The Bible: Talk 2

**What difference does the Bible make to Catholics? I own one but have never really understood it.**

Christianity is the relationship of love between human beings and their Creator. In order to love someone, you have to come to know them. Scripture is one of the ways we come to know Jesus Christ. The New Testament was written by people who actually walked and talked with Jesus and the people who knew Him. (St. Luke never met Jesus but set forth to write down all he heard from the eyewitnesses.)

The Bible is the inspired word of God. It offers comfort, encouragement, and spiritual strength; it shows us how God interacts in the lives of his people. Most of all, the Bible is the story of God’s love for us.

The Bible is a collection of books. The 46 books of the Old Testament contain the story of the Hebrew people. The 27 books of the New Testament contain accounts of Jesus and the early Church.

Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the biblical writers. But inspiration is a very mysterious process. It is not as if God dictated and the authors wrote what they heard. Instead, God instilled in human beings divine insights, which they described in their own words using images from their own culture to help readers understand the message.

God inspired kings, teachers, poets, prophets, fishermen, and ordinary people, “who made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things that He wanted” (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation). In this way, the divine origin and the human input are seamlessly intertwined.

We listen to readings from the Bible each Sunday at Mass. There are four Scripture readings during the Mass: an Old Testament reading (except during the Easter season when the reading is from the Acts of the Apostles) a responsorial Psalm, a reading from one of the New Testament letters or the Book of Revelation, and the Gospel. In addition, all of the prayers of the Mass are based in scripture. The prayer life of the Church is based in the Psalms.

We reverence the Holy Scriptures. This is evidenced by the fact that we stand for the Gospel, the Book of the Gospels is incensed the same way we venerate the altar, the Crucifix and the Blessed Sacrament.

Scripture and Tradition

The Bible plays a central and primary role in the Christian faith, but it is not sufficient as the sole authoritative source of belief. Catholics also believe that the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church in interpreting and handing on the truths contained within the Scriptures.

Numerous ancient books claimed to be divinely inspired. But only seventy-three were chosen for inclusion in the scriptural “canon” (literally, the “measuring stick” by which all else is judged.). So who had the power to discern and the authority to declare which books belong in the Bible? Ultimately, that role was played by the “Magisterium” (authoritative teaching office) of the Catholic Church, acting in light of the broader apostolic Tradition.

Though there was broad agreement among early Christians about which books belonged in the Bible, the agreement was not absolute. Some important Church fathers regarded as unscriptural certain books that are currently in the canon of the New Testament. Others (equally eminent) thought that certain books not now in the New Testament were part oaf the inspired revelation. The first Church father to list the currently accepted twenty-seven New Testament books was St. Athanasius in 367.

Who settled the issue? Several regional Church councils in the latter part of the fourth century (in 387, 392, and 393) listed the books of the canon as we now know it. Their pronouncements were universally accepted until the Protestant Reformation challenged them more than eleven centuries later. In response, the canon was reaffirmed by the Catholic ecumenical Council of Trent in 1646.

Catholics thus view the Bible, the Church, and Tradition as harmonious pieces of a whole. In fact, the Bible itself points to Tradition and the Church as authoritative; it doesn’t teach that Scripture is the Christian’s sole ultimate authority.

St. Paul, for example, commands Christians to “hold fast” to the traditions he has passed down to them, both those that were written down (and were later recognized as Scripture) and those that were not written down (see 2 Thes. 2:15). He writes to St. Timothy that the Church (not Scripture) is “the pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Tim 3:15).

Quotations

“To be ignorant of Scripture is to be ignorant of Christ.” -St. Jerome

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”-Mt. 4:4

“To become adult Christians you must learn familiarity with the Scriptures.” –St. John Chrysostom