



“Hold Fast to the Word”:

Scripture & Tradition

The Year of St. Paul
St. Aloysius Catholic Church
Leonardtown, MD

Is Scripture the sole spiritual authority for Christians?

What do Catholics mean by “Sacred Tradition”?

The Protestant doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, the belief that Scripture is the sole spiritual authority for Christians in matters of doctrine, is at the heart of the Protestant rejection of the Catholic Church during the Reformation and of modern disagreements with Catholicism. Catholics on the other hand believe that both Scripture and Apostolic Tradition, as preserved and interpreted by the successors of the Apostles, are authoritative for Christians.

The modern debate among Christians began in the sixteenth century with the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther and the other Protestant Reformers rejected the notion of Sacred Tradition and the teaching authority of the Church.

This outline will address three underlying aspects of Catholic teaching regarding Scripture and Tradition:

1. **Christ himself is the fullness of God’s revelation, and the Apostles received the fullness of the truth of His Gospel.** Anything that is not consistent with this revelation is to be rejected.
2. The Apostles were given the mission and the authority to hand on the truth. That truth was handed on two ways – in writing, in what would become the New Testament, and orally, through the preaching of the Apostles and their successors. Apostolic Tradition is that which was orally handed on from Christ, to the Apostles, to their successors, on to us.
3. Validly ordained bishops are the successors of the Apostles, and have received the **Apostles’ full authority to preserve and interpret the Word of God, as contained in both Scripture and Tradition.**

Christ is the Fullness of Revelation

Jesus Christ is himself the Word made Flesh, the climax of God’s revelation to us, and the Apostles were selected by Jesus to be the first recipients and heralds of that revelation. As is clear from the **word of Jesus and the writings of St. Paul, anything that is not consistent with what God’s has revealed is to be rejected.**

John 1:1—3, 14 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing **came to be.... And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.**

Matthew 28:18—20: [Jesus said to the Apostles,] “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

Colossians 2:8 See to it that no one captivate you with an empty, seductive philosophy according to human tradition, according to the elemental powers of the world and not according to Christ.

Mark 7:5—13: So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, "Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?" He responded, "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.' You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition." He went on to say, "How well you have set aside the commandment of God in order to uphold your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'Whoever curses father or mother shall die.' Yet you say, 'If a person says to father or mother, "Any support you might have had from me is qorban"' (meaning, dedicated to God), you allow him to do nothing more for his father or mother. You nullify the word of God in favor of your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many such things.

2 Timothy 3:16—17: All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

The Apostles Handed on the Truth in Writing and Orally

The Apostles fulfilled their task of handing on the truth of Christ in two ways: in writing, in what would become the New Testament, and orally, in the preaching of the Apostles and their successors. When **Christians think of the word “Tradition” today, we most often call to mind various medieval practices and idea, which were sometimes valuable and sometime not.** The Catholic Church uses the phrase **“Sacred Tradition,” or “Apostolic Tradition” to refer to that which was orally proclaimed by the Apostles, not innovations that may have sprung up since then.**

While the Bible warns about false tradition, St. Paul uses the Greek noun “tradition” (παράδοσις / “paradosis” / “what has been handed on”) and its verb form (παράδιδωμι / “paradidomi” / “to hand on”) positively more than he uses it negatively. St. Paul and the earliest Christians saw both Scripture and oral Apostolic Tradition as authoritative.

Catechism of the Catholic Church 83: The Tradition here in question comes from the apostles and hands on what they received from Jesus' teaching and example and what they learned from the Holy Spirit. The first generation of Christians did not yet have a written New Testament, and the New Testament itself demonstrates the process of living Tradition.

Tradition is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time. These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which the great Tradition is expressed. In the light of Tradition, these traditions can be retained, modified or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium.

1 Corinthians 11:2: I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold fast to the traditions, just as I handed them on to you.

2 Thessalonians 2:15: Therefore, brothers, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours.

2 Thessalonians 3:6: We instruct you, brothers, in the name of (our) Lord Jesus Christ, to shun any brother who conducts himself in a disorderly way and not according to the tradition they received from us.

See also 1 Corinthians 11:23—24, 15:3—4; Acts 16:4; John 21:25

St. Irenaeus, whose teacher was trained by the apostle John, wrote in the second century: The Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although she is disseminated throughout the whole world, yet guarded it, as if she occupied but one house. She likewise believes these things just as if she had but one soul and one and the same heart; and harmoniously she proclaims them and teaches them and hands them down, as if she possessed but one mouth. For, while the languages of the world are diverse, nevertheless, the authority of the tradition is one and the same.

Origen wrote in the third century: Although there are many who believe that they themselves hold to the teachings of Christ, there are yet some among them who think differently from their predecessors. The teaching of the Church has indeed been handed down through an order of succession from the apostles and remains in the churches even to the present time. That alone is to be believed as the truth which is in no way at variance with ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition.

St. Basil the Great wrote in the fourth century: Of the dogmas and messages preserved in the Church, some we possess from written teaching and others we receive from the tradition of the apostles, handed on to us in mystery. In respect to piety, both are of the same force. No one will contradict any of these, no one, at any rate, who is even moderately versed in matters [of the Church]. Indeed, were we to try to reject unwritten customs as having no great authority, we would unwittingly injure the gospel in its vitals; or rather, we would reduce [Christian] message to a mere term.

The Bishops are Successors of the Apostles

If we accept that there are some traditions that do not come from the Apostles and are to be rejected if they contradict what has been revealed and are other traditions that do come from the Apostles that are authoritative, how can we distinguish between the two? The Apostles received the duty and the strength to discern by the power of the Holy Spirit what was in accord with the teachings of Jesus, and their teachings were binding on all who followed Jesus. The Apostles used this authority in the Council of Acts 15, when they discerned whether Gentile converts needed to follow the Jewish law.

What would happen after their death? After Judas' suicide, the Apostles had appointed Matthias as his successor and used the same word that the New Testament uses for the office of the bishop (ἐπίσκοπος / episkopēn) to describe his office in Acts 1:20. Through the laying on of hands, bishops receive the same duty and strength that was given to the Apostles, and thus have the authority to discern what is consistent with the teachings that the Apostles received from Jesus Christ. This is seen clearly in St. Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, who were both bishops in the New Testament. The bishops historically used their God-given authority to reject the errors of Gnosticism, to discern what books belong in the New Testament, and to define the truth about Jesus in the Ecumenical Councils of the Church. Just as the early Christians submitted themselves to the teachings of the Apostles, Christians today have a duty to submit themselves to the teachings of their successors, the bishops.

John 14:26: 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.

John 16:13: But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears.

Luke 10:16: Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.

Matthew 18:18: Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

1 Timothy 4:13—16: Until I arrive, attend to the reading, exhortation, and teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was conferred on you through the prophetic word with the imposition of hands of the presbyterate. Be diligent in these matters, be absorbed in them, so that your progress may be evident to everyone. Attend to yourself and to your teaching.

2 Timothy 1:13 – 14: Take as your norm the sound words that you heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard this rich trust with the help of the holy Spirit that dwells within us.

Titus 1:7 – 9: For a bishop as God's steward must be blameless, not arrogant, not irritable, not a drunkard, not aggressive, not greedy for sordid gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, temperate, just, holy, and self-controlled, holding fast to the true message as taught so that he will be able both to exhort with sound doctrine and to refute opponents.

2 Timothy 2:2: And what you heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will have the ability to teach others as well.

See also Acts 2:42; Acts 15; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Timothy 1:2—3;

St. Ignatius of Antioch, who was taught by the Apostle John, wrote in the second century: Indeed, when you submit to the bishop as you would to Jesus Christ, it is clear to me that you are living not in the manner of men but as Jesus Christ, who died for us, that through faith in his death you might escape dying. It is necessary, therefore—and such is your practice that you do nothing without the bishop.

St. Irenaeus wrote: It is possible, then, for everyone in every church, who may wish to know the truth, to contemplate the tradition of the apostles which has been made known throughout the whole world. And we are in a position to enumerate those who were instituted bishops by the apostles and their successors to our own times—men who neither knew nor taught anything like these heretics rave about.

It is surely necessary to avoid them [heretics], while cherishing with the utmost diligence the things pertaining to the Church, and to lay hold of the tradition of truth. . . . What if the apostles had not in fact left writings to us? Would it not be necessary to follow the order of tradition, which was handed down to those to whom they entrusted the churches?

Tertullian wrote in the third century: But if there be any [heresies] which are bold enough to plant [their origin] in the midst of the apostolic age, that they may thereby seem to have been handed down by the apostles, because they existed in the time of the apostles, we can say: Let them produce the original records of their churches; let them unfold the roll of their bishops, running down in due succession from the beginning in such a manner that [their first] bishop shall be able to show for his ordainer and predecessor some one of the apostles or of apostolic men—a man, moreover, who continued steadfast with the apostles. For this is the manner in which the apostolic churches transmit their registers: as the church of Smyrna, which records that Polycarp was placed therein by John; as also the church of Rome, which makes Clement to have been ordained in like manner by Peter.