**How do we know that what the Roman Catholic Church teaches today is what Christ taught 2000 years ago?**

**February 5, 2017**

**Welcoming Catholics Home**

This topic goes straight to the heart of the human desire to know with certainty that something is true or not.

We are all aware of the current controversy about whether a news story is in fact true or is “fake news, that is, a story not based on facts or what actually happened but a false story or a story told with misleading information or innuendo. Why does “fake news” bother us? Does it really matter if an newspaper article or website is not accurate or has been written to intentionally mislead or deceive? We have a normal human reaction to recoil against the injustice of being lied to or intentionally misled. We all have the desire to know the truth and we sense we are being violated when someone tries to deceive us. Further, we fashion our opinions and decisions as citizens based on an accurate understanding of American history and current events. So the truth matters in our roles as American citizens.

What about the bigger and deeper questions of life that go beyond our political points to view, regarding the existence of God, the claims of the Roman Catholic Church that she possesses the Truth, and that she is the guardian of the Truth received from God himself in the person of Jesus Christ? In this arena, we surely do not want any “fake news.” But how can we be certain that what the RCC teaches today is true, and that the person of Jesus Christ was God, and that what He taught 2000 years ago are the same teachings that the RCC teaches today?

To help answer these questions of finding certainty in these matter, I will draw from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In addition, I will call your attention to a talk I gave at the first gathering of WCH on October 1, 2013, on the question of how we know Jesus is who he said he was? Copies of both talks are available on the table for you to pick up and read or reread. In addition, I encourage you to read the sections of the CCC referenced and summarized in this talk. You will find the Catechism to be a rich and eloquent restatement of all the truths of the faith. For those of you who do not have your own CCC, we have extra copies here for you to take home and begin to read. (The first Catechism was written by St. Irenaeus around 180 A.D. St. Irenaeus was taught by St. Polycarp, who was taught by the Apostle, St. John. The current Catechism was commissioned by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960’s and written by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger before he became Pope Benedict XVI.)

We start from the perspective of the natural human yearning for truth. We can all look at our own personal experience in life and know with certainty that this is real and a deep aspect of being human and one that we all share. Where did this come from?

The desire for truth is a part of the human desire for the infinite and the transcendent. We all have surely had the experiences of longing for a worldly experience of success (for example, being given a high position with one’s employer) or a particular moment of happiness (for example, one’s wedding day) or a particular source of pleasure (for example, a beach vacation in the middle of winter), and afterwards being a bit let down and thinking, that was great, but is that all there is? It was so momentary. We still long for more. There is more!

The Catechism tells us this longing we experience is actually the desire for God (as the infinite and transcendent reality) that is written on our hearts. He gave us this longing hoping in the process of searching to satisfy this longing, we will search for Him. Throughout human history, we have gone searching to satisfy this longing in all the wrong places (pleasure, power, money, for example). No matter how much pleasure, power or money we amass, we come up wanting more. Or we have worshiped what we can see in nature and become pagan and polytheistic by mistake. There have also been many reasons not even to consider searching for a God or rejecting the idea of God or being indifferent to God because of the presence of evil, injustice and suffering in the world, or the scandals and bad examples of persons representing God. (Sections 27-29)

Despite this mistaken or cool or forgetful response to God by man, God never ceases to call us and continues to initiate in us a desire to find the true God. (Section 30)

Let us say that we uncover this desire in ourselves and seek to come to know Him. How can we know God with certainty? God has given us the capacity to come to know Him. (Sections 31-53) The result will be the conforming of our minds to reality, i.e. the Truth! We have three ways to know the truth:

1. by observation – using our senses
2. by reason – using our mind to help us reason
3. by revelation – hearing or reading the testimony of another

Using these tools, even one of them alone, we can have certainty about the truth. Some people come to know with certainty the existence of God by witnessing the order and beauty of the natural world. Some people come to know with certainty the existence of God by reasoning that there must be a first cause since neither you nor I are the cause of our own being, nor are our parents or grandparents going all the way back to the first man and woman. They, too, were not the cause of their own being. There needs to be a first cause. One reasons that the source of all being, is being itself, another way to identify God. Even Aristotle and the Greeks who lived 400 years before Christ came to this conclusion using their reason. Once Aristotle was asked, can we be friends with God? He answered no, because there is too big of a gap between God and man. His reason foreclosed this possibility.

Then there are those who become certain about the existence of God through revelation, that is, the testimony of another. Who is the primary person who gave us testimony about God? The person of Jesus Christ.

We have seen that reason can take us beyond observation, and now we see that revelation can take us beyond reason. 400 years after Aristotle, the person of Christ in human form would say to his Apostles, “I call you my friends.” (John 15:15)

God wanting to become our friends is not against reason, but it is beyond it.

Jesus Christ is the primary source of the revelation of the truth of God. Prior to the Incarnation, God revealed himself slowly over time and initiated friendship with us. In the Garden of Eden, He invited Adam and Eve into intimate friendship. Even when they broke their friendship with God, He promised to continue to offer mankind His friendship. This was fulfilled in calling Noah, Abraham and the tribes of Israel into His friendship, as is recounted in the Old Testament. (Sections 54-64)

The final stage of the revelation of God is when in the “fullness of time” God became man to reveal Himself fully to us in the person of Jesus Christ. As Jesus said to the Apostle Phillip, “He who as seen me, has seen the Father.” (John 14:9) Jesus Christ revealed all of the Father and God gave Himself fully through Jesus. He said it all. There is no further revelation (despite claims of other religions). (Sections 65-73)

Now we reach the key questions: If Jesus fully revealed God 2000 years ago and there is no more revelation of God, how do we know Jesus is who he said he was, and how do we know this revelation has been transmitted without error for 2000 years?

Regarding how do we know Jesus is who he said he was, I refer you to my talk of October 1, 2013, (copies on table). Here’s a quick summary. First, we have ample concrete evidence and eyewitnesses that he was a real historical person. Second, his well-documented claims that he was the Messiah, God’s son, and came from heaven to redeem us are either true or they are the words of a liar or a madman. Were he either a liar or a madman he would have been a blip on the historical spectrum. Further, it is highly unlikely the Church he established 2000 years ago would still be the longest surviving institution in human history (look at the Timeline handout) were he a liar or a madman. Further, among all other founders of religions, he is the only one who claimed to be God, not just teach about God. He is the only one who claimed He has the answer to the human scourge of death. He’s the only one whose biography was prophesized 1500 years before he was born. He’s the only one who, if you believe him, changes everything about your life.

If we are now convinced that Jesus Christ is who He said he was and that He provided us the full revelation of God 2000 years ago, then how are we to know that what the Roman Catholic Church teaches today is the same revelation about God that Christ taught then? The Roman Catholic Church’s teachings rest on what the Catechism calls the Apostolic Tradition (Section 74). What does this mean? The word “tradition” means the handing on, the passing on, the giving across of something. In this case, it is the teachings of Christ on the full revelation of God that is being handed by the Church. (Sections 74-75)

How did Jesus hand on the full revelation of God? First, He taught the Apostles for three years by His words, His way of life and His works, most prominently His Passion and Resurrection. Close to the end of his life, He identified himself as Truth itself, saying “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” John 14:6). Then, just before He ascended into Heaven, He commanded the Apostles to teach the whole world what He had taught them. (“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you…” Matthew 28: 19-20 and, He gives His Apostles His teaching authority when He says, “He who hears you, hears me.” Luke 10:16). Finally, He promises them He will remain with the Apostles and their successors until the end of time (“…and lo, I am with you always until the close of the age.” Matthew 28: 20).

How were Jesus’ teachings to the Apostles preserved and handed on? The Church itself, as the Catechism so eloquently states, “was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross” from which flowed the water and blood of Baptism and the Eucharist (Sections 758-776) providing its followers a share in the life of Jesus. Then following Christ’s Ascension into Heaven, the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that Christ might continually sanctify the Church. With the infusions of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the Apostles began handing on Jesus’s teaching with their own preaching of what they learned from Jesus, by the example they gave in their way of life and death (11 of the 12 were murdered because they refused to recant their belief Jesus and what he taught) and the institutions they established (e.g., the Magisterium beginning at the Council of Jerusalem around 48 A.D. to resolve disagreements and controversies in matters of faith and morals, and within a few centuries, the Bible we know today.). Even within the first several decades after Christ’s Ascension, His revelation was committed to writing by two of the original Apostles and eyewitnesses, Matthew and John, by St. Paul, his Apostle to the Gentiles, by St. Mark who was a traveling companion and translator for St. Peter, and St. Luke who was a disciple of St. Paul and also the author of the Acts of the Apostles. It is worth noting, the “Dead Sea Scrolls” discovered in the 1950’s have now been shown to be the exact text, word for word, in the Book of Isaiah in the Bible we read today.

What happened to the original Apostle’s commission and teaching authority from Christ when they died? If we reread Jesus’ final words to the Apostles at the end of the Gospel of St. Matthew, the commission He gave them was for the whole world until the end of time. Being that these were a few poor mortal men with life spans of under 100 years living in the backwaters of the Roman Empire, what could He have meant? The authority to spread His teachings was meant to be a “living transmission” so that in every age, there is a living body of teachers endowed with the authority of Christ. (Section 78). This living transmission of accomplished by Christ being with us to the end of time through the Holy Spirit. This is what is meant by Apostolic Tradition. Before each of the Apostles died, they consigned to their immediate collaborators the duty to continue their mission by passing on the teaching authority vested in them by Christ. (Section 861). (See 2 Tim. 2: 2 where St. Paul passes on to St. Timothy the “deposit of faith.”) This process of passing on the teaching authority of Christ is what became sacrament of Holy Orders (the ordination of bishops, priests and deacons) through which the mission entrusted to the Apostles by Christ continues to be exercised in Christ’s Body, the Church “alone”, through the end of time, guided by the Holy Spirit, by its duly ordained ministers. (Sections 75-83) Every priest now living was ordained by a Bishop. That Bishop was ordained by another Bishop and on and on back to the original 12 Apostles. Parenthetically, when Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic Church and established the Church of England, once all the living Catholic priests and bishops in England died, mostly through martyrdom, all future clergy in the Church of England were and still are outside the line of Apostolic succession because they were no longer ordained by a bishop or the pope who can trace their ordination back to the 12 Apostles.

The particular successors of St. Peter, whom Christ granted the keys to the Kingdom, and whom He called the “Rock” upon which He would build His Church (Matthew 16:17), are known as the Roman Catholic Popes, or the Successors of Peter. Since Christ gathered his 12 and gave them a leader and asked them to unify around his teachings and transmit them, the Successors of Peter and the other Apostles who have Christ’s teaching authority as the living body at any given time are called the Magisterium (a term which means “teacher)”. The Magisterium is charged with making sure we have the accurate interpretation and understanding of Tradition and Sacred Scripture. “Christ has endowed the Church’s shepherds with the charism of infallibility. (Sections 85-95 and Sections 890-891) This living body of authority is a great gift to the Church. We can see this in the stark contrast between the Roman Catholic Church and the over 20,000 Protestant denominations that have occurred since the Reformation when the Magisterium was rejected. Protestants do not have a body possessing the teaching authority of Christ to resolve disagreements over interpreting words of Sacred Scripture, and so they splinter into thousands of denominations. The unity that Christ asked for is impossible without the living teaching authority directly from Christ present in the Magisterium. Further, it is worthwhile to point out that the “living body” of ordained ministers and baptized persons are referred to as the Church or the “Body of Christ” on earth. The Church is the means through which Christ relates to us and has a relationship with us. Like any other relationship, the one way to relate to other persons is through our bodies. The Church is Christ’s “Body” and the instrument through which He choses to relate to us. Thus, those who say they want a relationship with God without the Church or any church intervening, are seeking something that is not possible ultimately and makes no sense in any other human relationship. (Sections 775-776)

What is our response to this extravagant initiative by God to gain our attention, to come to know Him and believe in Him down through the ages and most spectacularly in sending His son to live among us and reveal to us and teach us about God, and then give us a reliable living teaching authority to preserve and spread in each generation the truth about God that Christ proclaimed?

God is hoping we respond with faith. Why? Because as humans we can be deceived by what we observe, or we can have flawed reasoning. Thus, when we rely with faith on the revelation of God by Jesus Christ, we can be MORE certain than we could be with any form of human knowledge that we believe in the truth. God does not lie. Revelation comes from Him and takes us beyond human observation and reasoning. (Section 157). Parenthetically, this is why a thinking educated person in the modern scientific age can have faith in the unseen mysteries of God once that person admits the limits of human observation and reasoning. Revelation goes beyond human capacities, but is still a source of truth.

To summarize: We are all created with a desire for the infinite, that is, to know God. We can know God exists with our human powers of observation and reasoning. But if we long to know Him personally, who He is, we receive this by revelation, that is, by the testimony of Jesus Christ. He is the one who reveals God’s desire to befriend us. This is the “deposit of faith,” the full revelation of God. We receive it today through the Roman Catholic Church as the vessel Christ created with the full teaching authority given to Jesus’ Apostles and their Successors to pass down to us.

When we recite the Apostle’s Creed each week at Mass, we state the believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. This last description of the marks of the Church refers to structure of the Church by which its teachings are accurately passed down through the ages by means of the succession of ordained ministers as successors of the original Pope, St. Peter, and the 12 Apostles.

On this basis, we can rely on the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church today as being the teachings of Christ with certainty.

RESOURCES:

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC Sections cited in text)

(For easier reading, you may wish instead to read:

1. Catholic Christianity – A Complete Catechism of the Catholic Beliefs based on the CCC, by Peter Kreeft, Ignatius Press, 2001 (used by St. John in R.C.I.A. classes)
2. United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, by US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006

Holy Bible Revised Standard Version (citations in text)

Lecture by Holy Family School of Faith “A Pilgrimage of Faith” on the Catechism of the Catholic Church on Sections 1-184 and Sections 683-945; schooloffaith.com