

SCRIPTURE

“I’ve got a dozen questions, Sandy.”

Filling her coffee cup, Sandra Bradshaw chuckles. “I might have more, Lois.”

Overhearing them, Father John, blueberry muffin in hand, turns to the two ladies.

“So, I take it you’re both looking forward to this evening’s session?”

“Oh, hello, Father,” Sandra says, “and yes ... all week.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Well, honestly, my family isn’t too happy with my being here. All I keep hearing is man-made traditions and how Catholics don’t follow the Bible. I’m looking for some answers.”

“Because they’ve bombarded you with all kinds of questions?”

Smiling sheepishly, Sandy nods her head.

“Something like that” ...

Smiling, Father John winks at the two ...

“Well, let’s see if we can provide you both with some answers”

Hi, Tony here. Tonight’s session explores Sacred Scripture; the Bible. Though Ben and Joey will lead the session, Father John has joined them as an ‘expert witness’.

Last week’s session addressed the early history of the church. Since the Bible is one of the Church’s earliest Traditions, tonight’s a good place to start.

I see Ben’s stepped to the front of the class.

What do you say we, grab some coffee, a blueberry muffin, and take a seat ...

“Scripture, the Bible, is tonight’s focus,” Ben says. “Now, I know you have a lot of questions but we’re going ask you to hold them for a few minutes. We want to present the basic Church’s understanding of Scripture first ...

... “So, let’s start ...

“... We’ll begin with some words taken from the primary teaching document of the Church, the Catechism,” Ben says, picking up his notepad. “It tells us the following ...

... “It is through the words of Scripture that God speaks to mankind. The inspired books of the Bible contain the truth God wants us to hear ...

... “The Holy Spirit inspires the various narratives written by men, and having God as their author; it is the Holy Spirit who inspires the writers of both the Old and New Testaments.”

“Pausing, Ben looks over the class. Seeing their interest, he continues.

“Inspired, but not dictated, by God, Scripture was written by men. God uses men to teach his truth, and what the human authors passed on is what God wants to reveal to mankind ...

... “To understand that Scripture presents all that is necessary and true, we must understand the times, conditions, and cultures in which they wrote. It is why we find differing themes, or styles in Scripture; like poetry, prophesy, historical narrative and other forms of literary expression ...

... “And please know I am paraphrasing here to simplify what the Catechism teaches. It presents our understanding in much greater detail. If you want to explore the Church’s teaching further, I suggest you get yourself a copy. It is far more complete than what time allows us here.”

Heads nod around the room.

Ben pauses. “Here, I’m going to turn things over to Joey.”

Setting down his coffee, Joey steps to face the class.

“Now, it's important to understand Jesus never instructed anyone to write anything,” he begins. “His instruction to the apostles was to teach. Jesus came to establish a group of believers, a church. Not to write books. So, why then did Scripture appear? ...

... “Well, the teaching of the Apostles was directed to diverse peoples, hence their narratives were tailored to their particular audience. Matthew wrote his gospel to the Jewish people, Mark, to the Romans, Luke to the Greeks, and John, to the developing church. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called synoptic gospels; synoptic meaning those who saw things in a similar manner. Their gospels related the events and teachings of Jesus, where John’s focus is less on the events of Jesus’ public ministry, and emphasizes His teaching.

Maybe, I guess, because John felt the first three guys did a bang-up job.”

Winking, Joey elicits some gentle laughter from the class.

“And, in the late fourth century, at the behest of the leaders of the church in Rome, Jerome, a premier Scripture scholar at the time compiled the various writings of the authors of the New Testament, joining it with the Old Testament to form the Bible we have today. ...

... “So, that is a simple overview. To recap, the Church considers the Bible the inspired word of God, written by men under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Scripture, combined

with Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium, the teaching office of the Church, forms the foundation of the Catholic faith.”

Pausing, Joey sips his coffee and continues.

“Now, rather than drone on with definitions and references to church writings, we’ve chosen a few of the questions you’ve asked and we’ll address them here.”

Enthusiastically, heads nod throughout the room.

“When was the Bible written?” Father John reads, drawing a slip from a small pile on an adjacent table.

“Okay, first it’s important to understand the apostles believed Jesus was going to return in their lifetime. In the gospel of John, Jesus tells them; ‘You heard me tell you, I am going away and I will return to you’ ...” So, among the apostles and first disciples, there was no urgency to record anything in written form.”

“And remember,” Ben says, joining Father John; “the early church was heavily persecuted. The apostle James was killed around the year forty-four; Saint Stephen even earlier than that, and Peter and Paul were executed in Rome about the year sixty-eight. The reality that maybe Jesus wasn’t returning began to creep in to their collective understanding. Thus, they began to see a need to record their experience so as to carry on Christ’s command to proclaim His gospel.”

“And again remember,” Joey adds, “the four gospel writers were writing to specific audiences; not contributing to a singular overall narrative. They weren’t writing with the compilation of their words into one source as their purpose ...

... “The gospels didn’t begin to appear until almost forty years after the Ascension,” Father John says, picking up from where he left off. “Now, Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians was written around the year fifty-one, and his letters continued to his death in Rome around sixty-eight ...

... “However, Paul’s letters were instructions, exhortations, and encouragements; not an all-encompassing narrative. That came with the four gospels which appeared after Paul’s death. Mark’s appeared around the year, seventy, Matthew’s was next, then Luke’s and finally John’s; over the next twenty-five years or so.”

Pausing to gauge the effect of his answer, Father continues

“Now, it isn’t clear what writings were available to the various apostles in the lands to which they went. For instance, as Joey noted, Mark wrote his gospel to a Roman audience. Did Thomas, who went to what is now India, have access to Mark’s words? We don’t know. What we do know is, as the church grew, it gradually perceived the necessity of a universal narrative assuring all heard the same story.”

Clearing his throat, Joey picks up a second slip.

“Why do the gospels differ in some of the accounts?”

Nodding slowly, Joey smiles.

“True, there are discrepancies; things like the actions of the thieves crucified with Jesus, or the number of women at the tomb on Sunday morning. Some of the incidents appearing in more than one gospel differ slightly in context. So why? Well, probably because its human nature for memories to fade ...

... “Remember, through the Holy Spirit, God inspired; not dictated. And again, they wrote to varying audiences. Mark’s gospel to the Romans is more spartan than Luke’s to the Greeks. Why, because the Luke’s audience wanted details ... and the Romans, just facts, no frills.”

“And Matthew’s leans more heavily on the Jewish nature of Jesus and His ministry,” Ben adds. “Why, because a Jewish audience would relate to specifics of little or no consequence to the Romans or a pagan Greek.”

“But that doesn’t explain the discrepancies,” Tom Taylor says.

“True, and your question leads to an important point, Tom ...

... “Scripture, as it is canonized, is about Jesus; primarily the three years of His ministry and mission. The writers considered ancillary things such as these discrepancies, and events of his life not critical to portray the essence of His ministry, unnecessary. It’s why we don’t know Joseph’s fate; when he died, the details of Jesus’ early life, or the eventual fate of those

closest to our Lord. As to whether there were several, or one woman at the tomb, the number is inconsequential; that there were witnesses who brought the news to the apostles, is. That there are minor contextual discrepancies in an incident appearing in more than one gospel, again is inconsequential. The truth of the incident occurring, is.”

Reading the next slip, Joey looks to Father John. “I think I’m going to let you handle this one.”

“Okay, let’s see what theological bombshell we have here,” the priest chuckles as he takes the slip from Joey.

Soft laughter ripples throughout the room.

“Oh, not too bad. Why does the Catholic Church de-emphasize Scripture when Jesus Himself cites it? ...

... “Well, first off, when Jesus, or someone else, cites Scripture in the New Testament, the reference is to the Old Testament. A good example is found in Acts when Phillip explains to a man from Ethiopia, the Scriptures as referring to Christ. He’s quoting from Isaiah in the Old Testament. Remember, the New Testament was over 350 years in the future. All the prophecies of the Old Testament point to Jesus. Do some have relevance to today’s conditions; sure, but future prophesy was not the intention of the writer, or the Holy Spirit. Nostradamus didn’t write a word of Scripture.”

Again, gentle laughter echoes through the room.

“As to de-emphasizing Scripture, well, as Joey already said, Scripture is one of the three foundations of the Church and especially of the Mass, our communal worship service. I would offer that while those who accept only Scripture would most likely see Rome’s understanding of the three foundations, or pillars of the faith as they are called, as de-emphasizing or minimizing the importance of Scripture. That viewpoint is totally erroneous.”

Picking up another slip, Ben chuckles. “Father’s words dovetail perfectly into this question. Do the prophecies of the Old Testament have relevance to today’s world? ...

... “Certainly, the words of the past have relevance to the events of today. But remember, Scripture is a foundation of what is known as soteriology; that is the study of salvation history. As Father said, Nostradamus didn’t write anything in the Bible.”

“You said ‘a’ foundation,” Tony Rice asks. “What else would be a foundation?”

“Well, Tony, archaeological findings, revelation from newly discovered sources; Sacred Tradition, things like that. Remember, the Bible is complete; nothing can be added or subtracted from it. That is dogma.”

“Okay,” Joey says, standing; “let’s take a break, stretch our legs, freshen the coffee cups, and we’ll continue in a bit”

Breaks over ... and the folks head back to their seats.

“Questions?” Father John asks, moving to the head of the class.

Up go a half dozen hands.

“Darrell.”

“I’ve heard Catholics were, prohibited from reading the bible.”

“Why?”

“Okay, we hear this a lot, Darrell, Remember, the Bible appeared around the year four hundred, Until the fifteenth century and the advent of the printing press, Bibles were rare; hand copied by monks. It often took a year or more to produce one, so they weren’t readily available outside churches. With the press appearing a little before the Protestant Reformation, producing a bible was much easier ...

... “Now, Luther issued his own Bible, adding and subtracting to Rome’s canonized version. Others did too; some having portions contrary to the approved Scriptures. So, to insure the faithful heard the authentic Scriptures a ban was put in place. Scripture was to be read at Mass ...

... “A second reason is that, historically, until recently, most of the faithful were illiterate. The Scripture they heard was authentic, being read three times at a Sunday Mass. The prohibition was to avoid confusion or heresy arising from unauthorized sources.”

Pausing to sip his coffee, Father John nods.

“Oh, and one more reason; civil authorities in times past meddled in the affairs of the Church,” he adds. “The ban was also to prevent them from providing their own interpretations of Scripture.” ‘

“I understand the Vatican had someone killed for translating the Bible?” Lois Webster asks.

“Not true, Lois. What is true, is a man named William Tyndale produced a English translation and was put to death. But Tyndale was executed by Henry VIII, two years after Henry broke with the Vatican and formed his own church. History tells us Tyndale angered Henry by his position on Henry’s marital status, and that is the reason Henry had him executed. The Catholic church, while it didn’t approve of Tyndale’s bible, didn’t kill him. Henry did.”

“Isn’t Scripture all we need? “I mean why does the Church follow traditions, and not just the Bible alone?” Mike DeCastro asks.

“Mike, the next session concerns itself with Tradition. So, I’ll give you a short answer here and ask you to wait. Okay?”

Nodding, Mike smiles his agreement.

“Tradition is the continued handing on of revelation. Call it the lens through which the church views Scripture. The Bible itself is one of the first great Traditions of the Church and one of its three pillars. Much of Scripture is recorded tradition. Tradition goes hand in hand with Scripture.”

Sandra Bradshaw raises her hand.

“Yes, Sandra.”

“Where is the word pope in the Bible? Peter was never called, the pope.”

“Simply ... nowhere, Sandra,” Father John, chuckles. “Why, because the position hadn’t been established when Scripture was written. The Church, the Vatican, and the pope, like the Bible, evolved over time ...

... “Now, the apostles had the pure teaching of Jesus; there was no confusion as to our Lords actions and teachings. As time passed however, conflicting ideas began appearing; ideas generated by some within the church. Thus, the bishops gradually recognized the need for a singular voice of authority. Remembering Christ’s commission of Peter, they chose and empowered the successor to Peter, the Bishop of Rome, to be that voice of authority. The papacy, its influence and importance evolved over time; the word, ‘pope’ coming with that evolution.”

“Where is purgatory in the Bible?” Carolyn Evert asks.

Clearing his throat, Joey looks over the class.

“Carolyn, as Father said to Mike, there is a coming session on purgatory. So, again, I’ll offer you a brief answer and ask you to wait for the session. Okay?”

Carolyn nods her assent.

“Purgatory is an understanding derived from Christ’s words in Scripture, the early church Fathers, and archaeological discoveries of activities of the early church. So, I ask your patience; we’ll address purgatory in coming sessions.”

“Why does the Catholic church say Mary was a perpetual virgin, when Scripture says Jesus had brothers and sisters? And where does it justify what you call her Immaculate Conception?” Janice Manning asks.

“Okay, Janice,” Father John says. “I know the guys have an entire session on that topic. So, again ... a short answer. As to perpetual virgin, Matthew’s gospel tells us Mary had no relations with Joseph until he took her into his home. Now, if I were to say I’ll never take another drink until the day I die ... see the problem. As to brothers and sisters; again, a problem in translation. Remember, Matthew’s gospel was to the Jews and the words brother and brethren are used interchangeably in Hebrew, Aramaic, and probably Greek. So, again, I urge you to wait for that session.”

“I’ve always been told the Church is built on Jesus with Scripture calling Him the Cornerstone,” Dave Palmer asks. “And His words to Peter only mean the church is built on Peter’s faith, not the man himself?”

“Okay,” Joey says. “It’s true; Scripture refers to Jesus as the cornerstone. But a cornerstone is the focal point of a building, not its foundation. Certainly, Jesus is the focal point of all Christian religion. But it’s plain from Scripture Jesus made Peter the foundation, the rock, on which the visible institution, the Church, in which Jesus lives and comes to us, is to be built.”

“How about taking it from here, Father?” Joey asks. Nodding, the priest steps to the front of the class.

“Again, in this case, a problem of translation and transliteration occurs,” Father John says, clearing his throat. The Bible was first written in Greek. However, Jesus spoke Aramaic to His apostles; men from the region of Galilee where Aramaic was the common language. He said, “thou art *kepha*, and on this *kepha* I will build my church... *kepha* being Aramaic for rock. In translating *kepha* into Greek, it becomes *petros*, the masculine form of rock when referred to Peter. Standing alone, *petros*, in Greek, means little pebble and in Jesus’ subsequent words,” on this rock I will build my church,” the word *petra*, the feminine form meaning foundational or bedrock is used ...

... “The problem here is Aramaic is a non-gender specific language; Greek is. In Greek, the masculine form, *petros*, must be used to refer to Peter. If the feminine form, *petra* were used,

it would be like saying in English something like, ‘Ralph is a good baseball player, she plays center field.’ The proper gender pronoun must be used to modify Ralph ... and Peter. People who contend Jesus couldn’t build his church on a pebble miss the confusion in translating, or transliterating, the languages ...

... “And another problem is context. Peter’s commission occurs in a group setting ... the assembled disciples. In that context, it wouldn’t make sense to them Jesus was referring to himself. That could only happen if Jesus and Peter were alone. They were not. The proper understanding of an incident in Scripture, any incident in Scripture, depends heavily on the context in which it occurs.”

Pausing, a look of amusement wanders across Father John’s face as he looks over the class.

“When it comes to the translation of the languages of Scripture, consider this ...

... “Imagine a pair of, let’s say, Chinese Scripture scholars are **in** San Francisco in the year twenty- six - seventy-five. They discover a document that reads, “this cat Jesus was hip man ... a really groovy dude. Bro, the dude was phat ... chill man, he didn’t diss nobody. Man, no one ever got his goat. The pharisees tried to gaslight him and his followers, man, but they fell flat on their face.”

More gentle laughter rolls through the room.

“Imagine them trying to figure out what it meant, the priest continues. They would have to understand the times and the slang ... the language of the day and the context of the narrative. Scripture translators have the same problem. There were no words in Hebrew, ancient Aramaic, and other languages for modern day English, or even Greek. That is a problem with scholarly translation and understanding of Scripture.”

Heads nod as the laughter abates.

“And, that’s why we have a church which, for two-thousand years, has dedicated itself to studying, and constantly searching for truth. Relying on Sacred Scripture together with Traditional teachings; all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

“Traditional teachings?” Tony Rice asks.

“Yes Tony, something we will delve into next week.”

Silently Tony nods, an understanding smile crossing his lips.

“So, any questions?” Ben asks.

Seeing no raised hands or looks of confusion, Ben smiles.

“Okay, enough for this evening. See everyone next week.”