

29th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (October 16, 2022)

In our second reading we again hear from St. Paul's second letter to Timothy in which he says that the sacred scriptures 'are capable of giving you wisdom' and that 'all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching.' The Bible is truly the word of God—the Holy Spirit inspiring the human authors to commit to writing the truths that God wanted written. They used the human skills and talents they had in doing that writing and they used terms of speech that were common back then, but the Holy Spirit was the primary author in a very real sense.

It's often said that the Catholic Church doesn't place as much emphasis on the Bible as do our Protestant brothers and sisters. Whatever the level of our own personal familiarity with the Bible, that is not true of the Church in general. The Bible is a primary source for all other Church documents and teaching—the Catechism, Vatican II documents, papal encyclicals and countless other resources and writings are chock-ful of scripture quotations and other references. The Bible is at the heart of the liturgy of the Word at every Mass, especially the reading of the gospel where we encounter Jesus himself in his words and deeds.

So the Church definitely puts great importance on the Bible in our prayer and worship and urges us to read, study, and reflect on the Bible on our own. But the Church also understands the need to help provide an authentic interpretation of what we find in Scripture. The Bible isn't always crystal clear in every chapter and verse about what it means; if it was, then we wouldn't have the thousands of different Christian churches and denominations that in fact exist. The Church has an essential role in helping us know the truths that God has revealed to us, especially through Jesus as his word has been preserved and handed on throughout Christian history.

It's good to be reminded of some basics of that history here. For example, the gospel of Jesus was first proclaimed and spread by word of mouth, by the oral preaching of the apostles. Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus told the apostles to teach and baptize; they in turn named others to carry on that same work. They and their successors—the bishops in union with Peter's successors, the popes—taught and continue to teach that same faith. That is what we mean by sacred Tradition: handing on that teaching of the apostles who first received it from Christ himself.

That is what the Church did from the beginning; only at a later time (a few decades later) did some of those leaders begin to put down in written form what they had been preaching. And it took some time for the Church to determine, from among the wide variety of writings that were circulating in those first Christian centuries, which of them were truly inspired and accurately conveyed the gospel of Christ. That process was completed by the late 300's when the Church formally defined the complete contents of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, in the form that we have now. So the Church not only existed before the Bible was put together; the Church actually put the Bible together in its current form.

So the Bible is certainly a necessary element of divine revelation, but it is not the only source of God-revealed truth. This is a key difference between the Catholic Church and the various Protestant communions who believe in varying degrees that the Bible is the one and only source of Christian truth. They often cite that verse in today's reading from 2 Timothy: "all scripture is

inspired by God” and conclude that if you can’t find a belief stated explicitly in the Bible, then it can’t be inspired. But there are real difficulties with the idea that the Bible is the only source of divine truth. For one thing, that idea itself didn’t arise until the 1500’s and the time of Martin Luther and his growing conflicts with the Catholic Church. Also, nowhere does the Bible claim itself to be the only rule of faith; in fact, it goes in the opposite direction. In St. Paul’s first letter to Timothy he refers to the Church and not the Bible as the ‘pillar and bulwark of truth’ (1 Tim. 3:15). And that makes sense since there was not yet such a thing as a ‘New Testament’ when Paul wrote his two letters to Timothy.

Our belief in the Holy Trinity is a classic example of this. The mystery of the Trinity—one only God who exists as the three Persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is the single most important and central doctrine of the Christian faith. If we are limited only to the written words in the Bible as the source of religious truth, surely we would find a clear and unmistakable reference to the Trinity in the Bible. In fact, we find no such thing. Yes, there are hints of the Trinity in the scriptures, but not a definitive statement—we don’t even find the word ‘Trinity’ itself in the Bible! All those words and ideas that we use to describe our belief in God as Trinity came later on in history as it became more necessary for the Church to be more precise in expressing the faith. This is exactly what sacred Tradition is all about—the Church relying on the Holy Spirit’s guidance through both the Scriptures and Tradition to come to a more complete understanding of who and what God is. This same process is at the heart of the Church’s teachings on other subjects such as the Eucharist, our beliefs about Mary, purgatory, and the papacy.

St. Jerome, a fourth-century Scripture scholar, once said that ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ. So if we want to know more about Christ, we need to become more familiar with Scripture, and we need to do so with and in the Church that Jesus established and which gave us that written word in the first place. The more we know how God has revealed himself to us and the role of the Church and the Bible in that process:

- the better we will know the Bible and our faith,
- the better we will be able to explain and defend our faith,
- and—most importantly—the better we will be able to live our faith.