

“Vatican II and the Year of Faith, Part 2:
Scripture and Tradition in the Life of the Church”

Pope Benedict has named this the *Year of Faith*. He has asked that we renew and reflect upon our faith, turning especially to the Second Vatican Council and the Catechism. With this in mind, I would like to consider an issue the Council treated at length: "How do we even know *what the faith is*? From where do we receive it?" This is the issue of *Scripture and Tradition*, which the Council addressed in *Dei Verbum*.

One question I often ask my Protestant friends is, "How did Jesus want us to hand on the faith? Did he give any instructions in this matter?" Often, I get the response, "Oh, He gave us the Bible." The problem with this answer is that the Bible, as we know it, did not even exist during the ministry of Jesus, nor did Jesus ever mention its completion. So that cannot be the answer.

When we look at the Bible itself (as well as non-inspired sources), we find instead a detailed record of Christ's instructions for handing on the faith. They are summed up nicely in the Gospel of Matthew, 28: 16-20:

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them . . . Then Jesus approached and said to them, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

In this text, and elsewhere, we find four elements for handing on the faith:

- 1) the commission of Apostles
- 2) the Liturgy (of which baptism is a part)
- 3) the oral teaching of Jesus
- 4) the promise of divine assistance.

The apostles took up each one of these elements and handed them on to the Church. We find the Apostle Paul, for example, handing on the liturgy with the words, " I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you." (1 Cor. 11:23) Similarly, we find St. Paul handing on the apostolic commission, through the ordination of Bishops. St. Paul commissioned St. Timothy. He consecrated him a bishop, promised divine assistance, and demanded that Bishop Timothy, in turn, hand on the faith. (2 Timothy 2:2; 2 Timothy 1:6, 2:2) Timothy was to "guard the good deposit," the teaching of our Lord. (2 Timothy 1:14)

It is clear from Scripture and history how Christ and the apostles intended for us to hand on the faith. Christ gave us the authority of the Church (Matt. 16:18; Math. 18:18), the teaching of the Apostles (the Magisterium), the elements of the liturgy, and his own oral instruction. Keeping this faith whole and intact is the task of the Church in every age, for which she is promised divine assistance.

In the course of time, the apostles also passed on their writings. These writings were prepared under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20-21) But at no time did they

ever constitute an alternative to the authorities established by Christ. They were, instead, *part of the tradition of the Church!*

The word *tradition* simply means "that which is handed on." The apostles themselves treated Scripture, liturgy, oral teaching, and episcopal orders as all part of the one deposit of faith, the one tradition, handed on by the Church. (1 Thessalonians. 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 1 Timothy 3:15)

The Second Vatican Council considered these facts in its Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. It summed up the relationship of Church, Scripture, and tradition in one famous passage:

Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers, so that holding to, practicing and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort.

To be faithful to the Council and to the teaching of Jesus, we need each of these elements. They all hold together as *one deposit of faith*. As such, they provide a great bulwark and defense against skepticism and unbelief. Since they are guaranteed by divine authority, we can be grateful for the certainty and clarity of faith we enjoy in the Catholic tradition. When Christ founded the Church on St. Peter (Matt. 16:18), He promised that the Gates of Hell would not prevail against her. If we use the means Christ provided, we have His promise that our faith will not fail.