

CAN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ADD TO REVELATION?

Judy Landrieu Klein

One of the perceptions non-Catholics often have about the Catholic Church is that she has taken the liberty of “adding” doctrines to the body of truth revealed by Jesus Christ (called “Revelation”). When I was a practicing evangelical and former Catholic, others and I frequently referred to the teachings of the Catholic Church as “traditions of men.” I sincerely thought that the Church added many of the beliefs professed by Catholics to the “pure Gospel” over the course of time. These included doctrines such as Purgatory and the Immaculate Conception, to name but a few. Due to opinions like these, an important question that Catholics must be prepared to answer is: Can the Church add to Revelation? Has the Church, indeed, attached her own set of “doctrines” to the truth revealed by Christ? The answer, of course, is emphatically “no!”

The [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#) addresses this issue directly in paragraph [73](#) (see also par. [65-66](#)), which states: “God has revealed himself fully by sending his own Son, in whom he has established his covenant forever. The Son is the Father’s definitive Word; so there will be no more Revelation after him.” The belief that Revelation is complete is held by all orthodox Christians, and it is usually stated by saying that “Revelation ceased with the death of the last Apostle.” In other words, all the truths that God wanted mankind to know in order for us to live eternally with Him were revealed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in all He said and did while on earth. Christ “deposited” those truths into the Church via His relationship with the Apostles. All that He revealed is contained in the “Deposit of Faith,” and it comes to us in and through the Church by way of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. The Apostles and their successors were commissioned by Christ to guard and transmit the Deposit of Faith through the ages. They were not, however, given the authority to add to or alter it in any way.

If all of the above is true, and we as Catholics believe it is, how could it be that the Church waited until the 19th Century to formally define the Immaculate Conception? The answer is found in [paragraph 66](#) of the [*Catechism*](#), which states: “Yet even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of centuries.” Simply stated, this means that all that the Church holds to be true was given by Christ in the Deposit of Faith, but it takes time, prayer and living the truth for the Church to fully understand what she was given. The truths that the Church believes never change, but her understanding of them deepens over time. And as it does, she articulates her beliefs more clearly. This process is known as the “development of doctrine,” and it was written about at length by the famous Anglican convert Cardinal John Henry Newman in his “Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine.”

Newman proposed that all of the truths that Christ revealed are implicitly held by the Church in the Deposit of Faith, and they are manifested by the way the Church lives and practices her faith over the centuries. We can determine what the Church has always believed by looking at various historical sources, including Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, the Liturgy, the Creeds,

the writings of the Early Church Fathers and the teachings of the Church's Magisterium. The Church generally does not express a truth of her faith explicitly unless she is confronted with a challenge to her beliefs, known as heresy. At such a time, the Church will defend the truth by articulating her faith explicitly, using dogmatic formulas to state in precise terms what she has always held to be true.

For example, Christ revealed the truth of the Trinity, and the Church has believed this truth since her inception. This is evident through records of her ancient liturgies, writings and practices, including the practice of making the Sign of the Cross and professing the Apostle's Creed, which served as the basis of instruction for catechumens in the early Church. The doctrine of the Trinity was not formally defined, however, until the fourth century when the Macedonian heresy denied the personhood and divinity of the Holy Spirit. As a necessary response to that heresy, the Church defined (not invented) the doctrine of the Trinity, stating that the Godhead consists of Three Divine Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Though the word "Trinity" is nowhere explicitly used in sources of Revelation, including the Bible, the Church coined the phrase after several centuries to describe a belief it held to be true. The same could be said about the Immaculate Conception, Purgatory and other doctrines, which are implied in Scripture and have always been believed by the Church, but which took time for the Church to fully understand and articulate.

For instance, Mary's Immaculate Conception is taught implicitly in Luke's Gospel, where God's angel addresses Mary as "full of grace" (Lk. 1:28). Though linguistic translations lose the significance of the greeting, in the Greek in which the Bible was originally written the word used is *kecharitomene*, which means, "fully perfected in grace" and suggests an action that has already been completed in the past. In meditating upon Scripture, the Fathers of the Church concluded that if Mary was already fully perfected in grace, God had created her in such a way that no sin dwelt within her! The Immaculate Conception is also suggested in Luke's deliberate association of the Blessed Mother to the Ark of the Covenant (compare 2 Samuel 6:2-16 to Luke 1:39-56). The Church Fathers recognized this parallel very early on as they prayed with the Scriptures, concluding that Luke was inferring the utmost holiness of Mary herself as the New Ark and Bearer of the New Covenant in comparing her with the all-holy Ark. These conclusions are the beginning of the formulation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, seen in its embryonic stages.

In my mind the development of doctrine is best likened to a marriage. On the day we say "I do" we know and love the person we are marrying, and with God's grace, we will be married to that same person for the rest of our lives. At the end of our lives together —after we've lived through the birth of children, illnesses, career changes, financial hardships and, of course, all of the joy and intimacy that marriage brings— our knowledge and love of our spouse will be vastly deeper. We will be able to express that knowledge and love in ways we never even imagined on our honeymoon. The Church's relationship with Christ is a marriage, and she is ever seeking new ways to express more deeply the exquisite beauty of the truth which she holds. Though

the substance of that truth always remains the same, her grasp of it grows and evolves over time, prompting her to communicate its mysteries more fully and clearly.

Judy Landrieu Klein resides in Mandeville, LA, with her husband Bernard and their five children. She holds a Masters Degree in Theological Studies from the University of Dallas. She is co-host with Jim Seghers of a live weekly apologetics program on Radio Maria, and conducts apologetics seminars both locally and nationally. She can be contacted at jklein60@aol.com.

This article appeared in the *Southern Renaissance* 7 July 2003. The *Southern Renaissance* is the best value in authentic Catholic Publications. Subscription is only \$20.00 a year. Call 1-800538-4355 or mail check to: PO Box 1199, Boutte, LA 70039.