

How God Reveals Himself

How We Hear His Voice

By Father Bill McCarthy along with Alan Schreck

Preface

The most important thing in life is to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And the most important part of that relationship is our intimate communion with Him. He lives in our heart. He speaks to us by His Spirit in many and varied ways. Throughout the 6,000 years of Judaic Christian history, many men and women have learned to listen to, to discern and to obey the voice of the Master.

God Speaks Face to Face

The fundamental thing in the life of Moses was to hear the voice of God. God spoke to Moses, “face to face as one man speaks to another” (Num 12:6-8). Jesus said of Himself, “He only did what the Father told Him” (Jn 5:32). Mary, His mother, was she “who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!” (Lk 1:45). All the saints have learned to hear and obey the voice of the Lord.

Listen

Prayer is not simply talking to God; rather, it is a two-way street, a communication between God and us. We must learn to talk and to listen. We must learn the ways in which God speaks to us and what His voice sounds like. Some years ago, someone asked Catherine of Sienna, “Why is this that in the Bible God is speaking all over the place, whereas today, hardly anyone hears God.” And Catherine said in response, “Because then their prayer was ‘Speak Lord, your servant is listening.’ Whereas today, our prayer is, ‘Listen Lord, your servant is speaking.’”

Discern and Obey

We who live in such a noisy world must learn to quiet our minds and hearts so that we may listen, to discern and obey the voice of the Lord, not only happiness in this life depends upon it, but also in the next.

How can Christians claim to know with certainty things about God and his will for the human race? Many people even question whether God exists, although the Bible and Christian tradition affirms that God’s existence should be evident from observing the beauty and order of the universe--God’s creation (see Ps 19:1; Rom 1: 19-20). Catholic theology claims that nature or the universe reveals God’s existence; we call this natural revelation.

However, natural revelation does not tell us all that we would like to know, or should know, about God. Christians believe that God offers the human race a more accurate and complete knowledge of himself and his will through what theology calls supernatural revelation. The Second Vatican Council explained this concept in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation:

In His goodness, God chose to reveal Himself, and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will... Through this revelation, ... the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite them and take them into fellowship with Himself. (no.2)

This statement emphasizes that God reveals, not primarily a set of rules or commandments, but himself and his infinite love for us. Through supernatural revelation God invites each of us into a living and personal relationship of love with our Father and creator, in order to discover the true meaning and joy of life. Not only this, but God has even demonstrated his love and shown his plan for our lives in action by coming to live among us as a man-- Jesus Christ. Thus, God’s revelation is personal because it comes to us through the person of Jesus. Jesus invites

each person to come to know God as our Father and to live in fellowship with him. Revelation leads to life: true, abundant life in this world (Jn 10:10) and eternal life with God in the age to come.

What comprises supernatural revelation? The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation explains that through supernatural revelation God reveals himself through both *words* and *deeds*. The faith of Christians and Jews is based on the belief that God acts in unique and specific ways in human history and that he also speaks to humanity in various ways. The Old Testament for example, recounts God's mighty act of delivering the Hebrew people from captivity in Egypt. It also testifies that God spoke to Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and other men and women of the Old Covenant through dreams, visions, voices, angelic messengers, and other means. The New Testament tells of Jesus' mighty works of healing, expelling demons, and finally redeeming the human race through his death on the cross. Christians understand these works of Jesus of Nazareth as the greatest intervention of God in human history. Further, the New Testament proclaims that God spoke to the human race in a unique and unsurpassable way through Jesus. His words and teaching present to us God's pure, perfect revelation, for "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell..." (Col 1:19).

The Holy Spirit Reveals God's Truth

God entered our history as a man, Jesus of Nazareth, yet, it is impossible to recognize who Jesus is without the enlightenment of the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit. St. Paul, for example, wrote that "...no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). In St. John's Last Supper discourse, Jesus tells his apostles that it is to their advantage that he is leaving them because when he departs he will be able to send them the Holy Spirit.

"I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth..." (Jn 16:12-13).

Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide his people into all truth. In this light, we can speak of the Holy Spirit as the revealer, the faithful source of God's revelation in the church. The Gospel of John affirms that the Holy Spirit will call to mind the words and teachings of Jesus (Jn 14:26). He will "teach you in all things" (Jn 14:26) and "declare to you the things that are to come" (Jn 16:13).

The Catholic church has always emphasized that the ultimate source of revelation in the church is not a book (the Bible), nor a thing (tradition), nor even a human group or person (the Magisterium or the pope), but is God himself, particularly in the person of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit certainly reveals God's truth through the channels just mentioned, but it is the Spirit who guides the church through these channels into the fullness of truth.

Public Revelation: the Foundation of Christian Truth

How does the Holy Spirit reveal the truth to God's people? A primary work of the Spirit is to testify to Jesus Christ, who is the climax of God's revelation of himself to mankind. Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6); the fullness of human life in this age, and eternal life in the age to come, is received only through Jesus. The Catholic church recognizes that the lifetime of Jesus and of his apostles was a privileged time of God's foundational revelation, which is sometimes called the period of public revelation. God has revealed himself in an unsurpassed way in Jesus and through the teaching of his apostles. Hence, the Second Vatican Council proclaims in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation that "we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord, Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Tm 6:14 and Ti 2:13)" (no. 4). This means that God will send no new savior to mankind, nor will there be any further revelation of God bearing the same authority or significance as his revelation in and through Jesus Christ.¹ As St. Paul warned, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8). No other revelation is valid if it contradicts the good news received through the apostles and in the traditions that they have passed on. St. Paul exhorted the Thessalonians, "stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thes 2:15).

God's Word in Sacred Tradition

The Catholic church teaches that the normative revelation of God, for all times and situations, comes to us from the Holy Spirit through two channels: sacred Scripture and sacred tradition. The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation explains that "Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the church" (no.10). The phrase "the word of God" is used by many Christians to refer only to the Bible, but Catholics understand that both the Bible and sacred tradition are God's revealed word:

One Source

...For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit. To the successors of the apostles, sacred tradition hands on in its full purity of God's word which was entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit..." (DV, no. 9)

Not Scripture Alone

It is simpler to think of the entirety of God's word as a neatly bound book--the Bible. However many aspects of Christian life, worship, and belief coming from the time of the apostles were not written in the Bible. They were handed on (which is the literal meaning of "tradition") by the apostles and their successors as essential parts of the life of God's New Covenant people, the church. As the Second Vatican Council states:

...the apostles, handing on what they themselves had received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they have learned either by word or mouth or by letter (cf. 2 Thes 2:15), and to fight in defense of the faith handed on once and for all (cf. Jude 3). Now what was handed on by the apostles includes everything which contributes to the holiness of life, and the increase in faith of the People of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life, and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, and all that she believes. (DV, no.8)

For the sake of clarity, the Second Vatican Council distinguishes sacred tradition from the Bible or sacred Scripture, even though the New Testament itself is a compilation of primitive Christian tradition about Jesus, and his teaching. Sacred tradition, sometimes called apostolic tradition or the Tradition includes every aspect of God's revelation outside of the Bible that God intends to be believed and followed by the whole church in every age: "all that she herself is, and all that she believes." Some aspects of sacred tradition pass on to us the fullest way to worship God in the church, or the proper way to honor the angels and the saints, including Mary the Mother of God. Other aspects of sacred tradition present God's will about how we are to live (the moral life), which is not always explicitly or fully spelled out in the Bible. Part of the role of sacred tradition is to safeguard the true meaning of the sacred Scripture by presenting the church's authoritative interpretation of certain passages of the Bible.

Sacred Tradition

Some Christians mistakenly think that Catholics are diminishing the importance of the Bible by also following sacred tradition. To the contrary, Catholics express their great respect for the Bible by acknowledging that we often must rely on sacred tradition to preserve the true meaning of the Bible. No element of sacred tradition can contradict the teaching of the Bible since both are expressions of the one truth of God. However, sacred tradition sometimes enables us to interpret certain passages of the Bible correctly (especially those which may appear contradictory). The Holy Spirit also uses sacred tradition to present the church with a fuller and deeper understanding of sacred Scripture. Certain themes which are only mentioned or implied in the Bible often are presented in greater fullness and depth through sacred tradition. An example of this is the Catholic beliefs about Mary's Immaculate Conception and Assumption into heaven, which are not explicitly stated in the Bible but which flow out of and deepen the biblical teaching about Mary. Nowhere does the Bible teach that the Scripture *alone* is inspired by God. Concerning sacred tradition and its place in the church, the Second Vatican Council

teaches in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.

The Magisterium

This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (cf. Lk 2:19, 51), through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For, as the centuries succeed one another, the church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her. (no. 8)

Private Revelation

Even though the church received its foundational “public revelation” during the lifetime of Jesus and his apostles, the Holy Spirit is active in the church, as Jesus promised, to provide us with an even fuller and more complete understanding of God’s truth. It is through sacred tradition that God accomplishes this. It is important to note that not every tradition that develops within the church is part of the divine revelation that Catholics refer to as sacred tradition or Tradition. There are many human traditions that are part of the church’s life that are subject to change. Such traditions may either be merely human customs, or they may be part of God’s will and intention for the church for a particular situation or period of time in the life of God’s people but not for all time and every situation. It is important to distinguish between the two. It is the bishops of the church (the *magisterium*, or leading office, of the church) who have the responsibility and gift (charism) to discern the difference between authentic sacred tradition and other traditions, and to faithfully preserve, interpret, and proclaim God’s revelation as it comes to us from the Holy Spirit through both sacred Scripture and tradition.

A final question often asked is where the sacred tradition of the church may be found. There is no single volume that contains all of what the Catholic church considers sacred tradition, since this tradition includes much of the life of God’s people, such as ways of worship, devotion, moral teaching and wisdom, and the interpretation and practical application of the Bible. There are books that summarize the official teachings of ecumenical councils and popes of the Catholic church. These represent a large portion of sacred tradition, where formal definitions of Catholic belief and practice have been made by the magisterium (teaching office) of the Catholic church over many centuries. However, sacred tradition also includes many things that have been consistently taught by the Fathers, Doctors, and saints of the church which have never been formally defined by the magisterium, such as by an ecumenical council or a papal decree. Many Catholic beliefs in the area of Christian living and morality fall into this category, such as the rejection of homosexual practice, abortion, euthanasia, and infanticide (see GS, no. 27). Catholics should be eager to grow in their understanding of the revelation of God to the church through sacred tradition, which along with the sacred Scripture is the primary way that God’s truth comes to us to guide and encourage us in our Christian lives.

The greatest compendium of Catholic tradition is the New Catholic Catechism which Pope John Paul II has declared is a “sure and authentic text” for (1) faith (2) liturgy and sacraments (3) morals and (4) spirituality. This is a universal guide.

God’s Revelation in Scripture

Each Christian should at times ask the questions, “Where do my beliefs come from?” and “How did I receive them?” Many of the essential teachings and traditions about Jesus in the primitive church were eventually written down. The basic written compilation of Christian belief is the record of God’s works and teachings found in the Bible, the sacred Scripture of Christianity. The Bible includes both the record of God’s revelation to the Hebrew people under the Old Covenant, known as the Hebrew Scripture or the Old Testament, and also the record of revelation under the New Covenant established by Jesus Christ, known as the New Testament. The Second Vatican Council strongly affirmed that the Bible is rightly called the word of God because its composition is inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of God: ““For sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is

consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit” (DV, no.9). The Council explained that “...the sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and, since they are inspired, really are the word of God:” (DV, no. 24). Even the Bible itself attests to its divine origin. St. Paul wrote to Timothy concerning the Bible of his day, the Hebrew Scriptures: “All scripture is inspired by God [literally “God-breathed”] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tm 3:16, 17).

The Value of the Old Testament

Christians accept the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, as inspired by God and thus important for instruction and guidance. However, there is a potential misunderstanding (held, for example, by Marcion in the second century A.D.) which sees the Old Testament as unimportant or dispensable because it has been surpassed by the New Testament, God’s revelation of himself in Jesus Christ.

Old Manifested in the New

The Catholic church has always valued and urged the study of the Old Testament, even though some elements of it (such as dietary laws and other ritual observances) have been surpassed or rendered unnecessary, based on Jesus’ teaching and example. The Second Vatican Council affirms St. Augustine’s saying that the New Testament is hidden in the Old, and the Old is made manifest in the New (DV, no. 16). Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., warned against the danger of considering the Old Testament to be valuable *only* as a foreshadowing of the New Testament, instead of having value in itself. Father Dulles writes:

It would be wrong to imagine that the Old Testament has a merely provisional value, and that everything in the Old Testament is better, more clearly, and more completely stated in the New. If that were the case, the Church could altogether dispense with the Old Testament, but of course it cannot. The *Constitution on Divine Revelation* affirms the abiding value of the Old Testament, and quite rightly, for on many points it remains unsurpassed, for example, in the sublime instructions of the prophets about God and in the models of the human prayer afforded by the Psalms (cf. *Dei Verbum*, no. 15). As article 16 of the *Constitution on Revelation* points out, the two Testaments shed light upon each other. In Christian eyes the Old Testament, no doubt, needs completion by the New, but the New Testament cannot be correctly interpreted except in the light of the Old. We cannot rightly understand Jesus unless we meditate on Old Testament categories such as Son of Man and Son of God, nor can we rightly understand the God of Jesus Christ unless we recognize Him as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Many things which lie hidden in the New Testament become evident only when we ponder the Hebrew Bible.²

It is important, then, for Catholics to study the Hebrew Scripture in order to fully and properly understand the New Testament, and to receive the Old Testament’s own unique and valuable divine teaching.

The Canon

An unfortunate result of the rift between Catholics and Protestants is the disagreement over the canon (official list of inspired writings) of the Old Testament. Catholics recognize as divinely inspired the writings included in the ancient Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures that was used in the early church, known as the Septuagint. Protestants accept only the writings found in an early Hebrew version of the Bible, which did not include the books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees. Protestants usually call these books the Apocrypha. Many Protestants read and respect these writings, although they do not consider them divinely inspired. Catholics often refer to these books as deuterocanonical (a second canon) because they have been disputed. Even so, Catholics accept them as divinely inspired works that are fully part of the canon of the Old Testament.

The Origins of the New Testament

The forty-six writings that Catholics recognize as the Old Testament were written, edited, and handed down over a period of many centuries. The twenty-seven writings that both Catholics and Protestants accept as the canon³ of the New Testament took relatively less time to advance from their initial form to their general recognition by the church as a set of inspired writings—only about three hundred years!

How did the New Testament, our primary witness to Jesus and his message, come into being? For the first two or three centuries of Christianity, Christians had no New Testament that they could open and read with the confidence that everything written there was divinely inspired truth. Instead, letters from the apostles and other followers of Jesus were circulated among the local churches, and various traditions (literally “things passed on”) about Jesus were either retold as stories or in preaching, or were eventually written down in bits and pieces. Beginning twenty or thirty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, some men, including the four evangelists, began to compile these traditions about Jesus and to write unified accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, known as the Gospels. One of these evangelists, St. Luke, describes his task in the introduction to his Gospel:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed. (Lk 1:1-4).

However, besides the four Gospels that Christians recognize today, there were a number of other gospels (accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry) circulating among the early Christian churches. Not all of these gospels were in agreement on certain points, and some accounts (such as the Gospel of Thomas and others) appeared to many Christians to be evidently unreliable or untrue. Also, Christians wondered whether the various letters of the apostles and other writings being passed around were all to be considered as totally true and genuinely inspired by God. There was no New Testament to refer to as a measure of truth—only the traditions about Jesus and his teaching that were being circulated by word of mouth or by letter.⁴

The question that the early Christians faced was, *Who* is to decide which teachings and writings about Jesus, which traditions, are true and to be believed without doubt? The answer they found, based on Jesus’ promise, was that the Holy Spirit would guide the church to recognize the teachings and writings that he had inspired. The Holy Spirit did this particularly through the chief elders of the church, the bishops. In caring for the flock of Christ, one of the bishops’ tasks was to insure that correct doctrine was taught. Along with the rest of the church, the bishops needed to discern which writings and teachings that were being widely distributed were truly God’s word for the whole church and which were not.⁵

By the fifth century, the bishops of the church reached a general agreement about which letters and gospels were truly inspired by God, even though the status of some writings were still disputed after this time. Thus was the New Testament “born,” substantially the same as we know it today.⁶ This is why Catholics regard the Bible as the book of the church—because it came into being as a product of the tradition of the church and through the judgment and discernment of the church, led by the church’s bishops. Catholics believe that the bishops continue their role of authentically proclaiming and interpreting the Bible through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁷ As different letters and gospels that claimed to have apostolic origins were read within the early Christian churches, the bishops of these churches prayerfully discerned their authenticity, and oftentimes discussed this subject with other bishops in the region. Over time the bishops increasingly agreed upon which letters and gospels were truly in harmony with the traditions they had received from the apostles.

The Meaning of Inspiration

What does it mean that the Bible, or a particular book of the Bible, is inspired by God? To say that a writing is inspired means that God is, in some way, its author. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II affirms this when it states:

...the books of the Old and New Testament, whole and entire, with all their parts (were) written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and as such they have God as their author and have been handed on to the Church itself. (no. 11)

To say that the Bible has God as its author emphasizes that it is the word of God and that it is a gift to the church, God's people. As one Catholic theologian described this:

Although the writers of the Old and New Testament belonged to a believing community of faith, and gave expression to the faith of their community, they did so by a special grace or charism, known as inspiration. In some cases the inspiration of the biblical writer coincided with the gift of prophecy [Isaiah, the seer of the Apocalypse], in some cases with apostleship [Paul], in some cases with gifts of wisdom [the sapiential literature] or poetic creation [Psalms]. In other instances inspiration took the form of an impulse and endowment for composing sacred history [Kings and Luke]. Biblical inspiration, therefore, is a term that covers a variety of charisms, the common characteristic of which is the efficacious divine assistance to express in its purity the faith of the people of God in their formative period, in such a way as to serve as a norm for the church in later ages.⁸

The Catholic understanding of inspiration also has another dimension, however. The human persons who wrote the sacred Scriptures were not just passive recipients of God's word who merely served as secretaries for what God was dictating. Rather, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation says that God "made use of their powers and abilities" and calls them "true authors," even though they "consented to writing everything and only those things which He wanted" (no.11). Thus, the author of the Bible is both God and man.

This Catholic view of inspiration has far-reaching implications. One of the most important implications is that in the interpretation of the Bible, the human dimension of the text needs to be taken into account if it is to be correctly understood. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation says:

Seeing that, in sacred Scripture, God speaks through men in human fashion, it follows that the interpreter of sacred Scriptures, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers had in mind, that meaning that God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words...rightly to understand what the sacred author wanted to affirm in his work, due attention must be paid both to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer, and to the conventions which the people of his time followed in their dealings with one another...Indeed the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when He took on Himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men. (nos. 12, 13)

The sacred Scripture may rightly be called "the word of God in the words of men," just as Jesus was the divine Word of God who nonetheless possessed the form and nature of a normal human person.

A recent result of this insight is that beginning with the encyclical letter of Pope Pius XII in 1943 (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*), the Catholic church has given positive encouragement to biblical scholars to employ modern methods of biblical criticism in order to understand more fully the human dimension of the Bible and its composition. Paragraph 12 of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (echoing paragraph 23 of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*) strongly urges biblical scholars to seek out what the authors of Scripture really meant and intended when they wrote. Scholars determine what literary forms they used, their customary and characteristic styles of perception, speech and narrative, and the conventions that prevailed in the biblical authors' world. The importance of this is that the meaning of the word of God sometimes can be understood fully or correctly only when the historical situation and the literary style of the human author of Scripture is understood properly.

On the other hand, this section in the Constitution on Divine Revelation is immediately followed by an implicit warning that the findings of biblical scholars, using the so called historico-critical method or any other modern scientific approach to Scripture, is not enough in itself to determine the authentic meaning of God's word. The

Constitution also insists that the "...Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written" (DV, no. 12). The Bible must be approached with faith and prayer if it is to be correctly understood. Also, the meaning of the sacred text, and consequently the meaning of an individual section of Scripture, must be seen in light of "the content and unity of the whole of Scripture" (DV, no. 12). Individual passages cannot be isolated from the overall message of Scripture if they are to be interpreted correctly. Likewise "the living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith" (DV, no. 12).

To insure that the tradition of the Catholic church would be taken into account in interpreting the Bible, Pope Pius XII strongly urged Scripture scholars to study assiduously the Fathers and Doctors of the church and renowned interpreters of past ages.⁹ The 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Catholic Bishops affirmed that "the exegesis of the original meaning of Sacred Scripture, most highly recommended by the Council (cf. *Dei Verbum*, no. 12) cannot be separated from the living tradition of the Church (*Dei Verbum*, no. 10)."¹⁰ All this is simply to recognize that modern approaches to biblical study, as valuable as their findings may be, are not adequate by themselves to elucidate the full meaning of the Bible. In order that these newer approaches to biblical study fulfill their constructive role of illuminating the true meaning of the sacred Scripture and of building up the faith and life of God's people, they must be carried out in the context of faith, prayer, appreciation of the biblical interpretation of the great Catholic scholars and saints of the past, and, finally, obedience to the teaching office of the church "which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God" (DV, no. 12).

The Inerrancy of Scripture

Biblical inspiration means that God has spoken his word to humanity through the medium of human authors. Even though fallible human authors are involved in the composition of the Bible, the Catholic church has continually insisted that there is a sense in which the sacred Scripture is without error.¹¹ The Second Vatican Council states that, "the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (DV, no. 11).

What does it mean to say that the Bible is inerrant or without error? There are different understandings of the inerrancy of the Bible among Christians. Some Christians generally believe that everything stated by the Bible is literally true and that this truth is usually readily understandable to the modern reader without the use of modern methods of biblical scholarship. On the whole, this literalist approach finds little in sacred Scripture that is obscure if sufficient reflection, prayer, and careful study of the entire Bible is undertaken by the reader. In general, the Bible is thought to mean what it says.

The Catholic understanding of the inerrancy of the Bible has developed in the past one hundred years, with the growing recognition of the value of modern methods of biblical study and their results. Specifically, the Catholic church has recognized that we cannot define how the Bible is inerrant without first determining what truth the biblical authors and editors wished to convey. In doing this, we may discern the truth that God wished to convey through these authors and their writings. For example, if the authors of the Gospels had no particular interest in conveying a perfectly accurate chronology of the events of Jesus' life, then we should not be surprised if the four Gospels present different (and sometimes conflicting) reports of when and where things happened in Jesus' public ministry and after his resurrection. The Gospel authors may have had little interest in absolute accuracy in historical details or in their recording of the order and location of particular events in Jesus' life.¹²

The same questions may be asked of the Old Testament. What truth did the authors and editors of the various Old Testament writings wish to convey? What did God wish to communicate to us? When the Book of Genesis says, in one account, that the world was created by God in seven days and in a particular way, is this account to be read primarily as an historical and scientific report of creation? Or did God (and the biblical author) wish to convey more important truths to us, on a different plane entirely, using symbols and language meaningful to those living at the time of the book's composition? The Old Testament itself indicates that historical accuracy was not the highest priority. Occasionally, conflicting reports of the same event are both included in the Old Testament (often in the same writing), such as the order of creation in Genesis 1:1-31 and 2:5, and the way God parted the Red Sea

in Exodus 14:21-27. Sometimes the Old Testament places two historically conflicting accounts side-by-side, which should indicate to the reader that the historical facts involved really are not the most important thing that God is saying through the accounts.

The Catholic Understanding of Biblical Inerrancy

The challenge, then, is to define more clearly in what respect the Bible is without error. With the emergence of modern methods of biblical scholarship, especially over the past hundred years, the Catholic church has made a number of formal statements on this subject.¹³ At present, the development of official Catholic teaching on this subject is best summarized in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation which states “that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation” (no. 11). The phrase, “for the sake of our salvation,” is essential to understand this correctly. The official footnote to this passage in the Vatican II document refers to a statement of St. Thomas Aquinas:

Any knowledge which is profitable to salvation may be the object of prophetic inspiration. But things which cannot affect our salvation do not belong to inspiration. (“On Truth,” Q 12, A2, C)

As an example of this principle, St. Augustine “says that although the sacred writers may have known astronomy, nevertheless the Holy Spirit did not intend to utter through them any truth apart from that which is profitable to salvation. He adds that this may concern either teachings to be believed or morals to be practiced.”¹⁴

In commenting on this, F. R.A.F. Mackenzie says,

The Bible was not written in order to teach the natural sciences, nor to give information on merely political history. It treats of these [and all other subjects] only insofar as they are involved in matters concerning salvation. It is only in this respect that the veracity of God and the inerrancy of the inspired writers are engaged.¹⁵

The Catholic church has learned this principle from long reflection and experience. At the time of the emergence of modern astronomy, for example, the Catholic church mistakenly condemned the scientific teaching of Galileo Galilei that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the solar system. Galileo’s theory appeared to contradict the Bible’s teaching on this point. Since then, modern science has blossomed with the encouragement and support of the Catholic church, and a clearer understanding of the inter-relationship of science, history, and Christian faith has developed. Recognizing the legitimate autonomy of the human sciences, the Catholic church today holds that the inerrancy of the Bible (and the teaching authority of the church) applies to science or history only where matters pertaining to salvation, faith in God, or morality are involved. God has inspired the sacred Scriptures primarily to reveal himself, and his plan for all his creation in relationship to himself. The bible infallibly reveals how we are to relate to God and to each other in this world in order to fulfill God’s plan and attain eternal salvation. The Bible is absolutely without error when it speaks of these things. There may be other truths contained in the Bible, but the Catholic church believes that only these are without error as a result of God’s inspiration of the sacred Scripture.

Interpretation of the Bible

Even in matters regarding salvation, faith, and morality, it is true that the meaning of very few passages of the Bible have been officially defined by the Catholic church. This leaves room for the contributions of saints, biblical scholars, and others who prayerfully reflect on the meaning of the Scriptures. Pope Pius XII taught in his encyclical letter *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943, that

...in questions of doctrine regarding faith and morals, and ...in the immense matter contained in the Sacred Books—legislative, historical, sapiential and prophetic—there are but few texts whose sense have been defined by the authority of the Church, nor are those more numerous about

which the teaching of the Holy Fathers is unanimous. There remains, therefore, many things, and of the greatest importance, in the discussion and exposition of which the skill and genius of Catholic commentators may and ought to be freely exercised, so that each may contribute his part to the advantage of all, to the continued progress of the sacred doctrine and to the defense and honor of the Church. (no. 47)

While the Catholic church has encouraged those who seek out the true meaning of God's word in the sacred Scripture, it has also issued some necessary warnings and cautions. Pius XII's encyclical letter *Humani Generis* (1950) warned against relying on human reason alone in interpreting the Bible and stressed that we need to consider "the analogy of faith and the Tradition of the Church."¹⁶ The destructive effect of rationalism in interpreting the Bible cannot be underestimated. The Instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of April 21, 1964, warned that some biblical scholars,

...motivated by rationalistic prejudices, refuse to recognize the existence of a supernatural order. They deny the intervention of a personal God in the world by means of Revelation in the strict sense, and reject the possibility or actual occurrence of miracles and prophecies. Some start out with an erroneous concept of faith, regarding faith as indifferent to, or even incompatible with, historical truth. Some deny, *a priori* as it were, the historical nature and historical value of the documents of Revelation. And finally, some minimize the authority of the Apostles as witnesses to Christ. Belittling their office and their influence in the primitive community, these people exaggerate the creative power of the community itself...

All these opinions are not only contrary to Catholic doctrine, but also devoid of scholarly foundation and inconsistent with the sound principles of the historical method.¹⁷

This same Commission, in 1950, said that in determining the meaning of a particular text of Scripture, the scholar "ought to search out accurately what sacred Scripture teaches in other similar passages, and what the explanation of the text is in the Holy Fathers and in the Catholic tradition and finally, if the case warrants it, what the teaching authority of the Church has decided about the text in question."¹⁸ The Instruction of April 21, 1964, agrees:

The Catholic exegete, under the guidance of the Church, should take advantage of all the contributions made by earlier commentators, by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and carry on their work. (I, General Guidelines for the Exegete).

The Catholic who wishes to learn more about the meaning of the Bible should seek out books and authors that utilize the best in modern biblical scholarship along with the Fathers and Doctors of the church, in the framework of loyalty to the Catholic church's teaching office in case of any disputed interpretation (see DV, no. 12).

Safeguarding Authentic Biblical Interpretation

The Catholic church teaches that God guides the bishops of the church in discerning the true meaning of the Scriptures and that they cannot teach error whenever they meet together in an ecumenical or worldwide council and officially interpret a disputed passage of Scripture; or when they universally agree, even without formally meeting, on the meaning of a particular biblical text or condemn an erroneous interpretation. Catholics also believe that the pope, by virtue of his office of chief teacher in the church, possesses a special gift of God enabling him to proclaim and interpret the Scripture correctly. While only his formal definitions on matters of faith and morals are considered by Catholics to be infallibly true, even the pope's ordinary magisterium, or teaching, on the Bible is to be respected and followed by Catholics, on the assumption that it, too, is true and helpful in living the Christian life more fully and faithfully.

The Bible, Tradition, and the Church's Teaching Office

Catholic Christians today believe that their understanding of the relationship between the Bible, tradition, and church authority is the same as that which developed in the early church. This teaching is expressed fully and

clearly in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council, especially in chapter two of that document, “The Transmission on Divine Revelation.” The following is the conclusion of chapter two of this Dogmatic Constitution:

Sacred scripture is the word of God as it is put down in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And tradition transmits in its entirety the word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that they may faithfully preserve this word of God, explain it, and make it more widely known...

The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of tradition, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on; listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit: it draws from this deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.

It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, sacred scripture, and the teaching authority of the church, in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls. (nos. 9, 10)

I envision sacred Scripture, tradition, and the teaching authority of the church as three legs of a tripod. They are mutually dependent and support each other. If one leg of the tripod falls, the whole structure collapses. Remove sacred Scripture, and the tradition and the church’s teaching office have no firm basis. Remove tradition, and the way Scripture has been understood and interpreted over the centuries by the church disappears and is lost leaving us to interpret Scripture according to societal or personal biases. Remove the church’s teaching authority, and there is no united way that either sacred Scripture or Christian tradition can be authoritatively interpreted and applied to practical situations in the present. Confusion and disunity is the result. But God, in his goodness, has provided not only the revelation of himself and his plan in the Bible but also the means by which revelation is to be faithfully preserved and passed on, fully understood and authentically interpreted from the time of Christ down to the present day. Catholics are not only grateful to God for the Bible but also for sacred tradition and the church’s teaching authority by which the fullness of God’s truth is safeguarded and brought forth in the unity of the Catholic church.

Private Revelation and its Forms

Earlier in the chapter we noted that there is “no new public revelation” after the time of Jesus and his apostles. However, this does not mean that God has ceased speaking or revealing himself to the human race. The Holy Spirit provides ongoing revelation and guidance to God’s people through various means, building upon the foundational revelation that God has given in Jesus.

One form of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing activity in the church is termed private revelation. There are certain truths that God reveals through the Holy Spirit that either are not intended for the entire church or are not intended to be truths relevant for all times in the church’s life. These are truths either directed toward a particular individual or group within the church or intended for a particular time or period in human history.

Private revelation includes such things as words spoken through the gift of prophecy; messages from God spoken to an individual or a group through angels, saints, or Mary, the Mother of God; visions, dreams, or voices that present a word from God to a person or persons; or even a word or appearance of God himself. The Catholic church insists that such private revelations must be discerned or tested carefully to insure that they are truly from God, lest some people be deceived. One important test is that no private revelation can contradict or disagree with public revelation, what God has revealed through the Bible or authentic Christian tradition. Genuine private

revelation always complements and supports God's public revelation to his people. Even when the church, after discernment, finds no objection to a private revelation, the Catholic church does not require any of its members to believe in it or its message since it is not part of the foundational public revelation of God. However, God often has an important purpose in presenting a special private revelation, such as to awaken the church to a part of public revelation that he desires his people to pray and act upon or to call attention to his work and plan during a particular time in human history.

A good example of the Catholic church's painstaking discernment of private revelation is its approach to the many reported appearances of Mary, the Mother of God. Some reported apparitions of Mary investigated by the Catholic church have been judged to be false. Others, such as appearances of Mary at Guadalupe (Mexico), Lourdes (France), and Fatima (Portugal) have received widespread approval in the Catholic world, and some popes even have made pilgrimages to these sites. Nonetheless, no Catholic is required to believe that Mary has appeared and spoken a word from God because these apparitions still remain in the realm of private revelation. However, if it is possible that God is speaking prophetically or sending messengers, such as Christ's Mother, to speak special words from him for our time, it would be wise for Catholics to be attentive and to consider them prayerfully. Authentic private revelation, like public revelation, is a gift of God and should be received with thanksgiving.

God not only continues to speak to his people but also continues to reveal himself and his presence by performing mighty acts among his people. Miracles, healings, exorcisms, and other mighty works are done in the name of Jesus and by his power. This should not surprise us, for Jesus told his followers that they would perform even greater works than his (see Jn 14:12). Christians should rejoice and be grateful that God has not chosen to remain hidden but that he has made himself known to us in both his words and deeds, in the past and today.

Immersing Ourselves in God's Revelation

God has shown an incredible love by revealing himself to us in the Bible, in the authentic Christian tradition, through the teaching authority of the church, and even in special private revelation. One way that we can respond to God's love is to desire to know God through his revelation—to become immersed in it.

In an audience on April 8, 1986, Pope John Paul II emphasized the importance of "a reverential love for the word of God, for the Incarnate Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, and for the inspired word contained in the Sacred Scriptures." He went on to urge that

...priests, deacons, catechists and other lay people—should be *immersed in the Scriptures* through constant reading and diligent study, accompanied by prayer. As far as possible, they should be acquainted with the insights of modern biblical scholarship. Attention must be given to the literary forms of the various biblical books in order to determine the intention of the sacred writers. And it is most helpful, at times, crucial, to be aware of the personal situation of the biblical writer, to the circumstances of culture, time, language and so forth which influenced the way the message was presented.

At the same time, an adequate formation for the biblical apostolate directs attention to the unity of all the books of the Bible and takes into account the *living Tradition of the Church*. In this way, it is possible to avoid a narrow fundamentalism which distorts the whole truth, and also possible to resist the temptation to place one's personal interpretation above or even in opposition to the authentic interpretation of God's word which belongs exclusively to the bishops of the Church in union with the Pope.¹⁹

How can Catholics better come to know God and his revealed truth?

1. *Reading and studying the Bible.* The primary way that Catholics should come to know God's revealed truth

is through reading the Bible daily. Even though the Bible is not the *only* source of God's revelation, it is a *primary* source that is normally accessible to every believer (2 Tm 3:16, 17).

Some Catholics (and other Christians) may ask whether the Catholic church has ever prohibited its members from reading the Bible. Because the meaning of the Bible was being disputed, and misinterpreted by some, at the time of the Protestant Reformation, Pope Pius IV declared in 1564, that lay Catholics had to obtain permission from their bishop to read the Bible in their native language—the vernacular. Reading the official Catholic Bible of the time, the Latin Vulgate, was never prohibited. Later, Catholics had to obtain permission from the Sacred Congregation of the Index in Rome, or from the pope himself, in order to read the Bible in the vernacular. This was done to protect Catholics from inaccurate translations and from misinterpreting the Bible. Catholics still heard the Scriptures proclaimed and explained at Mass and in other contexts by the clergy, as they always had.

In the nineteenth century, the Catholic hierarchy lifted all restrictions on reading the Bible in the vernacular as long as a Catholic edition was used. In 1896, Pope Leo XIII encouraged Bible reading among Catholics by granting a plenary indulgence to all Catholics who read Scripture fifteen minutes a day.²⁰

Today, the Second Vatican Council has taught:

Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful...This sacred Synod earnestly and specifically urges all the Christian faithful...to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures of the “excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:8). “For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (St. Jerome). Therefore, they should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy...through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids...And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for “we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine sayings” (St. Ambrose). (DV, nos. 22, 25)

2. *Studying teachings of past councils and popes.* God's revelation of himself also includes his truth passed on in the authentic tradition of the Catholic church. This tradition may be found in the decisions and declarations of the ecumenical councils of the church, and in the teachings of past popes. All Catholics today should become familiar with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council by reading the sixteen documents of the Council since this council presents the tradition of the Catholic church and God's revelation of himself directed specifically to us who live at this era of history. Through reading and studying the documents of councils of the church and past popes, we become familiar with the rich tradition and life of the Catholic church.
3. *Hearing the teaching of our present pope and bishops.* Finally, we encounter God's revelation of himself and his will through keeping in touch with the teachings and statements of the living magisterium or teaching office of the church—our present pope and bishops. We can do this by reading publications containing their official teachings, including the publications of national Catholic publication offices and magazines and newspapers containing current teachings of the popes and bishops. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are different levels of authority among the teachings of the pope and bishops of which the reader should be aware. Some teaching contains specific directives in the area of faith and morals that are binding on the conscience of Catholics. Other teachings, such as general political or economic reflections, do not have the same authority but are to be respectfully received and considered by Catholics. The reading of these teachings of whatever level of authority will enable Catholics to be informed about God's current direction and guidance of the Catholic church through those who have been set apart to carry on the apostles' task of faithfully preaching and teaching the word of God.