

VATICAN II, *Dei Verbum*, 1965.

CHAPTER II

HANDING ON DIVINE REVELATION

7. In His gracious goodness, God has seen to it that what He had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations. Therefore Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion (see Cor. 1:20; 3:13; 4:6), commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men that Gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching,¹ and to impart to them heavenly gifts. This Gospel had been promised in former times through the prophets, and Christ Himself had fulfilled it and promulgated it with His lips. This commission was faithfully fulfilled by the Apostles who, by their oral preaching, by example, and by observances handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with Him, and from what He did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled, too, by those Apostles and apostolic men who under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing.²

But in order to keep the Gospel forever whole and alive within the Church, the Apostles left bishops as their successors, "handing over" to them "the authority to teach in their own place."³ This sacred tradition, therefore, and Sacred Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments are like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything, until she is brought finally to see Him as He is, face to face (see 1 John 3:2).

8. And so the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved by an unending succession of preachers until the end of time. Therefore the Apostles, handing on what they themselves had received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they have learned either by word of mouth or by letter (see 2 Thess. 2:15), and to fight in defense of the faith handed on once and for all (see Jude 1:3)⁴ Now what was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the peoples of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes.

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develop in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit.⁵ For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of

¹ cf. Matt. 28:19-20, and Mark 16:15; COUNCIL OF TRENT, *Decree on Scriptural Canons*: DS 1501.

² cf. Council of Trent, loc. cit.; VATICAN I, *Dei Filius*, DS 3005.

³ ST. IRENAEUS, "*Against Heretics*" III, 3, 1: PG 7, 848

⁴ cf. NICAEA II: DS 602; FOURTH COUNCIL OF CONSTANCE, *Canon 1*: DS 650-652.

⁵ cf. VATICAN I, *Dei Filius*, DS 3020.

the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.

The words of the holy fathers witness to the presence of this living tradition, whose wealth is poured into the practice and life of the believing and praying Church. Through the same tradition the Church's full canon of the sacred books is known, and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and unceasingly made active in her; and thus God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the bride of His beloved Son; and the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, and through her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them (see Col. 3:16).

9. Hence 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. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.⁶

10. 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 (see Acts 2, 42, Greek text), 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.⁷

But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on,⁸ has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church,⁹ whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but

⁶ cf. COUNCIL OF TRENT, loc. cit.: DS 1501.

⁷ cf. PIUS XII, "*Munificentissimus Deus*," Nov. 1, 1950: A.A.S. 42 (1950) p. 756; Collected Writings of St. Cyprian, Letter 66, 8: Hartel, III, B, p. 733: "The Church [is] people united with the priest and the pastor together with his flock."

⁸ cf. VATICAN I, *Dei Filius*, DS 3011.

⁹ cf. PIUS XII, encyclical "*Humani Generis*," Aug. 12, 1950: A.A.S. 42 (1950) pp. 568-69: DS 3886.

serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.

It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.

COUNCIL OF TRENT, *Decree on the Reception of the Sacred Books and Traditions, 1546.*

The holy, ecumenical and general Council of Trent, lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the same three legates of the Apostolic See presiding, keeps this constantly in view, namely, that the purity of the Gospel may be preserved in the Church after the errors have been removed.

This [Gospel], of old promised through the Prophets in the Holy Scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, promulgated first with His own mouth, and then commanded it to be preached by His Apostles to every creature as the source at once of all saving truth and rules of conduct.

It also clearly perceives that these truths and rules are contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions, which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand.

PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *Sancta Mater ecclesia, 1964.*

DS 4404 To judge properly concerning the reliability of what is transmitted in the Gospels, the interpreter should pay diligent attention to the three stages of tradition by which the doctrine and the life of Jesus have come down to us.

Christ our Lord joined to Himself chosen disciples,[6] who followed Him from the beginning, saw His deeds, heard His words, and in this way were equipped to be witnesses of His life and doctrine. When the Lord was orally explaining His doctrine, He followed the modes of reasoning and of exposition which were in vogue at the time. He accommodated Himself to the mentality of His listeners and saw to it that what He taught was firmly impressed on the mind and easily remembered by the disciples. These men understood the miracles and other events of the life of Jesus correctly, as deeds performed or designed that men might believe in Christ through them, and embrace with faith the doctrine of salvation.

DS 4405 The apostles proclaimed above all the death and resurrection of the Lord, as they bore witness to Jesus. They faithfully explained His life and words, while taking into account in their method of preaching the circumstances in which their listeners found themselves. After Jesus rose from the dead and His divinity was clearly perceived, faith, far from destroying the memory

of what had transpired, rather confirmed it, because their faith rested on the things which Jesus did and taught. Nor was He changed into a "mythical" person and His teaching deformed in consequence of the worship which the disciples from that time on paid Jesus as the Lord and the Son of God. On the other hand, there is no reason to deny that the apostles passed on to their listeners what was really said and done by the Lord with that fuller understanding which they enjoyed, having been instructed by the glorious events of the Christ and taught by the light of the Spirit of Truth. So, just as Jesus Himself after His resurrection "interpreted to them" the words of the Old Testament as well as His own, they too interpreted His words and deeds according to the needs of their listeners. "Devoting themselves to the ministry of the word," they preached and made use of various modes of speaking which were suited to their own purpose and the mentality of their listeners. For they were debtors "to Greeks and barbarians, to the wise and the foolish." But these modes of speaking with which the preachers proclaimed Christ must be distinguished and (properly) assessed: catecheses, stories, testimonia, hymns, doxologies, prayers--and other literary forms of this sort which were in Sacred Scripture and were accustomed to be used by men of that time.

DS 4406 This primitive instruction, which was at first passed on by word of mouth and then in writing--for it soon happened that many tried "to compile a narrative of the things" which concerned the Lord Jesus--was committed to writing by the sacred authors in four Gospels for the benefit of the churches, with a method suited to the peculiar purpose which each (author) set for himself. From the many things handed down they selected some things, reduced others to a synthesis, (still) others they explicated as they kept in mind the situation of the churches. With every (possible) means they sought that their readers might become aware of the reliability of those words by which they had been instructed. Indeed, from what they had received the sacred writers above all selected the things which were suited to the various situations of the faithful and to the purpose which they had in mind, and adapted their narration of them to the same situations and purpose. Since the meaning of a statement also depends on the sequence, the Evangelists, in passing on the words and deeds of our Savior, explained these now in one context, now in another, depending on (their) usefulness to the readers. Consequently, let the exegete seek out the meaning intended by the Evangelist in narrating a saying or a deed in a certain way or in placing it in a certain context. For the truth of the story is not at all affected by the fact that the Evangelists relate the words and deeds of the Lord in a different order, and express his sayings not literally but differently, while preserving (their) sense.