Sacred Tradition and Scripture

As Catholics, we believe that God revealed himself in two ways: through Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scriptures. This dual form of revelation was largely uncontested for the first 1500 years of the Church.

Tradition is simply the handing down or passing along of information or beliefs from one generation to another. During the time of Christ and the Apostles, as well as Old Testament times, this was an oral tradition.

Stories were passed along orally from person to person and community to community. During those days very few could read or write and preparation of written manuscripts was an expensive undertaking.

Our Gospels were based on stories that were told for decades before being committed to the written word.

This sacred Tradition dates back to the Apostles who faithfully passed along the Good News of Jesus that they witnessed first hand. Also we inherited our faith in one God from the Jewish people so ours is a rich Judeo-Christian tradition.

This all changed on the eve of All Saints Day in 1517 when Martin Luther, a Catholic, Augustinian monk nailed his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany.

It was not Luther's initial intent to challenge the authority of the Church. His initial impetus was to protest the selling of indulgences, a practice which flew in the face of his newfound theology of justification by faith alone.
But as his dispute with the Church intensified he eventually rejected the rich Catholic tradition as well as the authority of the Church. This left him with sacred scripture as his only authority.

Luther introduced the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, meaning Scripture alone.

Sola scriptura: In the Bible is contained all we need for our salvation. The Bible alone is the sole rule of faith. This became the battle cry of Luther and Protestants for generations to come.

The Catholic Church believes, "The true rule of faith is Scripture and Tradition, as manifested in the living, teaching authority of the Catholic Church, to which were entrusted the oral teachings of Jesus and the Apostles plus the authority to interpret Scripture rightly." (CCC: Catechism of the Catholic Church)

From this Sacred Tradition flow the Sacred Scriptures and the teaching authority of the Church. The teaching authority, referred to as the Magisterium, protects the Church from error and protects us from the misinterpretation of the Holy Scriptures.

Let’s talk first about the Sacred Scriptures, the Bible.

As we discuss the scriptures we are going to speak of “canons.”

A canon is an authoritative, infallible, divinely inspired collection of books. Religious councils have approved these canons. The decisions over canons were not always easy and much conflict and disagreement existed.

The Bible as we know it was first accepted as an official canon in the 4th century.

As you all know the bible is divided into the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) and the New Testament (Christian Scriptures)

There is general agreement among all Christians that we have 27 books in the New Testament:

- Gospels
Acts of the Apostles
Letters or Epistles
Book of Revelation

However, when we get to the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, there is much disagreement.

The early Church and present day Catholics accept 46 books as being canonical.

Since Martin Luther and the Protestant reformation most Protestants accept 39 books as canonical.

The Catholic Bible accepts 7 books rejected by Martin Luther in the 16th century and Jews in the early centuries of the Church.

It is important to understand that these books were accepted as part of the Bible dating back to the 4th Century. They were not added by Catholics; they were rejected by Martin Luther.

Catholics refer to these books as the Deuterocanon, or second canon.

Protestants call the books the Apocrypha. This term has many meanings but to Protestants the books of the Deuterocanon, the apocrypha, are not believed to be inspired by God. However, they are still felt to be useful for instructive purposes.

The books of the Deuterocanon:

Tobit
Judith
1&2 Maccabees
Wisdom
Sirach
Baruch

Esther: additional 107 verses
Daniel: stories of Susanna, Bel, and the Dragon

Many reasons exist as to why these books were not accepted as canonical by Luther and Jews following the ascent of the Christian Church.

Remember that these books were considered as canonical by the Catholic Church for over 1500 years. However, much controversy occurred as the existing canon was established.

To understand the origin of these books we must understand some basic biblical history.

Following the Babylonian exile that occurred in the 6th century BC the Jewish people were dispersed through the Mediterranean world. This is referred to as the Diaspora.

In the 3rd century BC there were more Jews living in Alexandria, Egypt than were living in Palestine.

It was during this time that a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was undertaken.

This Greek translation is referred to as the Septuagint (based on the Latin septuaginta meaning seventy), often abbreviated by the Roman numerals LXX.

The story of the Septuagint dates back to Alexandria, which was ruled at that time by the Ptolemys.

Ptolemy II planned to build one of the greatest libraries in the world containing all of the great literary works. He invited 70 Hebrew scholars to translate their scriptures into Greek.
The story goes that the 70 scholars were placed in 70 cloistered rooms and after 70 days emerged with identical translations that were in perfect conformity to the original texts.

More recent scholars feel this is a myth. More than likely it took over a decade to complete the translations beginning with the law.

It was felt that the Jews in Alexandria were afraid that their laws and scriptures as well as cultic rituals and religious services would be lost as their people became assimilated into the Greek culture and their language was lost.

It was for this reason that the translation occurred.

The 7 books of the Deuterocanon were part of the Septuagint.

The Septuagint was widely used throughout the eastern Mediterranean and was also used in Palestine at the time of Jesus, along with the Palestinian scriptures written in Hebrew and Aramaic.

The early Christians included the Septuagint in their canon because it was in wide usage by Christians and Jews alike.

The Hebrew Scriptures are divided into:

**Law – Torah or Pentateuch**
- Genesis
- Exodus
- Numbers
- Leviticus
- Deuteronomy

**Prophets – Nebi’im**
- Isaiah
- Hosea
- Nahum
- Jeremiah
- Joel
- Habakkuk
- Lamentations
- Amos
- Zephaniah
Because the Old and New Testament Scriptures are the Divinely revealed written Word of God, Catholics venerate the Scriptures as they venerate the Lord’s body.

Our belief in the Sacred Tradition does not diminish our reverence and veneration of the scriptures.

What do we mean by Sacred or Apostolic Tradition?

With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the apostles were empowered to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth.

At first, this message was not written down but was in the minds and hearts of Jesus’ disciples, especially the twelve.

The Apostles were trained to understand and teach Jesus’ message as no others were, for Jesus had personally formed them for this task and had also sent the Holy Spirit to teach them and expand their understanding.

So from the beginning of Christianity, the teaching of Jesus’ apostles was the most reliable source of truth about him.

At first the teaching of the Apostles was passed on from word of mouth, from believer to believer, community to community. This passing on of the Good News of Jesus Christ by word of mouth is called “oral tradition.”
Today when we say “Tradition”, many people think we are speaking of things like holy cards, the Latin Mass, nuns in habits, and fussy old priests telling you what you can’t do.

But these are memories of culture, not faith; they are matters of custom and have nothing to do with Tradition

Tradition is the living and lived faith of the Church. Tradition is living, not just history. Present and past

We need to distinguish between Tradition with a “Big T” and tradition with a “little t.”

Sacred or apostolic tradition consists of the teachings that the apostles passed on orally through their preaching. These teachings largely (perhaps entirely) overlap with those contained in the scriptures but their mode of transmission is different.

The process of sorting out “T” from “t” is ongoing, and involves the official teaching authority of the Church, theologians, and the lived experiences and wisdom of the Christian community itself.

The term does not refer to legends or mythological accounts, nor does it encompass transitory customs or practices that may change, as circumstances warrant, such as styles of priestly dress, particular forms of devotion, or even liturgical rubrics. These are traditions with a little “t”

To be Sacred Tradition it cannot be rejected or lost without an essential distortion of the Gospel.

The Church doesn’t hold any truth on the basis of scripture alone but she doesn’t hold any truth on the basis of Tradition without scripture either

You can’t take one without the other.
Sacred Tradition is the only source of information about fundamentally important ideas like the Trinity, which isn’t explicit in the Bible.

With Vatican II (Second Vatican Council – 1960’s) came the understanding that with the death of the last apostle the revelation given by Christ and the Holy Spirit is complete.

Nothing can be added to the deposit of revelation and nothing can be taken away.

But even though Tradition can’t change, our knowledge of it can evolve. Our understanding of it grows steadily because Tradition unfolds as the Church faces new situations.

Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, committed to the Church... For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end.

So although the Church recognizes 2 sources we see them as one directed toward one goal, the salvation of souls...

Dei Verbum, one of the many documents that emerged from Vatican II greatly shaped the way we look at Tradition and Scripture.

“Tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ... and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known.”
It is clear, therefore, that “sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church...are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.”

Tradition comes before, during and after the writing of sacred scripture.

In the wider meaning of the word, Tradition refers to the whole process by which the Church “hands on” its faith to each new generation.

This handing on occurs through
  Preaching
  Catechesis
  Teaching
  Bible
  Doctrines
  Devotions

By what we are doing tonight we are carrying on the Tradition of the Church.