

## SACRED TRADITION

By: Jim Seghers

The Catholic Church teaches the following Sacred or Apostolic Tradition:

“In keeping with the Lord’s command, the Gospel was handed on in two ways:  
- *orally* ‘by the apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by the example they gave, by the institutions they established, what they themselves had received - whether from the lips of Christ, from his way of life and his works, or whether they had learned it at the prompting of the Holy Spirit’<sup>1</sup>;  
- *in writing* ‘by those apostles and other men associated with the apostles who, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing’<sup>2</sup>.”<sup>3</sup>

“This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it. Through Tradition, ‘the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes.’<sup>4</sup> ‘The sayings of the holy Fathers are a witness to the life-giving presence of this Tradition, showing how its riches are poured out in the practice and life of the Church, in her belief and her prayer’<sup>5</sup>.”<sup>6</sup>

Protestants deny Tradition as a source of revelation. They teach that the Christian faith is based on the Bible alone, called in Latin *sola scriptura*. The Catholic Church teaches that the Bible and Tradition are complimenting sources of divine revelation.

“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.”<sup>7</sup> 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’<sup>8</sup>.”<sup>9</sup>

“*Sacred Scripture* is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit’”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Citing the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation – Dei Verbum*, #7.

<sup>2</sup> Citing the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation – Dei Verbum*, #7.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (henceforth shown as CCC), # 76.

<sup>4</sup> Citing the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation – Dei Verbum*, # 8.1.

<sup>5</sup> Citing the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation – Dei Verbum*, # 8.3.

<sup>6</sup> CCC, #. 78.

<sup>7</sup> Citing the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation – Dei Verbum*, # 9.

<sup>8</sup> Mt 28:20.

<sup>9</sup> CCC, # 80.

<sup>10</sup> CCC, # 81, citing the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation – Dei Verbum*, # 9.

“And [Holy] *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, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching’.”<sup>11</sup>

“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 honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence’.”<sup>12</sup>

“The Tradition here in question comes from the apostles and hands on what they received from Jesus’ teaching and example and what they learned from the Holy Spirit. The first generation of Christians did not yet have a written New Testament, and the New Testament itself demonstrates the process of living Tradition.”<sup>13</sup>

“Tradition is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time. These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which the great Tradition is expressed. In the light of Tradition, these traditions can be retained, modified or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church’s Magisterium.”<sup>14</sup>

The biblical basis for the Catholic understanding of Sacred Tradition is solidly based. Because some Protestants claim that the Christian faith of the early centuries was based on the Bible alone, and that Catholic Church invented the idea of Sacred Tradition sometime after the fourth century, the citations that follow show what the early Church taught and believed.

## **FIRST CENTURY**

### **Clement I (88-97)**

“Then the reverence of the law is chanted, and the grace of the prophets is known, and the faith of the Gospels is established, and the *Tradition of the apostles* is preserved, and the grace of the Church exults.”<sup>15</sup>

## **SECOND CENTURY**

### **St. Irenaeus (180-200)**

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<sup>11</sup> CCC, # 81, citing the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation – Dei Verbum*, # 9.

<sup>12</sup> CCC, # 82, citing the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation – Dei Verbum*, # 9.

<sup>13</sup> CCC, # 83.

<sup>14</sup> CCC, # 83.

<sup>15</sup> *Letter to the Corinthians 11*, quoted in *This Rock*, “Not by Scripture Alone,” November 1996, p. 36.

For even creation reveals Him who formed it, and the very work made suggests Him who made it, and the world manifests Him who ordered it. The Universal Church, moreover, through the whole world, has received this *tradition from the Apostles*.”<sup>16</sup>

“True knowledge is [that which consists in] the *doctrine of the Apostles*, and the *ancient constitution of the Church* throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the *succession of the bishops*, by which they were *handed down* that Church which exists in every place, and has come even unto us, being guarded and preserved, without any forging of Scriptures, by a very *complete system of doctrine*, and neither addition nor [suffering] curtailment [in the truths which she believes]; and [it consists in] reading [the Word of God] without falsification, and a lawful and diligent exposition in harmony with the Scriptures, both without danger and without blasphemy; and [above all, it consists in] the pre-eminent gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and which excels all the other gifts [of God].”<sup>17</sup>

“The Church *having received* this *preaching* and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet as if occupying but one house, *carefully preserves it*. She also *believes* these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heat, and she *proclaims them and teaches them*, and *hands them down*, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth. For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the *tradition* is one and the same.”<sup>18</sup>

“It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the *truth*, to contemplate clear the *tradition of the apostles* manifested throughout the whole world; and were 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; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] now rave about.”<sup>19</sup>

“Suppose there arise a dispute relative to some important question among us, should we not have recourse to the *most ancient Churches* with which the *apostles* held *constant intercourse*, and learn from them what is *certain and clear* in regard to the present question? 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?”<sup>20</sup>

“Now all these [heretics] are of much later date than the *bishops* to whom the *apostles* *committed the Churches*;... {These heretics} are forced into various by-paths.... But the path of those belonging to the Church circumscribes the whole world, as

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<sup>16</sup> *Against Heresies*, Bk. 2, Chapter 9, Willis, *The Teaching of the Church Fathers*, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> *Against Heresies*, Bk. 4, Chapter 33, Willis, *The Teaching of the Church Fathers*, p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> *Against Heresies*, Bk. 1, Chapter 10, Willis, *The Teaching of the Church Fathers*, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Against Heresies*, Bk. 3, Chapter 3, Willis, *The Teaching of the Church Fathers*, p. 76.

<sup>20</sup> *Against Heresies*, Bk. 3, Chapter 4, Willis, *The Teaching of the Church Fathers*, p. 63.

*possessing the sure tradition from the apostles, and gives unto us to see that the faith of all is one and the same.*"<sup>21</sup>

### **Tertullian (c. 150-220 A.D.)**

"Wherever it shall be clear that the truth of the Christian disciple and faith are present, there also will be found the truth of the Scriptures and of their explanation, and of *all the Christian traditions*."<sup>22</sup>

"If these things are so, then it follows that all doctrine which agrees with the apostolic Churches, those nurseries and original depositions of the faith, must be regarded as truth, and as undoubtedly constituting what the Churches *received from the Apostles*, what the *Apostles received from Christ*, and what *Christ received from God*. And indeed, every doctrine must be prejudged as false, if it smells of anything contrary to the truth of the Churches and of the Apostles of Christ and God. It remains, then for us to demonstrate whether this doctrine of ours, of which we gave the rule above, accords with the *tradition of the Apostles*, in which case all other doctrines proceed from falsehood. We communicate with the apostolic Churches because there is *no diversity of doctrine*: this is the *witness of truth*."<sup>23</sup>

"These things being so, in order that we may be judged to have the truth, - we who walk in the *rule* which the Churches have *handed down from the Apostles*, the Apostles from Christ, and Christ from God."<sup>24</sup>

## **THIRD CENTURY**

### **St. Hippolytus (c. 170-236)**

"And now, through the love which He had for all the saints [Eph 1:15], having come to our most important topic, we turn to the subject of the *tradition* which is *proper for the Churches*, in order that those who have been *rightly instructed* may *hold fast* to that *tradition* which has continued until now, and fully understanding it from exposition may stand the more firmly therein. This is now the more necessary because of that apostasy or error which was recently invented out of ignorance and because of certain ignorant men."<sup>25</sup>

"Let us believe, then, dear brethren, according to the *tradition of the Apostles*, that God the Word came down from heaven into the holy Virgin Mary, in order that, taking flesh from her and taking also a soul, I mean a rational soul, and thus

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<sup>21</sup> *Against Heresies*, Bk. 5, Chapter 20, Willis, *The Teaching of the Church Fathers*, p. 64

<sup>22</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, "The Demurrer Against the Heretics," # 291.

<sup>23</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, "The Demurrer Against the Heretics," # 293.

<sup>24</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, "The Demurrer Against the Heretics," # 298.

<sup>25</sup> Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol II, "Apostolic Tradition," p. 187.

becoming all that man is except in regard to sin, he might save the fallen and confer immortality on such men as believe in His name.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Origen (185-254)**

“Although there are many who believe that they themselves hold to the teachings of Christ, there are yet some among them who think differently from their *predecessors*.... That alone is to be believed as the truth which is in no way at variance with *ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition*.”<sup>27</sup>

“The Church is one; and it is not possible to be both within and without what is one, if the Church is around Novatian, it was not around Cornelius. And indeed, if it was around [Pope] Cornelius, who succeeded Bishop Fabian by a legitimate *ordination* and whom the Lord glorified with martyrdom even beyond the honor of the *priesthood*, than Novatian is not in the Church, nor can he be reckoned as a *bishop*, since, in contempt of *evangelic and apostolic tradition*, he succeeded to no one but sprang up of himself. He that was not *ordained* in the Church can neither have nor hold the Church in any way.”<sup>28</sup>

## **FOURTH CENTURY**

### **St. Athanasius (296-373)**

“But what is also the point, let us note that the very *tradition*, teaching, and faith of the Catholic Church *from the beginning*, which *the Lord gave*, was *preached by the Apostles*, and was *preserved by the Fathers*. *On this was the Church founded*; and if anyone departs from this, he neither is nor any longer ought to be called a Christian.”<sup>29</sup>

### **St. Epiphanius of Salamis (315-403)**

“It is not necessary that all the divine words have a allegorical meaning. Consideration and perception is needed in order to know the meaning of the argument of each. It is needful also to make use of *Tradition; for not everything can be gotten from Sacred Scripture*. The holy *Apostles handed down some things in the Scriptures, other things in Tradition*.”<sup>30</sup>

[We] confess that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are consubstantial, three Persons, one substance, one God, *because that faith is true which is handed down by those who came first*, that faith which is both prophetic and evangelic and apostolic, that faith

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<sup>26</sup> *Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, “The Refutation of All Heresies,” # 384.

<sup>27</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, “The Fundamental Doctrines,” # 443.

<sup>28</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, “Letter of Cyprian to a Certain Magnus,” # 589.

<sup>29</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, “Four Letters to Serapion of Thmuis,” # 782.

<sup>30</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. II, “Against All Heresies,” # 1098.

which our fathers and bishops confessed, when they met in the Synod of Nicaea in the presence of Constantine, the great and blessed king.”<sup>31</sup>

**St. Jerome (340/2-420)**

“Do you not know that the imposition of hands after Baptism for an invocation of the Holy Spirit is the *custom* of the Churches? Do you demand to know where it is written? In the Acts of the Apostles. And even if it had not the authority of Scripture the *consent of the whole world* in this matter would confer on it the force of precept.”<sup>32</sup>

**St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386)**

“Keep these *traditions* inviolate, and preserve yourselves from offenses. Do not cut yourselves off from *Communion*, do not deprive yourselves, through the pollution of sins, of these *Holy and Spiritual Mysteries*.”<sup>33</sup>

**St. Basil the Great (330-379)**

“We neither say that the Holy Spirit is unbegotten, - for we know one Unbegotten and one Being of beings, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, - nor do we say that He is begotten; of in the *tradition* of the faith we have been taught that there is one Only-begotten.”<sup>34</sup>

“Of the *dogmas* and *kerygmas* [preaching] preserved in the Church, some we possess from *written teaching* and others we receive from the *tradition of the Apostles*, handed on to us in mystery.”<sup>35</sup>

**St. Gregory of Nazianzus (330-389/390)**

“Farewell, great city [Constantinople], beloved by Christ.... My children, I beg you, jealously guard the *deposit* [of faith] that has been entrusted to you (cf. 1 Tim 6:20), remember my suffering (cf Col 4:18). May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.”<sup>36</sup>

**St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-394)**

“Let [Eunomius] first show, then, that the Church has believed in vain that the Only-begotten Son truly exists, not made such through adoption by a Father falsely so-called, but existing as such according to nature, by generation from Him Who is, not

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<sup>31</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. II, “Against All Heresies,” # 1107.

<sup>32</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. II, “Dialogue Between a Luciferian and an Orthodox Christian,” # 1358

<sup>33</sup> *Catechetical Lectures*, “On the Mysteries,” 23, 5, 23, Sungenis, *Not By Bread Alone*, p. 263.

<sup>34</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. II, “Transcript of Faith Dictated by the Most Holy Basil and Signed by Eustathius, Bishop of Sebaste.” # 917.

<sup>35</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. II, “The Holy Spirit,” # 954.

<sup>36</sup> Orations 42:27 quoted by Benedict XVI, *Address*, August 25, 2007.

estranged from the nature of Him who begot Him.... And let no one interrupt me and say that what we confess should be confirmed by constructive reasoning. It suffices for the proof of our statement that we have a *tradition* coming down to us *from the Fathers*, an inheritance as it were, *by succession from the Apostles* through the saints who came after them.”<sup>37</sup>

### St. John Chrysostom (347-407)

“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the *traditions* which you have been taught, whether by word *or by our letter*’ [2 Tim 2:15]. From this it is clear that they did not hand down everything by letter, but there was much also that was not written. Like that which was written, the *unwritten too is worth of belief*. So let us regard the *tradition of the Church* also as *worthy of belief*. Is it a *tradition*? Seek no further.”<sup>38</sup>

“Through whom we have received grace and Apostleship for obedience unto faith’ [From 1:5]. He does not say ‘for questioning and reasoning,’ but ‘for obedience.’ We were not sent, he says, to argue, but to give what *was entrusted into our hands*. For when the Master makes some declaration, those who hear are not to bluster about and be meddlesome about what is told them; they have only to accept it. If was for this reason that the Apostles were sent: *to tell what they had heard*, not to add to it anything of their own; and that we, for our part, should believe.”<sup>39</sup>

## FIFTH CENTURY

### St. Augustine (354-430)

“But in regard to those observances which we carefully attend and which the whole world keeps, and which derive *not from Scripture but from Tradition*, we are given to understand that they are recommended and ordained to be kept, either *by the Apostles* themselves or *by plenary councils*, the authority of which is quite vital in the Church.”<sup>40</sup>

“These are things of a kind that are not prescribed by the authority of Scripture nor by the *Tradition of the universal Church*, and they serve no good purpose for the amending of one’s life, but are insisted upon simply because someone thinks up a reason for them or because someone was accustomed to such in his own country or because on a pilgrimage somewhere *he saw them done* and through they must be more correct because they were quite unlike his own customs.”

If you should find someone who does not yet believe in the Gospel, what would you answer him when he says, ‘I do not believe?’ Indeed, I would not believe in the

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<sup>37</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. II, “Against Eunomius,” # 1043.

<sup>38</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. II, “Homilies on the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians,” # 1213.

<sup>39</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. II, “On Romans,” # 1181.

<sup>40</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. III, “Letter of Augustine to Januaris,” # 1419.

Gospel myself if the *authority of the catholic Church* did not influence me to do so.”<sup>41</sup>

“What the *universal Church holds*, not as instituted by councils but as *something always held*, is most *correctly believed to have been handed down by apostolic authority*.”<sup>42</sup>

“What they *found* in the Church, they *kept*; what they *learned*, they *taught*; what they *received from the fathers*, they *handed on to the sons*. We were never involved with you before these judges; but our case has been tried before them. Neither we nor you were known to them; we but *recite their judgments delivered in our favor against you*.”<sup>43</sup>

“Do not raise against us the authority of Cyprian as favoring the repetition of Baptism, but join us in Cyprian’s example for the preservation of unity. For this question of Baptism had not yet been completely worked out, but still the Church kept the most wholesome practice of correcting what was wrong, not repeating what was given; healing what was wounded in heretics and schismatics, not curing what was already sound. I believe that this practice *comes from apostolic tradition*, just as so many other practices not found in their writings nor in the councils of their successors, but which, because they are kept by the whole Church everywhere, are *believed to have been commended and handed down by the Apostles themselves*.”<sup>44</sup>

“The custom of Mother Church in *baptizing infants* is *certainly not to be scorned*, nor is it to be regarded in any way as superfluous, *nor is it to be believed that its tradition is anything except Apostolic*. The age of infancy also has a great weight of witness; for it was the infant age that first merited to pour out its blood for Christ.”<sup>45</sup>

“It is an excellent thing that the Punic Christians call *Baptism* itself nothing else but *salvation*, and the *Sacrament of Christ’s Body* nothing else but *life*. Whence does this derive, except from an ancient and, I suppose, *apostolic tradition*, by which the Churches of Christ hold inherently that *without Baptism and participation at the table of the Lord it is impossible for any man to attain either to the kingdom of God or to salvation and life eternal?* This is the witness of Scripture too.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. III, “Against the Letter of Mani Called ‘The Foundation’,” # 1581.

<sup>42</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. III, “Baptism,” # 1631.

<sup>43</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. III, “Against Julian, Defender of the Pelagian Heresy,” # 1899.

<sup>44</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. III, “Baptism,” # 1623.

<sup>45</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. III, “The Literal Interpretation of Genesis,” # 1705.

<sup>46</sup> *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. III, “Forgiveness and the Just Deserts of Sins, and the Baptism of Infants,” # 1717.