

How to Understand the Revelation of God and Sacred Scripture in the Catholic Church

Where to Begin?

There are many churches that define themselves as “full Bible churches” or proclaim that they have no teacher other than God’s words in the Holy Bible. There are other churches that seem to posit the Bible as a guideline, but that people in each generation have to discern what it means for them – as though there were no universal, objective truth. What does the Catholic Church say about the Bible?

Official Catholic teachings about the Bible do not deal immediately with the written scriptures, but begin from a much broader perspective, first presenting the Church’s teachings about “**The Revelation of God.**” In Catholic understanding, divine revelation is more than just the Bible; it is also more than God revealing verbal messages to humanity. Rather, it is the entire process by which God reveals or expresses Himself in our world, what we might call “God’s self-revelation.”

The idea of self-revelation is much less about us “finding God” than God revealing God’s self to us. In other words, God finds us and often surprises us what God reveals about himself.

God Reveals God’s Self

God seems to have chosen to reveal Himself in four main historical stages:

1. God’s self-revelation in **creation**, in everything that exists in the universe, from inanimate material, to plants and animals, in what we today call “nature.” In other words, humanity has always seen the grandeur of creation and the splendor of the universe, as St Paul writes in his *Letter to the Romans*, “For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made.” (*Rom 1:16-20*)
2. God’s self-revelation in and to the **human race**, who are not only “created in God’s image and likeness” (*Gen 1:26-27*), but who are endowed with reason, which gives us the ability to know God.
3. God’s special revelation to the **people of Israel**, the “chosen people,” giving them more direct knowledge about God and the world, working in and through their history, sending them messages that were passed down orally and eventually written down in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament).
4. God’s self-revelation in **Jesus Christ**, “the Word made flesh” (*John 1:14*), whose words and actions reveal even more clearly everything we need to know about God and our world, about life and love, about forgiveness and salvation.

Passing On God’s Revelation

Unless one assumes that God intends to repeat this pattern of historical revelation in every generation, to every person, then God must have had a plan for the transmission of the revelations and the accumulated inspired human reflection upon them. This is the reason why, after presenting the broader concept of “Revelation,” but before addressing the written scriptures,

Catholic teachings explain “The Transmission of Divine Revelation.” That is, the process by which God’s revelation is “transmitted” or “handed down” or “passed on” (Latin *traditio*) through the ages. Again, this is a complex process involving several different stages or steps, which one must carefully distinguish from one another. The following stages apply both in the OT era and in the NT era:

1. **Historical Events:** the actions of the patriarchs, prophets, kings, and all the people of Israel (in the OT era), or the actions of Jesus, his own disciples and apostles (in the NT era).
2. **Oral Traditions:** the stories about what happened, and the teachings of various people, as passed down from one generation to the next, often by anonymous people.
3. **Written Documents:** the various books of Moses, the prophets, and teachers of Israel (in the OT); and the recorded Gospels, letters, and other writings of early Christian leaders (in the NT).
4. **Canonization and Interpretation:** the “transmission” of God’s revelation did not end with the writing of the individual books of the Bible, but continues in the activity of the Church, first in collecting and “canonizing” the collections of scriptures we now call the Old and New Testaments, as well as in the ongoing teaching, interpretation, and application of God’s revelation in the lives of individuals and communities throughout the centuries.

This idea of *Tradition* is separate from small-t tradition. The “small-t” traditions (e.g., kneeling, not eating meat on Fridays of Lent, etc.) certainly help to embolden and strengthen the Faith, but they themselves are not part of the Transmission of Divine Revelation. “Large-T” Tradition is that which carried and transmits the deposit of Faith that God intends be known for our salvation. Contrary to a sometimes heard anti-Catholic position, “Scripture” and “Tradition” are not opposed to each other; they are not two separate entities. It is not either-or, rather Catholic views are most often Both-And. *Tradition* passed along not only the written Scriptures themselves, but also how the first generations of Christians understood Scripture.

The Sacred Scriptures

Only after understanding the Catholic Christian teachings about Revelation and Tradition can we also come to a proper understanding of the Church’s teachings about the Bible, the Sacred Scriptures. Only now can we properly see the intertwined relationships between Revelation, Tradition, and Scripture:

1. “Scripture” (the written Bible) is part of the larger reality called “Tradition” (the transmission of divine truth), which is itself part of the larger process called “Revelation” (or better, “God’s self-revelation”). One might say Revelation contains all Tradition, but is more than Tradition. Tradition contains all of Scripture, but is more than Scripture.
2. Although the Bible is a very old and crucial part of Church Tradition, handing on God’s Revelation, it is not the only part. Much of God’s self-revelation has been and continues to be handed on to humanity through other aspects of the Church’s Tradition (especially the liturgy), and even more broadly in various ways. Put differently, although the Scriptures contain Revelation, not all of God’s self-revelation is recorded in the Bible (since God has revealed and continues to reveal Himself in nature, people, and many other ways).

3. However, since the Bible contains the indispensable “core” of God’s Revelation, so to speak, Christians believe that no other revelations would ever change or contradict what God teaches us in and through the Old and New Testaments. Moreover, as the core of Revelation, the Bible contains all the truths necessary for our redemption and salvation, so that we neither seek nor need any other revelation to supplement or complete God’s revelation as found in the Scriptures.
4. It is also crucial to understand that the Word of God, in Catholic understanding, is not primarily the Bible (the written text), but is Jesus Christ (the Incarnate Word). The most important part of Christian faith is not the Bible, but Jesus himself. Jesus came before the Bible (before the NT books were written, and before the complete scriptures were canonized).
5. The Church also came before the Bible! Not only did the oral preaching of the apostles precede the writing of the NT books (by several decades), but it was the early Church that determined the Canon of the Bible (not until several centuries after Jesus’ life).

A Brief Word About Inspiration of Sacred Scripture

Who wrote the Bible? In contrast to a naïve view of biblical authorship, which sometimes reduces the role of biblical writers to little more than dictation machines, Catholic understanding of the “divine inspiration” of the Bible is a good example of the Church’s overall BOTH/AND approach to theology:

1. **The Bible is both the Word of God and written in human languages.** One can properly say both that God is the author of the scriptures and that the human writers acted as real authors. They did not merely record the exact words whispered into their ears by the Holy Spirit (as graphically portrayed in much medieval art), but rather made use of their own human abilities in writing their texts (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of course).
2. Because the Bible is written in human languages (indeed, ancient languages very different from our own!), the proper interpretation of the Scriptures requires not only that **we are aware of the limitations of all human language** (and the difficulties of translation from one language to another), but also that we pay attention to the various literary forms and modes of expression used by the ancient authors.
3. **The “inspiration” of the Holy Spirit applies not only to one stage, but to all stages** in the long process of the transmission of divine revelation. Not only were Moses, the prophets, Jesus, the apostles, and other biblical characters inspired by the Holy Spirit in their words and actions; not only were the biblical authors inspired by God’s Spirit as they were busy writing; not only were the Church leaders inspired by the Spirit when they selected which books to include in the biblical canon. Rather, the Holy Spirit was active at all these stages of the process.
4. Finally, **the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Christian Church in the correct understanding and proper application of the scriptures** for our own lives in community and as individuals. Although this goes beyond the traditional doctrine of the “divine inspiration of sacred scripture,” one can properly say that the Holy Spirit still actively guides the Church in its use of the scriptures in many ways: in liturgical prayer, in small-group discussions, in personal prayer and study, and in many other facets of our individual and communal lives.

How do we know which written works are to be considered as Scripture?

Many times this question is asked because while all Christian churches agree on the books of the New Testament, that is not the case with the Old Testament. But we will cover that when we talk about the Old Testament. Lets stay with the New Testament.

If a “Gospel” is a written narrative about the life of Christ, did you know that we know of 54 gospels? There are ancient writings such as the gospels of Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene, James, the Infancy Narrative of James, Paul and Thecla, and many more. So, the trick question is “How many gospels are there?” – answer:54. The better question is “How many canonical Gospels are there?” The answer is four – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Greek word *kanon* originally meant "measuring rod; rule; criterion" (*cf. 2 Cor 10:13-16; Gal 6:16*), but later came to mean such a list of writings that met certain criteria.

What were the criteria. Interestingly, in the first four centuries of the Church, there were no written guidelines. But in the late part of the 4th century and early 5th century CE, the question was formally asked in several local church councils – whose results were verified by the popes of those times. The criteria used later became more formally stated as:

1. **Apostolic Origin** - attributed to and/or based on the preaching/teaching of the first-generation apostles (or their closest companions).
2. **Universal Acceptance** - acknowledged by all major Christian communities in the Mediterranean world (by the end of the fourth century).
3. **Liturgical Use** - read publicly along with the OT when early Christians gathered for the Lord's Supper (their weekly worship services).
4. **Consistent Message** - containing theological ideas compatible with other accepted Christian writings.

In other words, it was not a few select people sitting in a closed room, rather it was the broad, universal experience of the People of God in what writings they found to be “inspired” and useful in worship and praise of God.

Want to Read More?

The teachings of the Catholic Church were formally stated in the document *Dei Verbum* “**Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation**” (Second Vatican Council - 1965). You can easily see the full text of the document in two places:

- It is generally in the preface of most Catholic Bibles, and
- On line at <http://www.cin.org/v2revel.html> (Catholic Information Network)

Perhaps a better start would be the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) or even better, the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*. The CCC outline of this topic is:

- Article 1: The Revelation of God (§§51-73)
- Article 2: The Transmission of Divine Revelation (§§74-100)
- Article 3: Sacred Scripture (§§101-141)

The full text of the CCC can be found on-line at <http://www.usccb.org/catechism/text/>