

# COLUMNISTS

## More on Scripture and tradition

I did a column last month on a complex theological issue, the relationship between Scripture and tradition, in which I tried to make two points: (1) The deposit of faith does not include anything that is not contained at least implicitly in Scripture; and (2) Tradition is not a fact-factory, that is, it cannot simply create biblical "evidence" out of whole cloth.

Both points are rooted, directly or by implication, in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that Scripture and tradition form one sacred deposit of revelation ("Constitution on Divine Revelation," n. 10).

In other words, revelation is not contained partly in Scripture and partly in tradition, as many Catholic theologians had taught before Vatican II.

There is only one source of revelation, namely, God, and it is "handed on" by a process known as tradition, which includes sacred Scripture as its normative element. Let me attempt to explain.

Revelation has occurred in various ways: through the beauty and majesty of the whole created order; through historical events, such as the exodus of the Jewish people from the bondage of Egypt into the Promised Land; through the words and witness of the patriarchs and prophets; and definitively through the person, words, and ministry of Jesus Christ, who is revelation in the flesh (see Hebrews 1:1-2).



By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

The Word-made-flesh was first proclaimed and witnessed to by the Apostles and the other disciples, and by the whole church ever since. The process by which that proclamation and witness occurs is called tradition, literally, the "handing on" of revelation.

As the Apostles, the other disciples, and the first-century Christian communities reflected on their experience of the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ, they set down their reflections in a series of diverse writings that were later collected together and recognized by the church to be the inspired word of God, sacred Scripture.

Scripture is itself a stage and a product of the "handing on" process, known as tradition. But Scripture is not simply one of tradition's many products, alongside, for example, various teachings of ecumenical councils and popes.

Scripture has a normative status within tradition. It is a uniquely authorita-

tive expression of the word of God and, as such, is the standard against which all else in tradition is to be measured, including the official teachings of the church, which are "not above the word of God" (n. 10).

Some may find that difficult to understand in light of the council's teaching that "sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the church ... are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others" (n. 10).

But it would be a serious mistake to conclude that official teachings of the church are somehow equal to the inspired scriptural word of God. The two are not authoritatively equivalent, even if "linked and joined together." The magisterium must always conform its teachings to Scripture, not vice versa.

It might be helpful to compare the relationship between Scripture and the magisterium with that of the U.S. Constitution and the U.S. Supreme Court. The court officially interprets the Constitution and performs a necessary role in doing so. But its decisions are never on a par with the Constitution itself, they must conform with the Constitution, and they cannot add anything to it nor subtract anything from it.

Given the normative status of Scripture in the process of tradition, there cannot be something essential to the faith that is not found in Scripture, at least implicitly.

To deny this is to revert to the discredited theory that revelation is found partly in Scripture and partly in tradition, as if these constituted two separate sources of revelation.

If something is said to be in tradition, therefore, it must also be in Scripture, at least implicitly. And if something is in Scripture, it is also in tradition, because Scripture is itself a part of tradition.

One final point: Reference was made in last month's column to the dogma of the Assumption and the doctrine of purgatory. A few readers wondered whether these teachings were being excluded from the deposit of faith, on the ground that neither has any apparent basis in Scripture.

That was not the column's intention. The dogma of the Assumption is rooted in the biblical belief in the resurrection of the body which is rooted, in turn, in the resurrection of the Lord himself. As such, the dogma can be regarded as part of the deposit of faith.

Belief in purgation after death, however, has a more tenuous biblical foundation (2 Maccabees 12:39-45, in particular), and has never been widely shared even in the Eastern churches. That it is a teaching to be held by all Catholics is clear. That it is part of the deposit of faith, like belief in the resurrection of the body, is less so.

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