

SACRED TRADITION

“Okay ... three questions ...

...One, who are the writers of the New Testament?”

“Matthew ... Mark ... Luke ... John ...” comes the classes’ response.

“Anyone else?” Ben asks.

“Paul,” Mike DeCastro says.

“Didn’t Peter write a letter?” Janice asks.

“Actually, two, Janice,” Ben replies. “And James and John also wrote letters. That’s eight. Now, add in the apostles. Okay?”

Heads nod, but no one speaks.

“So ... question number two ... how many of them were present in Bethlehem at our Lord’s birth?”

Silence.

“How many saw the manger, the shepherds; met the Wise Men, witnessed the slaughter of the innocents or the flight into Egypt with the child?”

More silence.

“Anybody?”

Then, a gentle smile ambles across Ben’s face ...

... “welcome to the Sacred Tradition of the Catholic Church ...”

Hi Tony here. Tonight’s OCIA topic addresses Sacred Tradition; the second of the three foundations on which the Catholic faith rests

Asking a somewhat obscure question that, relevant to the evening’s discussion, grabs the attention of his audience, is a favorite ploy of Ben’s. Tonight, seeing the looks on the faces seated before him, I’d say he’s succeeded.

Let’s grab some coffee and see where Ben’s question takes us...

“Okay, last question; who are Jannes and Jambres?”

Blank looks and silence.

“Never mind,” Ben chuckles, “we’ll come back to them.”

“Okay, our word, tradition comes from the Latin meaning ‘handing on,’ ‘presentation’ or maybe ‘delivery’ Tradition is the handing on of Christ Himself; His teachings, His life, and His call to the Church to teach all nations.”

“Like not eating meat on Friday?” Melissa asks.

“Or, what do you call it ... oh yea, celibacy for priests. After all, Peter was a married man?” Janice asks.

“Simple answer, ladies; they’re not,” Ben says, chuckling softly. “But thank you for bringing up an important point ...”

... “Habits, customs, things like meatless Fridays, clerical celibacy, methods of dress, certain prayers and devotions ... things that can be modified or removed, are traditional, but with a small “t”. They are not Sacred Tradition ... capital T ... an important distinction.”

Pausing, Ben sips his coffee. Setting his cup down, he continues.

“A good example you may be familiar with, is the term, limbo.”

Heads nod; seems many recognize the term.

“Limbo was believed to be that place where infants went if they passed away before being baptized. It was what we call a theological construct; something hypothesized in answer to a question or a dilemma. The concept was de-emphasized after Vatican II; the council held in the early sixties.”

“Was it wrong ... I thought the pope was infallible?” Devin asks.

“Wrong, Devin; no. It was simply not supported by enough evidence of its existence. Who knows; it might be right, actually ...

... “So, any other questions about that distinction?”

Silence.

“Here, I’m going to turn the discussion over to Joey,” Ben says.

“Okay, moving on,” Joey says. “So, what is Sacred Tradition; capital T? It is the teaching of Christ and by extension, the apostles themselves. It is the truth imparted to the apostles and their successors by the authority of Jesus Himself, and guided by the Holy Spirit.”

Picking up some note cards, Joey continues.

“One of the most important things to understand is that Tradition is something believed from the time of the apostles and the earliest days of the Church. At some point, in time, for clarification, in answer to confusion, or for general acceptance, it is formally set forth as dogma ...

... “think of Tradition as the lens through which the Church views not only Scripture, but those understandings that arise from its study. Sacred Tradition clarifies and broadens our view of Scripture.”

“So, are you saying that somehow Tradition is greater than the Bible?”
Lois asks.

“No. Again remember, the Bible is complete, closed; nothing can be added or subtracted, Revelation and interpretation isn’t ...

... “Understand, all the church teaches has its basis in Scripture, but the actual dogma or doctrine may not be explicitly found in the words of the Bible. The church was founded in the year thirty-three; it did not have the New Testament until almost the year, four hundred. Much of Sacred Tradition originated and developed during those intervening years. And in both Testaments, Old and New, we see the action of a living Tradition.”

“How do you mean that?” Sandra Bradshaw asks.

“Okay. In Genesis, Sandra, the history of salvation begins with the father of the monotheistic religions, Abram or Abraham, around 1850 B.C. However, nothing was written down until Moses wrote Exodus.”

“But isn’t Genesis the first book of the Bible?” Darrell asks. “And what about Adam and Eve, Eden, Cain and Abel, the tower of Babel and the great flood?”

“In its present form, yes, Darrell, Genesis is first, but numerous scholars believe parts of Exodus were actually written first. As to the incidents you cite, they’re considered pre-history.”

Heads nod, but again, no one speaks as Joey continues.

“So, the narratives from Abraham to Moses were orally handed down. In those times, every tribe had an elder whose task it was to pass on the history of the tribe; history Moses eventually codified in the Torah.”

“And this is an example of what you call Scripture as Tradition?” Mike DeCastro asks.

“Exactly. Six-hundred years of history orally handed down and eventually put into the narrative we find in Genesis; accepted by the Church as revealed and inspired truth.”

Heads nod. Joey’s point seems well taken.

“Now back to the New Testament and Ben’s original question; how many of the apostles and gospel writers were present in the first days of Our Lord?”

A momentary silence ensues. Then, a voice is heard. “None.”

“Good answer. Who said that?”

Somewhat timidly, Angie Santini raises her hand.

“You’re right, Angie. We don’t know the ages of the apostles, but it’s fair to assume most were either not yet born, or children themselves. And, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not Galilee; the region where the apostles lived and grew up ...

... “so, who told the story to the apostles? Mary, Joseph, Mary’s parents, John the Baptist, or maybe Mary’s cousin Elizabeth?”

Again, silence.

“We don’t know. What we do know is someone passed on the account; it was accepted by the apostles and the very early church. A Traditional teaching the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew and Luke to record and eventually include in the canon of Scripture. An accepted contemporary belief becomes formal Sacred Tradition.”

“And again, remember, as we learned last week. The gospel writers didn’t write anything until almost seventy-five years after Jesus’ birth, and their writings were not canonized as Sacred Scripture, the inspired word of God, until over three hundred years later. Additionally, it should be noted much of the New Testament, is derivative in nature.”

“Please explain that further, Joey,” Roy Sanders asks.

“Sure, Roy, First, Mark was not one of the twelve; neither was Paul or Luke; though Mark is thought to be the disciple of Peter referred to by Peter Himself in his first letter ...

... “The gospel of Matthew is often attributed to the apostle of that name. However, studying the gospels, Matthew draws heavily on the gospel of Mark; again, the first gospel written. If Matthew was an original apostle, why would he rely so heavily on the accounts of Mark; who was not? ...

... “Many scholars now conclude the actual author or authors, are unknown; Matthew may have been written by disciples who knew both Matthew the apostle, and Mark ...

... “Now, Luke was a disciple of Paul. Paul was instructed by the apostles and it stands to reason that Luke took what he learned from Paul, and whatever other sources he encountered and put together his gospel ...

... “So, Roy, that’s what I mean by derivative. Matthew and John were eyewitnesses to Christ, Mark, possibly, and Paul and Luke most likely not. And the unknown writers may or may not have been. Does that answer your question?”

Roy nods his assent.

“And John?” Laura Bird asks.

“The gospel of John is attributed to John, the apostle who stood with Mary at the foot of the cross and into whose care Jesus gave His mother. However, contemporary thought is John’s gospel was written by more than one person. The last chapter seems to have been added by another writer as its style and content diverges from the rest of the narrative.”

“And all of that is important, how?” Barbara Larsen asks.

“To show that Tradition is inspired by the Holy Spirit, Barbara. Mark, Paul, and Luke took what they heard from others and compiled a narrative inspired by the Holy Spirit, accepted as the word of God, and becoming a vital part of the New Testament ...

... “So, to sum up, Sacred Scripture is the word of God, written by men, and inspired by the Holy Spirit while Tradition is the lens through which we view Scripture.”

“So, what about those traditions not found in Scripture?” Sandra asks.

“Okay,” Joey says, pausing a moment. “I think this is a good point to take a break. Let’s refresh the coffee cups and stretch our legs ...

... “Sandra, we’ll start with your question after a short break, okay?”

Breaks over as Joey steps to the front of the class.

“Joey, before you get to Sandra’s question, who are these guys Jannes and Jambres, Ben mentioned?” Mike DeCastro asks. “I’m dying to know,” he says, chuckling softly.

Likewise, a small chuckle escapes Joey’s lips. I’ll let Ben answer that one.”

“Okay, Ben says, in the account of the plagues of Egypt, Moses turned his staff into a serpent. Seeing this, Pharaoh called for his magicians to do likewise. Nowhere in the Old Testament are those magicians named. But in a letter to Timothy, Paul does: Jannes and Jambres. So, how did Paul know their names 1300 years later? Again, an example of Tradition. Somehow their names were passed down and become included in Scripture.”

“So, you’re saying Scripture actually is Tradition.”

“Well, not exactly. They are separate, but closely related. Scripture is the recorded word of God and, again, Tradition is the lens through which the church views Scripture.”

“But isn’t Scripture apostolic?” Sandra asks. “My family insists they will only follow the apostolic teachings of Scripture, nothing else. In fact, they call anything else, heresy.”

“Sandra, my answer would be Scripture, at least the New Testament, was written about the time of the apostles, but not necessarily by the apostles. The Old Testament was accepted by Jesus, the apostles, and eventually canonized by the Church together with the New Testament to produce what we know today as the Bible.”

“But how about things not in Scripture. Things my uncle Luther calls anti-biblical. Where did they come from?”

“Were I to rephrase your question,” Ben chuckles, “I would ask does Tradition detract from or direct the focus away from Christ? ...

... “Simply, the Church teaches; no, they don’t. Though those Traditions are extra-Biblical, they are not anti-Biblical.”

Silence descends as the attention of the class intensifies. Ben pauses to sip his coffee, then continues.

“Yes, Sacred Tradition includes things *not explicitly found in Scripture*. So, let’s look at the two Traditions most often referred to in this instance; the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary.”

“You might want to explain the basics of each in case some of our friends aren’t familiar with them,” Joey suggests.

Ben pauses.

“Good, idea,” he says.

“Quickly, for those not familiar; the Immaculate Conception tells us, Mary, as a gift of God, insofar as she was to bear God’s Son, was preserved from any stain of sin from the beginning when conceived in her mother’s, womb ...

... “The Assumption tells us, as a gift of her Son, Mary was assumed, or taken up into heaven, body and soul on her demise. She did not undergo the corruption all mankind experiences upon death ...

... “And it is important to understand the word assume; meaning taken up by another, in this case, her Divine Son. Mary did not ascend, as Christ did, on her own power. It’s a critical difference to understand ...

... “These two beliefs were held by the early church, passed on, either orally or in some written form, and at some point, formally accepted,

thus becoming Sacred Tradition; divinely revealed truth, a doctrine of the faith ...

... “And, remember, some of the church father of the early second century knew some of the apostles personally and received much from them not recorded in Scripture.”

“Okay, Joey, but what is the foundation of those doctrines?” Sandra asks. “They have to have some foundation in Scripture.”

“Why didn’t the gospel writers or the early church fathers write about it ... that’s what you’re asking, Sandra?” Ben asks.

“Yes.”

“Simply because the belief was widely accepted and unchallenged; it was not necessary to put them in writing ...

... “These two beliefs were held by the early church fathers in the succeeding centuries after the apostles. In fact, when it comes to the Assumption there is evidence of written narratives pertaining to it in existence as early as the 4th century.”

“Okay, but where exactly in the Bible do you find any evidence for these doctrines? There has to be something, otherwise it simply sounds like something made up a long time ago out of thin air,” Sandra asks.

“Okay, as to the doctrine of the Assumption, let me suggest this. In John’s gospel, from the cross, Jesus entrusts His Mother into his care. And we know from Scripture that Mary was with the apostles on Pentecost, right?”

Sandra nods yes.

“So, doesn’t it stand to reason John knew what happened to Mary? After all, John lived to be well into his nineties. Mary, if she gave birth to Jesus at age sixteen, would have been almost fifty at His Resurrection. To outlive John who is believed to be a very young man when in Jesus’ company, Mary would have to have been at least 100 years old. Tradition has Mary’s passing around the year 60 ...

... “No, Sandra, John knew what became of Mary, and he passed it on. And it is a fact that one of the early Church fathers, Polycarp was a disciple of John. He, Polycarp, died around the year 155. Polycarp was a Church father in what is now the Eastern Church which holds very fast to the doctrine of the Assumption. It is logical to believe John passed on much to Polycarp and others who were disciples of John.”

“Well, if Mary died around 60, and Mark’s gospel, the first one, was written around 70, why didn’t he record it?” Darrell asks

“Probably the same reason no one recorded when Joseph died? ... why they didn’t record all those things John tells us Jesus did that all the books in the world couldn’t hold?”

Ben pauses to sip his coffee, then continues.

“And again, it is important to remember from our discussion of Scripture the New Testament was solely about Jesus, his teachings, his life, and his death and resurrection. Anything not related, other than the circumstances around His birth and one incident in his youth, were irrelevant to the gospel writers, and not the focus of their narratives.”

Heads nod, as looks of understanding blossom on faces around the room

“And the Immaculate Conception?” Roy Sanders asks.

“Roy, at this point I’m going to turn it back over to Joey,” Ben says.

“Again, the Immaculate Conception of Mary is commonly held belief of the early Church,” Joey says, smiling and stepping to the class. “It is the belief that Mary, in the womb of her mother, Anna, was conceived, as a gift of God, without the stain of any original sin ...

... “We find support for this belief from the Angel Gabriel’s greeting to Mary, especially the words ‘Hail thou who art highly favored’ or ‘Hail full of grace.’ The Church sees those words as an indication of the pure and spotless nature of Mary as graced by God ...

... “In addition, we see a great foreshadowing of Mary’s motherhood in the ancient Ark of the Covenant. The Ark carried God’s word, the Ten Commandments. Mary carried the Word of God in her womb. Remember the first words of John’s gospel, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ And subsequently we hear, ‘and the word was made flesh’ ...

... “Now, combine that with the Scriptural admonition that nothing impure can enter heaven. The Ark of the Covenant was so sacred in God’s eyes that if a man so much as touched it he would die. The Ark carried manna and the ten commandments: Mary, carried the Second Person of the Trinity, God Himself, in her womb. Really, would God come to us through something impure in nature? ...

... “Again, the immaculate Conception was believed from the beginning of Christianity based on the oral, if not recorded, teaching of the apostles and the early Church Fathers. And we trust in the Holy Spirit which guides the Church in all truth.”

Though some faces retain some skepticism others morph from adversarial to contemplative.

“Are they the only examples of your justification of these ‘extra-Biblical Traditions?’” Roy asks.

“Actually, no. There are two verses in the gospel of John the church considers relevant.”

“And they are.”

“I’m paraphrasing here,” Ben says. “John tells us ‘there are so many things Jesus did that are not recorded here that if written, all the books in the world could contain them.’ Also, Jesus’ words earlier in John’s gospel; ‘The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name – he will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you’ ...

... The word ‘remind’ is interesting. It tells us the Holy Spirit will teach the apostles and disciples after Jesus has ascended; His mission accomplished.”

“That’s nice and all, but just because John says there’s more; are you saying that’s a blanket justification for all Tradition?” Darrell asks. “Why would you not believe all those things John refers to aren’t recorded in the other three gospels?”

“Well, I have my granddad’s King James Version given to him at his baptism almost a hundred years ago,” Joey says; an impish grin on his face. “In it, the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke take up 98 pages. When I add in Acts, the epistles plus Revelations, I get a total of 232 pages. Not quite what I’d call all the books in the world. Would you, Darrell?”

Gentle laughter ripples through the room as Darell joins in, raising his hands as if to surrender.

An impish smile ambles across Joey’s face. “And not to be facetious, but where in Scripture does it say the Holy Spirit had finished Its work? ... when did the Holy Spirit stop guiding the Church and go home? ...

... “No, the Holy Spirit is with us, guiding the Church Jesus founded on Peter, and promised the gates of hell will not prevail against; till end of time ...

... “And one final thing, much of our Sacred Tradition is held by all Christian churches. Things like the Trinity, the common narratives of the Bible, the redemptive power of Jesus’ sacrifice, his death, and resurrection, heaven and hell, the afterlife, angels. We share that and more. Understand, Sacred Tradition is not simply those things on which Christians fail to find agreement ...

... “So, to sum up; Tradition is the lens through which the Church views Scripture; the ongoing revelation that comes through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

”Any further questions?”

Several heads shake no.

“Okay, Joey says, if there are no questions, before you go, we would like to offer you a couple personal observations.”

“Ben?”

Setting his cup down, Ben steps to the head of the class.

“Jesus said, ‘unless you become like unto one of these little children, you shall not see God. For such as these is the kingdom of Heaven made.’ Christ was speaking of a child’s absolute belief and trust in those older; parents, teachers, and others. When it comes to Tradition, I find I must rely on that childlike trust in the church, guided by the Holy Spirit in all truth as Christ promised. My powers of logic and reasoning, are insufficient. I don’t know, I can only believe.”

“Joey?”

“For me, when it comes to these two traditions we’ve discussed, I understand them, not so much as glorifying Mary, as they glorify God and His immense love for us in that He would choose to repair the rift of Eden, not by a simple command, but by involvement in our humanity, our life. And in doing so, He makes one of us pure and worthy to carry Him in the person of His only begotten Son. And by showing us in Mary’s Assumption, what awaits all of us who are faithful to His law and His love.”

No one speaks as the class quietly ponders Ben and Joey’s words.

Downing the last of his coffee, Joey smiles.

“So, if there is nothing else, he says, see you next week. We’ll begin our discussion of the sacraments of the church.”

“Drive safe.”