

The Catholic Understanding of Tradition

The Catholic understanding of tradition is something not just for theologians, or for bishops and priests, let alone for historians. It touches the way that we live our lives as human beings who have received the tremendous privilege to know God, and to participate with God in bringing that knowledge to other human beings and helping them to live fruitfully the life God intends us to live.

I Revelation: the means God uses to make Himself known.

Revelation: the way the Lord makes known Himself and his saving plan. Dei verbum 6

Human beings can know something about God through "Natural Revelation". Dei verbum 3

Romans 1:19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse;

(Psalm 19:1) The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

This is not sufficient to give us much beyond the existence of a cause of the world.

God reveals Himself and His ways through "Divine Revelation".

God offered our first parents a more accurate and complete knowledge of Himself and His will.

This knowledge was corrupted by sin. Dei verbum 3

A new stage with Abraham and his descendants: forming a nation, a culture.

"Through the patriarchs, and after them through Moses and the prophets, He taught this people to acknowledge Himself the one living and true God, provident father and just judge, and to wait for the Savior promised by Him, and in this manner prepared the way for the Gospel down through the centuries." DV 3

II. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is God's ultimate revelation of Himself.

Gal. 4:4-7 RSV But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Hebrews 1:1 In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets;² but in these last days he has spoken to us in a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.³ He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.

The Son of God Himself, in the very nature of God.

He has come in Person: God has spoken *in* the Son.

Jesus Christ completes and perfects revelation. Dei verbum 4

Through His words and deeds and way of life.

Through His signs and miracles.

Through His death and resurrection.

Through the sending of the Spirit.

God has chosen to reveal Himself to us in a literally human way.

III. This revelation of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is meant for all men of all ages.

In the same way, God continues to reveal Himself by human means.

Jesus worked closely with, and prepared a set of witnesses, who could pass on what He had given them.

Lk 24:44f.; Mt 28:19ff.

How is the Word of God, this sacred deposit of faith handed on? The Apostles handed on what they themselves had received Dei verbum 7

1 Corinthians 15:1 Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand,² by which you are saved, if you hold it fast -- unless you believed in vain.³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me.

- through their spoken word
- by their example
- Scripture. Dei verbum 8, 11-26

“[A]ll the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: ‘For the word of God is living and active’ (Heb. 4:12) and ‘it has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified’ (Acts 20:32; see 1 Thess. 2:13). Dei verbum 21

- by teaching gentiles, a lot of what is in the OT
- the sacraments
- by the power of the Holy Spirit: Christ never exits the scene
- establishing a people with a way of life as the fulfillment of all that is found in the OT.

“What was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the peoples of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes.” Dei verbum 8

IV Tradition is literally, 'handing on'

How does the people of God hand on what has been handed on to us?

Bishops have a unique and indispensable role in the guidance of the people as a whole. Dei verbum 10

Priests preach the gospel and perform the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

On the other hand, most of what many learned came from parents, teachers, catechists, etc. Christianity is not just something we understand, but something we *do* ('teach them to obey all that I have commanded you...'), we can only enter into it by *doing it*

All this is important, not just for those who care for the young, but also for those who bring the gospel to adults.

The Church is entrusted with a great task and a great privilege: sharing in (as the wholly dependent instrument of the Lord) the very work of Christ to save.

In the remainder of this series we will look at four exemplars of the Tradition -- Athanasius, Basil, Augustine, and Aquinas – and we will see the range of their activities, the centrality of Scripture in their teaching and preaching, the aim of their lives and work.