

Sacred Scripture

And he said to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" ~ Luke 24:25-32

SACRED SCRIPTURE OR THE BIBLE is the privileged expression of God's Word. It is unique because it, being written under the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit, has God as its author. In it, the story of salvation unfolds through God's saving actions and words. Furthermore, because Scripture is the Word of God, it is the most perfect source of encouragement and guidance. In it, God the Father comes to meet his children, talks with them and provides for them, as the Psalmist says, a lamp to their feet and a light for their path (see Ps 119:105).

Important Facts about Sacred Scripture

Divine Authorship — God is the principal author of Sacred Scripture, the Bible. He inspired the human authors (for example, Moses, Isaiah, David, Matthew, John, and Paul), who made full use of their own faculties and powers to write what he wanted. The human authors wrote according to their own various times and cultures, literary styles, and modes of expression. Nevertheless, all that the inspired writers attest must be regarded as intended by the Holy Spirit. St. Augustine, a great teacher and Scripture scholar of the fourth century, wrote: "You recall that one and the same Word of God extends throughout Scripture, that it is one and the same Utterance that resounds in the mouths of all the sacred writers"¹ (CCC 102).

No Errors — The Sacred Scriptures teach the truth faithfully and without error. God cannot make a mistake, nor can he lie. His Word to us is his Revelation, which he intends for us to know

"God is the principal author of the Bible."



Jesus teaching two disciples on the road to Emmaus, by Domenico Mastroianni, 1876-1962

for our salvation. In his loving goodness, he reveals the mystery of his will: *by his Word, the incarnate Son of God, Jesus, we can have access to the Father and participate in the divine nature. He intends that we share in Trinitarian life now and forever in Heaven.* The Bible is the Word of God. It is wisdom from on high. We must be attentive to it, believe it, and obey it.

There are passages in the Bible that seem to contradict each other, but many times what appears to be a contradiction is worked out when one interprets the passages in their proper context.

¹ St. Augustine, En. in Ps. 103, 4, 1 from J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Latina 37, 1378 (Paris: 1841-1855); cf. Psalms 104; John 1:1

The Church has always taught that the Bible is free from error because it has been inspired by God. God being the source of all truth could not author anything that contained errors.

However, this does not mean that we can read everything in the Bible as literally true. The Bible is a collection of many different kinds of writings. When reading the Bible we should be careful not to interpret one kind of writing as if it were another, but to interpret each part according to the intention of its human author. The account of creation in the book of Genesis is not intended as a manual of physics. The book of Songs is a long love poem, not to be read as a historical narrative. The book of Job is a drama, not to be read as a description of a factual event. Different kinds of writings will have different kinds of meanings, sometimes literal, sometimes spiritual, and many times both. Most of the time it will be fairly obvious what the author is trying to convey and, with a little common sense and careful reading, the meaning and truth intended will come to light. If problems still persist, commentaries are usually helpful in explaining apparent errors or historical mistakes.

Interpretation of God's Word — The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, inspired all of Revelation. Sacred Scripture can only be properly understood in light of him and his intention in revealing. The plan of God, his intention, and his mode of operation are one entity. Attention must be paid to the unity of his Revelation: *"And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, be interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.... Then he said to them, 'These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled'"* (Lk 24:27, 44).

The Bible must also be read in "the living Tradition of the whole Church." The deposit of faith, all that Jesus commanded, taught and did, was given to the apostles and disciples (see Mt 28:18-20; Jn 20:30; Jn 21:25). They held it to their hearts to guard it (see 1

The Word of God is proclaimed at every Mass, not only on Sunday, but also every day of the week

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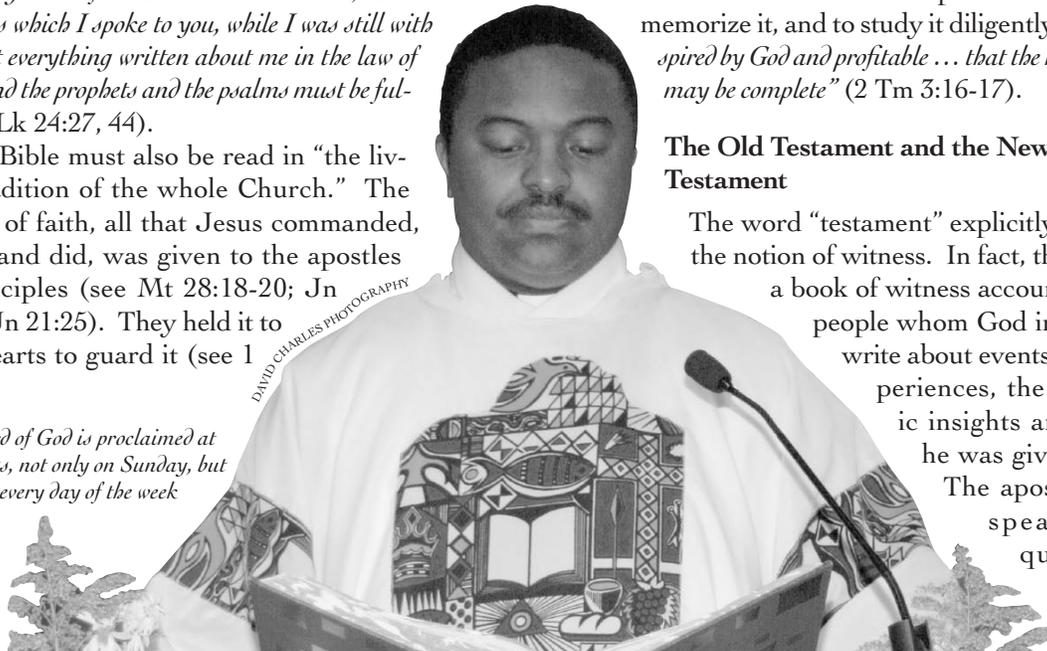
Tm 6:20), and they could not be restrained from virtually "shouting it from the housetops" (see Acts 1:8; Acts 2:14-36; Acts 4:1-20). That whole deposit, the "living Tradition" of the Church, has been carefully passed down and guarded by the successors of St. Peter, who was given the authority of the keys of the Kingdom (see Mt 16:18-19). Sacred Scripture came from that "living Tradition." It was the successors of Peter and the apostles, the pope and bishops in union with him, who authorized the canon of Scripture. Still today, the pope and bishops are the final authority and guardians of the whole deposit of faith (the living Tradition) and the Sacred Scripture.

No truth of Revelation can be in contradiction to other truths of Revelation. When interpreting Scripture, the reader should keep in mind the unity and coherence that exists in and between all the truths of the faith as taught and transmitted by the Church. A major test for the authenticity of Revelation is the consistent coherence between Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture.

Each person approaches Scripture from individual experience and perspective. These factors often influence personal interpretation of it. Everyone who is honestly seeking the truth and personal direction in the Scriptures can find them, if that search is done in faith and in the light of the continual teaching of the Church. Misinterpretation of Scripture can result in loss of the primary meaning of God's Word and in selective acceptance of the truths contained there. Nevertheless, the Church strongly encourages everyone to read the Word of God for private devotion, to memorize it, and to study it diligently. It is *"inspired by God and profitable ... that the man of God may be complete"* (2 Tm 3:16-17).

The Old Testament and the New Testament

The word "testament" explicitly contains the notion of witness. In fact, the Bible is a book of witness accounts of real people whom God inspired to write about events, their experiences, the prophetic insights and words he was giving them. The apostle John speaks eloquently of



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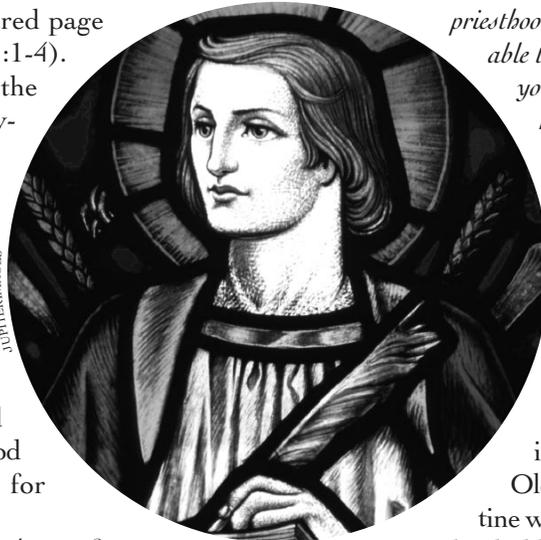
his role as a writer of the sacred page in his first letter (see 1 Jn 1:1-4).

The Old Testament contains the accounts of the successive covenants that God made with the People of Israel, his Chosen People. Each covenant (with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, and with David for example), was in fact the establishment of God's family, his intention from the first days of his creation of men and women. In every covenant God himself promised to provide for them, to be a Father to them.

To Abraham God said: *"Look toward Heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.... So shall your descendants be.... To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates"* (Gn 15:5, 18). To Moses God said: *"I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment, and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God.... And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham"* (Ex 6:6-8). To David God said: *"I will appoint a place for my people Israel, ... and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house [i.e., a family], ... I will raise up your offspring after you, ... and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father and he shall be my son"* (2 Sm 7:10-14).

In every instance of divine Revelation, God made his intention clearer and more complete. Even so, with the advent of the New Testament at Jesus' coming (see Jer 31:31-34; Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:24; Lk 1:72; Heb 8:6-13), the Chosen People still did not recognize him as the Promised One of the Old Testament. Jesus fulfilled all of the promises of the Old Testament more deeply than anyone could have imagined. In addition, he established the Church as his people on earth, God's people, a Kingdom of priests whose mission it is to bring the Good News of God's plan to all men and women everywhere and for all time.

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy



Stained glass window of St. John the Evangelist

priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy (1 Pt 2:45, 9-10).

In fact, the New Testament is best understood in light of the Old Testament. It was St. Augustine who said that the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New. God is one and his Revelation is one and his plan is one; he cannot be divided and neither

can his Testaments. However, the New Covenant does fulfill the Old. It supersedes the Old. There will be no new covenants. Jesus has come, has redeemed us, has sent his Holy Spirit, and we await his final coming to complete his original purpose to draw us back to God the Father.

Sacred Scripture in Catholic Life Today

The "study of the sacred page" is not optional. God's Word must be heeded. It has always been the case that the Catholic Church has venerated the Bible "as she venerates the Lord's Body" (CCC 103). The "wonderful works of God" began with creation and are carried on today in the sacramental life of the Church (see 2 Pt 1:3-4). Receiving the sacraments worthily and studying God's Word are the foundation of Catholic spiritual life. Just as God "walked with Adam and Eve" in the Garden of Eden, he also wants a relationship with us, a dialogue. Therefore, reading and studying the Bible should always be rooted in prayer, especially meditation. *"Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"* (Ps 119:105).

The Liturgy of the Word

The first half of the Catholic worship service, the Mass, is the proclamation of the Scriptures. This is called the Liturgy of the Word. It is God speaking to us and it is our response to him. The Word is absolutely essential to this process; it is light on the journey and food for the way. At Mass,

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the first reading is taken from the books of the Old Testament, except during the weeks after Easter. In general, these Scriptures relate how God acted in the past with his Chosen People, Israel.

A responsorial Psalm follows. The Psalms were originally composed as prayers. (They are generally attributed to King David.) The Psalms provide us the opportunity to participate in a prayerful dialogue with God. At Sunday Mass, there is another reading from one of the books of the New Testament (not a Gospel). What follows in both instances is a reading from the Gospel. This is always accompanied with signs of special honor (such as processional carrying of the book, incense, candle bearers, respectful standing and the Sign of the Cross). This is because the Gospels expressly concern Jesus' life and his words. The Scripture verse chanted before the Gospel is meant to emphasize and express our understanding that Jesus is present in the Word of God. The homily follows the readings. It is an exposition of the readings with applications for daily living. The homily is always given by the priest or deacon.

The readings for Sundays have been arranged so that over a three-year period almost all the New Testament and a variety of texts from the Old Testament will have been read. Each new cycle starts on the first Sunday of the season of Advent, four weeks before Christmas. The Gospel reading in year A is generally from Matthew, year B from Mark, and year C from Luke. The Gospel of John is usually read during Easter, Christmas, and to fill out year B, because the Gospel of Mark is short.

Sacred Scripture on Itself

"And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph 6:17).

"Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jer 23:29).

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the



St. Jerome, author of the Vulgate in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, the first major translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, drawing by Ferréol Bonnemaïson, 1766-1826, after a painting by Raphael

sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tm 3:14-17).

"For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,' we heard this voice borne from Heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns

and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pt 1:16-21).

"I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Rv 22:18-19).

"Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Heb 4:11-13).

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4).

"How sweet are thy words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through thy precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119:103-105).

(CCC 101-133, 1349)

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