

SUNDAY CATECHISM / 11

## The Sacred Tradition

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# Sunday Catechism



We are addressing the sources of Revelation and the ways it's transmitted through the Sacred Scriptures and the Sacred Tradition. Today's lesson is dedicated to the Sacred Tradition.

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in paragraphs 80-82 there are two texts that re-propose the conciliar dictate of Vatican II, of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*:

*"Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal." [Dei Verbum, 9]. Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain with his own "always, to the close of the age".(Mt 28,20 )" (CCC § 80).*

This paragraph emphasises the union of these two modes of transmission, namely Scripture and Tradition. They are united because they have the same source and tend to the same end.

*As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, "does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence." [Dei Verbum, 9]" (CCC § 82).*

In the post-Council years, there was a tendency to put Tradition aside, which is why it is important to refer back to its aspects and meanings.

**PLEASE NOTE:** The principle of Catholic hermeneutics is to read the documents without putting them in contrast with each other; it is necessary to read the most recent documents, which perhaps deal with aspects not explored in previous documents, still bearing in mind that they are based on the previous documents. It is therefore essential not to make the mistake, on the subject of Tradition, of thinking that the only document of reference is Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*.

**1- Tradition comes from Christ, founder of the Church, and it is mentioned in the apostolic texts and in the texts of the Fathers of the Church.**

**2- The Council of Trent, at the time of tensions with the Lutheran world, brings it back to light by underlining some aspects in the decree *De libris sacris et de traditionibus recipiendis* (Denzinger, 1501)**

The apostles announced the Gospel by preaching; subsequently the written form of the Gospels and the Epistles was born and this oral tradition, passed on in time, continues

to flow parallel to the Scriptures.

While the Council of Trent puts more emphasises on the content that is transmitted, hence the *traditio*, the Second Vatican Council, with *Dei Verbum*, puts more emphasises on the transmission within the Church, thus on the *tradere*. These two aspects - the act of transmitting and the content transmitted - are both important and must be kept together, because they are both constitutive elements of the Tradition.

Two aspects to be clarified:

### **1- the meaning of "oral" transmission**

### **2- the meaning of the content concerning "morality"**

#### **1- What does the oral aspect mean?**

It does not mean that what was transmitted orally could not then have been put in writing and therefore traced back to written documents. Furthermore, "Oral" does not only mean transmitted by word, but that through the word that is received and then transmitted, a certain discipline, a certain way of praying comes to life.

#### **2- What does *Disciplina morum* or *ad mores pertinentes* mean?**

In a broad sense it refers to all those ritual or disciplinary rules, as well as the moral norms that the Church has preserved and transmitted over the centuries.

The Sacred Scriptures testify to the existence of the Sacred Tradition. For example, the **First Letter to the Corinthians** (15, 3):

*"The tradition I handed on to you in the first place, a tradition which I had myself received...."*

Paul receives a tradition, a depositum, and then passes it on. So there is both the idea of transmitting, the *tradere*, and the idea of something being transmitted, therefore of the real *traditio*.

And in the **second letter of St. Paul to Timothy** it says (2, 2f):

*"Pass on to reliable people what you have heard from me through many witnesses so that they in turn will be able to teach others."*

The **second letter to the Thessalonians** reads (2, 15):

*"Stand firm, then, brothers, and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter."*

This text anticipates *Dei Verbum*, which says essentially the same thing: transmission

occurs both through writing and through oral tradition. Therefore, it is the Holy Scriptures which indicate that there is something more, something beyond the content written in the inspired canonical texts.

**The FATHERS OF THE CHURCH**, besides being themselves part of the Tradition, are also witnesses to the existence of the tradition.

**Letter of St. Clement to the Corinthians** (7, 2):

*" We are struggling on the same arena, and the same conflict is assigned to both of us. Wherefore let us give up vain and fruitless cares, and approach to the glorious and venerable rule of our Tradition".*

The invitation to respect Tradition is an invitation to remain steadfast in what is publicly passed on. This idea is broadly conveyed in the **Adversus Haereses** of **Saint Irenaeus of Lyons**, Doctor of the Church. In Book III, chapter 3:

*" It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth , to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times; ".*

This provides an interesting point for reflection: the tradition of the apostles can be "seen"; it is not just a question of hearing a teaching, but of seeing it alive, put into practice in the churches. Saint Irenaeus specifies that the reference to the Church's tradition is normative as regards the distinction between the truth that is announced and the falsity of heretical sects, or in any case of these new formations that claim to have a deeper and different understanding of the announcement of Christ.

In Book III, chapter 4:

*"For how should it be if the apostles themselves had not left us writings? Would it not be necessary, [in that case,] to follow the course of the tradition which they handed down to those to whom they did commit the Churches? To which course many nations of those barbarians who believe in Christ do assent, having salvation written in their hearts by the Spirit, without paper or ink, and, carefully preserving the ancient tradition, believing in one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and all things therein, by means of Christ Jesus, the Son of God; (...) If any one were to preach to these men the inventions of the heretics, speaking to them in their own language, they would at once stop their ears, and flee as far off as possible, not enduring even to listen to the blasphemous address. Thus, by means of that ancient tradition of the apostles, they do not suffer their mind to conceive anything of the [doctrines suggested by the] portentous language of these teachers, among whom neither*

*Church nor doctrine has ever been established."*

**The apostolic tradition is a simple and public tradition**, unlike the abstrusity of the Gnostics, often with an esoteric and secret characteristics.

The next catechesis will investigate the relationship between Scripture and Tradition more closely.