

# Roman Catholic Tradition

by James G. McCarthy

What is the fundamental reason that Roman Catholicism is what it is? Why does it differ so significantly from Christianity based solely upon Scripture? The answer is Tradition. Its role can best be explained by a story.

Imagine for a moment a person in some remote corner of the earth. He has no knowledge of Christ, Christian history, or Roman Catholicism. Yet, stirred by the Holy Spirit, he longs for a knowledge of God. If such a person were given a Bible, and sincerely began to search for God in its pages, what would he uncover?

In the four gospels, our imaginary seeker would find a record of “the exact truth” (Luke 1:4) about Christ’s life and teaching. As he continued to study the Book of Acts and the epistles, he would discover a record of the preaching of the apostles. In a short time, he would have obtained “...the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15).

Assume now that our solitary seeker, having found Christ and salvation by faith in Him, continued his study of Scripture. His goal now was to discover all that he could about how to serve and worship God and how to order his life. What would he learn?

In the book of Acts, he would read an inspired history of the first 30 years of the church. In the letters of Peter, Paul, John, James, and Jude he would encounter more fully the doctrines of the Christian faith. He would learn how to conduct himself (1 Timothy 3:15), how to minister to others (1 Corinthians 12-14), how the early Christians had worshiped (1 Corinthians 11:17-34; 14:26-40), and how local churches were to be governed (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). In short, he would find everything that he needed to know in order to live the Christian life. This, writes Paul, is the intended purpose of the Bible:

**All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17**

Now suppose this new believer, having learned the basics of the Christian faith, set out in search of finding other Christians. After many days’ travel, he enters a city early one Sunday morning and finds at its center a large Roman Catholic church. He finds an empty pew where he remains for many hours watching priests celebrate the Mass, hear confessions, and lead in the praying of the Rosary before a statue of Mary. Then, having learned all that he could through observation, he asks a priest to explain to him the basic doctrines of Roman Catholicism. What would our new believer conclude?

Certainly our imaginary seeker would find Roman Catholicism very strange. From his study of Scripture, he would have learned absolutely nothing about baptismal regeneration and justification, year long programs in preparation for justification, seven sacraments, sanctifying grace, transubstantiation, a continuing sacrifice, confession to a priest, temporal punishment, indulgences, purgatory, merited eternal reward, priestly ordination, the papacy, ruling bishops, the Magisterium, or Mary’s Immaculate Conception, Assumption into heaven, co-redemptive work, and mediation of all grace. Realizing that these beliefs were not only not taught in Scripture but actually contradicted God’s Word, our seeker would certainly conclude that whatever he had found, it was not what he was looking for, and move on.

From the Roman Catholic Church’s perspective, the judgment of such a person is

meaningless. The man's catechesis, his instruction in the Catholic faith, is terribly lacking. "No one can believe alone," says the Church, "just as no one can live alone"<sup>1</sup>. Regardless of how well he thinks he knows the Scriptures, the man has heard only part of the story. Specifically, he has no knowledge of divine revelation passed on as Tradition. He lacks insight and information necessary to understand Scripture. Consequently, he is unable to appreciate Roman Catholic beliefs and practices not plainly found in the Bible. He is also completely ignorant of the authentic interpretation of revelation assigned to it by God's Magisterium. The man has neither the knowledge nor the authority to judge the Church.

This story presents before us two opposing views as to how the faith received from Christ is to be understood and practiced. Roman Catholicism teaches that the Catholic faith is contained in Scripture and Tradition. Together, as interpreted by the pope and bishops, they are the supreme rule of the Church. Biblical Christianity holds that the plain teaching of Scripture, as illuminated by the Holy Spirit, contains all doctrine essential for salvation and Christian living. It recognizes Scripture alone as the supreme rule of faith. Though it values the information that the study of biblical languages, archaeology, history, and early Christian writers can bring to the study of Scripture, biblical Christianity rejects placing Tradition alongside Scripture as a rule of faith.

### Tradition Defined

The difference between Scripture and Tradition becomes apparent when one understands what the Roman Catholic Church actually means by Tradition. It is a difficult concept to grasp, yet one which is essential to an understanding of Roman Catholicism. Consider first two things that Roman Catholic Tradition is *not*.

When the Church speaks of Tradition, it is not referring to inherited culture or practices originating from merely human sources or from Church discipline and policy. Sacred Tradition does not refer to matters such as priestly celibacy (obligatory since the eleventh century), the direction in which the priest faces while saying Mass (changed following Vatican II), or whether girls can serve alongside altar boys (approved in 1994). These may rightly be called *traditions* in that they involve practices that have been *handed down* from previous generations, but they are not sacred Tradition, for the Church does not consider them to have their origin in divine revelation. To distinguish human traditions from sacred Tradition, Catholic literature generally capitalizes the latter.

Neither is Roman Catholic Tradition the conclusions of scholars who have studied the documents, history, and archaeology of the first centuries in search of the primitive Christian faith. Tradition is not the writings of early Christian leaders, ancient liturgies, or even the decrees of synods and ecumenical councils. These may be partial *expressions of or witnesses to* Tradition, but they are not sacred Tradition itself.

So what exactly *is* Tradition? Catholic bishops tell us that "Tradition is the word living continuously in the hearts of the faithful,"<sup>2</sup> "the living memorial of God's Word"<sup>3</sup>. Roman Catholic Tradition is not something you can read or even lay your hands on.

**[Tradition] ... is not an inanimate thing passed from hand to hand; it is not, properly speaking, an assemblage of doctrines and institutions consigned to books or other monuments.... it must be represented as a current of life and truth coming from God through Christ and through the Apostles to the last of the faithful who repeats his creed and learns his catechism. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*<sup>4</sup>**

Tradition, as explained by Catholic scholars, is not contained in books, but in people, in the life of the Church. It is the *life experience* of the Catholic faithful. It is revelation "...

written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records...."<sup>5</sup>

Roman Catholicism describes Tradition as a "living transmission"<sup>6</sup> through which "... the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes"<sup>7</sup>. It is the *living faith* produced by "realities and words that are being passed on."<sup>8</sup> This, explains Catholic scholars, is accomplished in a variety of ways:

**The way in which the faith is transmitted can take almost any form in the Church: the sign of the cross that a mother traces on the forehead of her child; teaching the basic prayers of Christianity, especially the "Our Father," in the home and in religious instruction; living, praying, and singing in the local congregation, into which the young person grows; Christian example in everyday life and Christian action even to the point of martyrdom; the witness given by Christian music (especially hymns and chorales), by architecture and the plastic arts (especially representations of the cross, which is considered a privileged Christian symbol); and, not least, by the liturgy of the Church. *The Church's Confession of Faith*<sup>9</sup>**

Catholic definitions equating Tradition with the oral teachings of the apostles are misleading. For example, the Second Vatican Council described Tradition as revelation that the apostles passed on "...by the spoken word of their preaching, by the example they gave, by the institutions they established..."<sup>10</sup>. In support of this definition, the Council referred to Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians:<sup>11</sup>

**So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. 2 Thessalonians 2:15**

In citing this verse, the Church would have us believe that Roman Catholic Tradition is equivalent to the Apostle Paul's oral teachings. This is misleading, however, for, as we have seen, Roman Catholic Tradition is a far more complex concept. It is not the direct oral teaching of the apostles as referred to in 2 Thessalonians 2:15. Rather, Roman Catholic Tradition is "a current of life and truth."<sup>12</sup> It can be as ethereal as an idea that, after having lain dormant for centuries, can spring to life in modern times through pious contemplation.

The Assumption of Mary is one such example. The Church pronounced it a divinely revealed dogma in 1950. In view of Mary's sinless perfection, said the Church, Mary's body did not undergo decay at the end of her life. God miraculously took her up to heaven. In the document defining the Assumption of Mary, Pope Pius XII cited several Scriptures in an attempt to demonstrate a biblical basis for the doctrine.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, he acknowledged that most of the Scriptures referenced had been put forth by theologians and preachers who had "...been rather free in their use of events and expressions taken from Sacred Scripture to explain their belief in the Assumption."<sup>14</sup> The fact of the matter is that none of the Scriptures the Pope cited said anything about Mary's Assumption. Only one, Luke 1:28, even refers to Mary. Nevertheless, the Pope used them anyway. No reasonable comparison can be drawn between such teachings based on Roman Catholic Tradition and the Apostle Paul personally and directly instructing the Thessalonians—the "traditions" of 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

Scripture and Roman Catholic Tradition are not equals. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that "...both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence"<sup>15</sup>. But the Scriptures are a written record of revelation. They are tangible, unalterable, and accessible to all. Moreover, they are an inspired record, "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV), the writings of "...men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21). Scripture, therefore, is rightly called the Word of God.

Roman Catholic Tradition, on the other hand, is an amorphous body of beliefs and practices which the Church claims has been handed down for some 60 generations in “human formulas”<sup>16</sup>: a bishop teaching, a priest delivering a Sunday’s homily, a theologian writing, a mother reciting prayers with her children, a hymn, a stained glass window, or the unspoken “spiritual realities”<sup>17</sup> shared by the faithful. Though a child could see the difference between this and Scripture, the Church cannot, or will not.

Adapted from *The Gospel According to Rome* (Harvest House Publishers: Eugene, 1995).

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 166.
2. The German Bishop’s Conference, *The Church’s Confession of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 45, quoting J. A. Mohler. See also the Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” no. 8; and the Council of Trent, session 4, “First Decree: Acceptance of the Sacred Books and Apostolic Traditions.”
3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 113.
4. Jean Bainvel, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Robert Appleton Co., 1912), “Tradition,” vol. 15, p. 9.
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 133.
6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 78.
7. Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” no. 8.
8. Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” no. 8.
9. The German Bishop’s Conference, *The Church’s Confession of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 46, quoting J. A. Mohler.
10. Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” no. 7.
11. Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” no. 8.
12. Jean Bainvel, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Robert Appleton Co., 1912), “Tradition,” vol. 15, p. 9.
13. Genesis 3:15; Psalm 131:8; 44:10-14; Song of Solomon 3:6; 4:8; 6:9; 8:5; Isaiah 61:13; Luke 1:28; Romans 5-6; 1 Corinthians 15:21-26, 54-57; Revelation 12.
14. Pope Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, no. 26.
15. Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” no. 9.
16. Jean Bainvel, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Robert Appleton Co., 1912), “Tradition,” vol. 15, p. 11.
17. Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” no. 8.