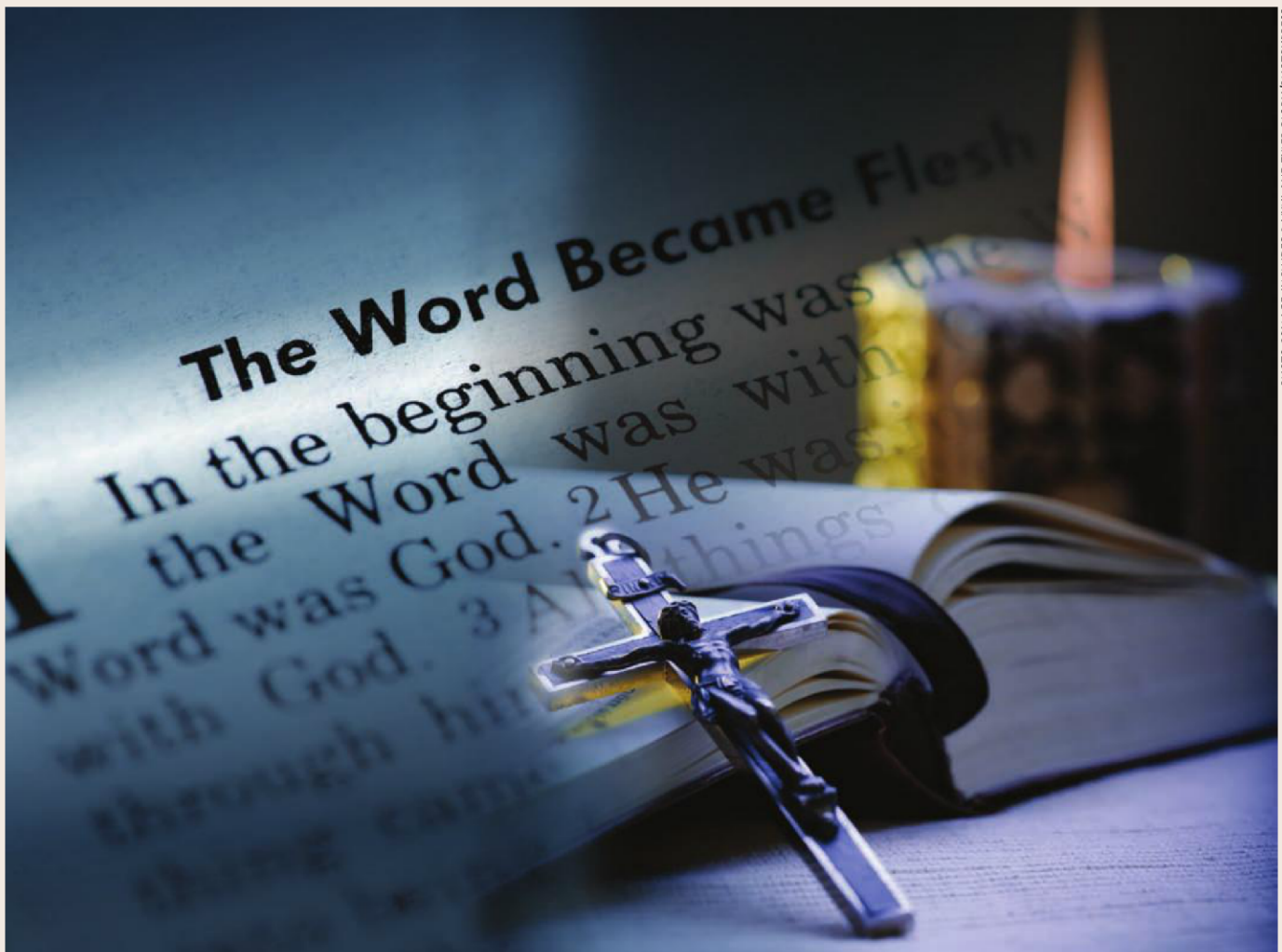


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Which came first, the chicken or the egg? This question is difficult to answer because each needs the other to exist. We might say the same thing about Scripture and Tradition. Each truly needs the other to exist.

The Catholic Church understands both Scripture and Tradition as expressions of the Word of God; each is a form of revelation—“God’s communication of himself and his loving plan to save us” (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, glossary). “By this revelation, then, the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men and women as his friends, and lives among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company” (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, “*Dei Verbum*” [DV] 2).

What came first is neither Scripture nor Tradition, but the Word. We read about this Word in John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things came to be through him, and

without him nothing came to be” (Jn 1:1–3). The phrase “the Word of God” refers first and foremost to the Word who existed before all else, the Word through whom all that exists came into being—the Word who became flesh as Jesus.

The book of Genesis also speaks of God’s creative Word. Both the Gospel of John and Genesis begin in the exact same way: “In the beginning . . .” (The author of John is alluding to Genesis.) Genesis goes on to say, “Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light” (Gn 1:3). The phrase “and God said” becomes a refrain in Genesis (see chapter 1). So, both Genesis and John’s Gospel teach that all that is comes to be through God’s creative Word. Christians call God’s Word, Jesus, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. God’s Word is God’s self-revelation to the human race: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14a).

This Word who became flesh, Jesus Christ, is the fulfillment of God’s self-revelation. Jesus, who suffered, died, and rose from the dead, remains with us through his Spirit. Led by the Spirit, the Church continues to grow in our understanding of God’s self-revelation through Jesus Christ. Therefore, both Scripture (the written accounts of God’s self-revelation) and Tradition (the living faith handed on from generation to generation) find their source in God’s Word.

WHAT IS SCRIPTURE?

The root of *Scripture* means “to write,” but the writings in the Bible are far from ordinary. “Those things revealed by God which are contained and presented in the text of sacred scripture have been written under the inspiration of the holy Spirit. For holy mother church . . . accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and the New Testaments . . . on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the holy Spirit, they have God as their author, and have been handed on as such to the church itself” (DV 11).

From our perspective, Scripture may seem older than Tradition, and Scripture seems to have authority over Tradition. The Christian religion “should be nourished and ruled by sacred scripture” (DV 21). However, when we understand how Scripture came to be, we understand that it is actually one of the gifts of Tradition.

Scripture, also called the Bible (the word *Bible* means “a collection of books”), is the result of a long, five-step process that took place within a believing community.

Step 1: Experiencing God in the events of salvation

history. From the time of our father in faith, Abraham (1850 BC), to about 100 years after Jesus’ public ministry (AD, early second century), God revealed God’s self through events. Among these events were the Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt; their entrance into the Holy Land; their establishment of a kingdom; the division of that kingdom;



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their exile in Babylon; their return to the Holy Land—first under Persian rule, then Greek rule, then Roman rule; the birth, public ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and the birth of the early Church.

Step 2: Sharing the stories of the people of God by word of mouth. Accounts of these events were first passed on through *oral tradition*.

Step 3: Committing the stories to writing. Gradually, certain parts of the oral tradition were *written down*.

Step 4: Editing the written stories. Over time, as the tradition continued to be handed down, it was *edited* in the light of subsequent events.

Each of these steps—the oral tradition, the written tradition, and the edited tradition—took place in the midst of a believing community. The result is a layered text that reflects what was originally understood by the community to whom God was revealing God’s self as well as how that believing community, over centuries, grew in its understanding in the light of subsequent events.

Step 5: Selecting which written and edited stories to include in the Bible. Certain works became canonical, and others did not. The root word for *canon* is “ruler,” that by which other things are measured. To say that a book is part of the canon, part of Scripture, part of the Bible, is to say that it has authority. Since the authors were inspired (therefore, in one sense, God is the author), what the authors intended to teach has authority because it is part of God’s self-revelation to God’s people and is part of Church Tradition.

The books that became part of the Bible are those that the believing community received and found nourishing, used in their worship services, and chose to pass on to every generation. The canonical books are the fruit of Church Tradition.

WHAT IS TRADITION?

By definition, Scripture is a written text. As such, it needs to be interpreted. It is one of the Church’s roles to interpret Scripture so that it is not just a historical word, something an inspired author said to his contemporaries, but a living word, a word that *nourishes and rules* every generation.

The magisterium, the teaching voice of the Church, has taught us how to interpret Scripture: “In determining the intention of the sacred writers, attention must be paid . . . to *literary genres*. . . Truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression. Hence the exegete [Scripture scholar] must look

SCRIPTURE, THE FRUIT OF TRADITION

While the five-step growth process (events, oral tradition, written tradition, edited tradition, canonical) that resulted in the Scripture that we now have is evident throughout the Bible, the first four steps are particularly evident in Luke’s Gospel. The author of Luke begins his Gospel by saying:

“Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received” (Lk 1:1–4). Luke tells us that he is editing oral and written traditions about events in order to respond pastorally to his particular audience.



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CORE OR CUSTOM?

Through Scripture and Tradition, God has revealed to the human race what we need to know for the sake of our salvation (DV 11). We include in Tradition (notice the capital T) those truths that are core to Christianity. However, there are many other traditions (notice the small t) that are beloved by many Catholics but are not core to our salvation and so are not part of Tradition. For example, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is core to our Tradition. The rosary is a beloved form of prayer that enables us to meditate on core truths, but the rosary itself is part of Catholic tradition, not part of Tradition. It is important both for the sake of Catholic identity and for the sake of ecumenical unity to distinguish between what is core and what is not; what is necessary for our salvation and what is a cherished practice.

DIG DEEPER

How are both Scripture and Tradition living expressions of the Word of God?

How often do you seek God and God’s will for you in Scripture and Tradition?

In what practical way can you invite the Word of God to dwell in your heart so that you may grow in love?

for that meaning which the sacred writers, in given situations and granted the circumstances of their time and culture, intended to express . . . through the medium of a contemporary literary form” (DV 12).

We see, then, that Tradition gave birth to the Bible, and Tradition is now rooted, nourished, and ruled by that same Bible. The Church keeps Scripture as a living word, one that continues to cut to the marrow of our bones and be a light to our paths in numerous ways: we proclaim Scripture at Mass, at

Because we believe that the Church continues to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, these teachings become part of Tradition, part of the revelation that God has given God’s people. “The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This magisterium is not superior to the word of God, but is rather its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it.

At the divine command and with the help of the holy Spirit, it listens to this devoutly, guards it reverently and expounds it faithfully” (DV 10).

THE WORD OF GOD

We see, then, that the source of all revelation is the Word—Jesus Christ—who became flesh and dwelt among us. That Word reveals God to God’s people through creation, Scripture, and Tradition. Why is an understanding of revelation—of Scripture and Tradition—so important? The authors of *Dei Verbum* tell us why as they begin their document: “This synod [Vatican Council II] . . . wants the whole world to hear the summons to salvation, so that through hearing it may believe, through belief it may hope, through

the celebration of every sacrament, and in the Divine Office. We teach Scripture in our catechetical settings. We apply Scripture to our daily lives through homilies, *breaking open the Word* in the RCIA process, and meditation in our personal prayer lives.

The Church’s ongoing teaching, rooted in the apostolic tradition, but applied to new settings for each generation, is called *Tradition*. As the Church is *nourished and ruled* by Scripture, its teaching voice applies core biblical teachings to new situations.

hope it may come to love” (1). May we allow the Word of God to dwell in our hearts so that we, too, may grow in love.

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