

God Calls You By Name

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Chapter 3

Divine Revelation and Sacred Scripture



Catholic Teaching on Revelation, Sacred Scripture, and Tradition

The person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God become man, whose coming and mission had been foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament, is the ultimate revelation of God. Jesus commissioned his apostles to preach the Gospel, which is the source of all saving truth and moral discipline for all people. His message was handed on both orally by the apostles and in writing by apostles and their associates acting under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (CCC 76). Sacred Scripture and Tradition encompass the entirety of the revelation of God that was entrusted to the apostles and carried down through their successors in a single integrated deposit of God's revelation.

We will first survey the books and literary styles of the Bible, and then clarify Catholic teaching on Sacred Scripture. Essential characteristics, including the inspired nature of sacred writing will be identified, and the relationship between Scripture and Tradition will be discussed. The information in this chapter builds on a respect for your previous experience with Sacred Scripture. If you have no prior introduction to Sacred Scripture or to the New Testament in particular, or wish to study it in greater depth, then a good study edition of the *New American Bible (NAB)* or the *New International Version (NIV)* will help tremendously.

Books of the Bible

The books of the Bible are divided into two sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament was compiled over a period of many centuries: it tells the divinely inspired story of God's saving acts in human history. It edited and consolidated many ancient stories, poems, oral traditions, sacred rituals and codes of law into writing. It compresses and juxtaposes widely differing literary forms. Much of the Bible, including parts of Genesis, Psalms, Wisdom, and many portions of the historical and prophetic books, is actually poetic in form although our English translations do not present this clearly. Poetry was a widely favored literary form among ancient cultures and was used copiously in both religious and secular writings; it was also a literary form of choice among ancient genealogists.

The historical books tell the inspired story of God's people. The Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, unfolds the creation accounts, the epic adventures of the ancient patriarchs, the 400 year enslavement in Egypt, God's signature saving acts of the Exodus, a journal of the Hebrews' sojourn in the desert, and the code of law given by God under the leadership of Moses within a poetic and historical narrative. Joshua, Judges and Ruth connect the record presented in the Pentateuch with the era of the Great Kingdoms. I and II Samuel, I and II Kings and I and II Chronicles recount the saga of the kingships of Saul, David, Solomon, the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the Babylonian captivity. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah

continue the historical narrative after the return from the 70 years of exile in Babylon. The books of Maccabees narrate the heroic fight for freedom from Greek oppression. All these distinct units are collectively identified as the historical books of the Bible.

Prophetic books including Isaiah, Jeremiah and the books of the Minor Prophets describe how these prophets were called by the Holy Spirit to lead the people back from sin to the pure worship of their one true living God. The people committed infidelities against the Lord; the prophets warned them to change their ways; the people refused; they were punished; they repented, were forgiven and restored, only to repeat the cycle by sinning again. These books teach us that God never gives up on his people.

Wisdom literature includes the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom and Sirach. The Psalms are inspired prayers that place every facet of human emotion before God and can powerfully enrich our spiritual life. Words of wisdom and exhortations to virtuous living abound in these divinely inspired works.

God called Abraham and revealed himself as the one all-powerful God; God called the Israelites out of slavery and, under Moses' leadership, formed them into his own chosen people. Old Testament authors, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote this body of literature to record God's saving acts and loving intervention in their Salvation History. The Old Testament also provided the cultural background of Jesus Christ himself and of the Catholic Church.

The New Testament was written over a period of decades and presents the fullness of God's revelation through his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. The Church has firmly and consistently maintained that the four Gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, whose historical validity she affirms, faithfully passed down what Jesus, the Son of God, really did and taught for eternal Salvation while he lived among his people. After the Ascension of the Lord, the apostles handed on what Jesus said and did, but with a more complete understanding that came from having been enlightened by the Holy Spirit. This information was handed on orally or in written form, and was synthesized or explained with an eye to the situation and needs of the early apostolic churches; but "always in such a fashion that they have told us the honest truth about Jesus" (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 19, 20).

Each of the four evangelists wrote for his own unique apostolic community: this gives four accounts and four perspectives on the life and teachings of Jesus. Matthew wrote for a Jewish community, sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and he saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Law. He demonstrated to the early Jewish converts to Christianity how Jesus fulfilled the prophesies and promises narrated in the Old Testament. It is generally accepted that St. Mark's Gospel was written first; it displays tremendous energy, more human emotion and less theological reflection than do the others. St. Mark has often been identified as a disciple of St. Peter, and he expresses the vigor of St. Peter. St. Luke, believed to have been a physician and an artist, wrote for Greek Gentile communities, and he strongly reflected the compassion of Christ. Some material that is common to Matthew and Luke likely came from an earlier source. Luke wrote both a gospel and a sequel, The Acts of the Apostles, which chronicled the story of the birth and spread of the early Church. Luke is believed to have accompanied St. Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, on some of his journeys, and he sees Jesus as the Savior of the Gentiles – that is – all people. In portions of The Acts of the Apostles he writes in the first person plural. These three Gospels are called the "synoptic" Gospels because each in its own way presents a summary or synopsis of the life of Jesus. St. John's Gospel is quite different, was written much later, and reflects a highly developed theology (*New American Bible* pp. 1005, 1063, 1090, 1135).

The other writings of the New Testament include the Epistles, which were divinely inspired letters written by the earliest Church leaders. The Epistles give us a window on the development and the lived faith experience of the earliest apostolic Christian communities, and they formulate more precisely the

authentic teaching of Jesus Christ. The Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic or cryptic and symbolic vision of the parousia, or end times, written by St. John in the latter years of his life to encourage Christians who were undergoing persecution for their Faith.

Questions & Answers

Aren't there some extra books in the Catholic Bible?

Yes, there are: the primary difference between the Catholic Bible and the King James version of the Protestant Bible is the fact that the Catholic Church accepted the Septuagint, a very late pre-Christian Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible used by Greek-speaking Jews. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the initial Protestant authorities accepted an earlier compilation written in Hebrew and used in Jerusalem, which did not contain these extra books.

You have probably called the extra books the "Apocrypha." Catholics call the same books the "Dutero Canon," (second official series). It contains some late Old Testament books, generally written in or translated into Greek. "Protestant copies usually lack the seven books (viz: Tobias, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and I, II Machabees) and parts of books (viz: Esther, x, 4-xvi, 24, and Daniel iii, 24-90; xiii, 1-xiv, 42) which are not found in the Jewish editions of the Old Testament." (Catholic Encyclopedia on line, topic: Bible) If you obtain a Bible that has been published cooperatively by Catholics and Protestants, you will find these books listed as "Dutero Canon - Apocrypha". I and II Maccabees depict the struggles of the Jews to cling to the worship of Yahweh despite Greek persecution; Tobias and Judith tell stories of God's fidelity; Daniel offers encouragement in an apocalyptic style; while Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus give practical advice for moral living and praise the virtuous life. Regardless of official status, they are very edifying books and are well worth reading.

Catholic Teaching on the Bible

Sacred Scripture is the self-disclosure of God, the recorded story of Salvation History and God's saving relationship with humankind. It presents authentic divine teaching in matters of Faith and morals. The Bible is, in its entirety, sacred and canonical, officially accepted as valid, because it was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and therefore has God as its author.

These writings are the work of God and the work of human beings. Although sacred writings were accomplished under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they were also written by human authors who recorded God's word within specific linguistic, cultural, historical, scientific and geographic limitations and boundaries. They wrote in various literary styles, including historical narrative, myth, poetry, prophetic utterance and apocalyptic literature. Just as God respects our free will, so also God honored the humanity of these authors. God chose certain men, who, while employed in this task, made full use of their own powers and faculties (*Constitution on Divine Revelation* 11). Look at it this way: God can do all things, but would God have made a Stradivarius violin without Stradivarius?

In order to understand the truths of Scripture in the same spirit in which they were written, the Church gives serious attention to the meaning that the sacred authors actually intended to convey through their use of language, style and cultural background. The Church strongly encourages us to study the disciplines of language, culture and history in order to understand more fully the humanity of these inspired sacred authors. We are also encouraged to give special weight to the original texts and to the languages in which they were written.

Considering all these factors challenges us to take approaches other than literally imposing our 21st

century concepts of language, science, history and culture, and even our left-brained way of thinking onto ancient authors who knew nothing of these things. Imagine that someone from the 40th century reads an ancient headline such as “Denver Broncos Defeat Atlanta Falcons in Super Bowl.” He/she could assume that there were feathers and horsehair strewn all over the field! What if people then judged that their uncouth ancestors relished cruel animal fights? The stupendous – or ghastly, depending on your affiliation – truth revealed by that headline would certainly escape them unless they understood our culture! Likewise when we insist, for example, that by the use of the term “brother,” the ancient author definitely meant a first-degree male sibling, a son of the same parents, we ignore the fact that ancient near-Eastern languages lacked exclusive terms for this relationship. We also refuse to appreciate the intimacy they shared within their extended family groups.

The books of the Bible often deal with matters that concern everyday life, such as history and science, and present them as the ancient peoples understood them. We are more concerned about the religious truth of God’s intervention in Salvation History. For example, the Book of Genesis tells us, in stunning poetry and timeless imagery, that God is one, all-powerful, and responsible for all of creation. All things began at a certain point in time, before which nothing existed. Likewise, the creation of humankind in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26), with an immortal spiritual soul destined to enjoy an eternal, personal, loving relationship with God, is a breathtaking revelation. Our anxiety about whether God created our bodies from inanimate dust or from previously living material probably stems from a literal interpretation of the tender poetic image of God as the potter fashioning the clay (Gen. 2:7). We also see in the original language a characteristically Hebrew play on words (yes, a pun!) between the words “adam,” meaning man, and “adama,” meaning ground (*New American Bible* footnotes p.3) Thus we see in this simple example how culture, literary form and language clarify our understanding of Scriptural texts.

Questions & Answers

Why can't I interpret what the Bible means for me?

To understand Scripture, we look to the Church’s Magisterium, or teaching authority, because it was conferred by Christ and is firmly guided by the same Holy Spirit who authored the Scripture. We need to view the whole of Scripture within the context of the living Tradition of the Church. All of Scripture has a coherent unity centered on the Passion of Christ. “Interpretation of the inspired Scripture must be attentive above all to what God wants to reveal through the sacred authors for our salvation. What comes from the Spirit is not fully understood except by the Spirit’s action” (CCC 137). The virtues of obedience and humility characterize our approach to Sacred Scripture.

On a practical level, consider the intense professional depth of language, historical and cultural expertise, which the Church, often in cooperation with experts of other religions, devotes to the study and accurate interpretation of biblical texts. Even if we studied the Bible full time to the best of our ability, none of us could amass this knowledge for ourselves in a lifetime! In faith and humility, we trust the Holy Spirit to guide the Church in the search for truth in these matters. On a spiritual level, we respond in faith to the loving self-disclosure of God who instructs us for our Salvation.

We may use Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels, in prayerful reading and spiritual exercises such as meditation, or guided meditation conducted by a group leader. This method of prayer was taught by St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order. We place ourselves within a biblical scene in order to come to know Jesus in his humanity, or slowly and prayerfully read these texts and ponder the call a particular passage makes on our life. The full intense realization and living of even a single Scripture passage has made some people saints, and it could profoundly influence your life as well.

Does the Catholic Church oppose, or has it ever opposed, the teaching of Evolution?

Don't worry. The Church you are considering will not monkey around with your science classes! The Catholic Church as well as Catholic schools and institutions of higher learning have had no problem teaching the theory of evolution as it applies to our material world. Read the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nos. 279-379. "The universe was created 'in a state of journeying' (in statu viae) towards an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it" (CCC 302). Scientific studies concerning the origin, age and dimensions of the cosmos, the origin and development of life and the development of humankind itself prompt us to an even greater admiration for and gratitude to the Creator of the universe (Ibid 283). Do any budding biologists remember who discovered the laws of genetics and heredity through experimentation with garden pea plants in the 19th century? It was Gregor Johann Mendel, of course! Do you also know that he was an Austrian monk?

Unlike other creatures, we have an immortal soul that gives form and life to the body and is united so closely with it that it forms one nature; yet it survives when the body dies. Each human soul is an individual act of God's creation, and does not come from the parents' procreative act (Ibid 365, 366). Therefore, approval of the theory of evolution is confined to the physical material nature of humankind; it does not apply to the human soul. Yes, you matter, but do not let your biology teacher tell you that you are nothing but matter!

Register in that philosophy class, too! Consider the arguments of St. Thomas Aquinas. When would the world have been created out of nothing, or caused, unless an Uncaused Cause brought it into being – with the Big Bang or otherwise, and where was all that matter one nanosecond before the Big Bang? Why would the universe give evidence of order and design without being the work of a Great Designer? What about the inherent goodness of creation (CCC 339, 340) – its stability, truth and excellence, and the way each creature fills its own niche and relates with other creatures? The Creator must be all-good. How could the universe have been spun into motion without a Prime Mover? Where could life and breath originate without a creative Life Force? Who in creation would be intelligent without a Supreme Intelligence? What love and relationship could exist without an Eternal Lover? We call this Uncaused Cause, this Designer, this Goodness, this Prime Mover, this Life Force, this Supreme Intelligence and this Eternal Lover God! How, again, can this universe continue to exist, unless its Maker and Designer sustains it and holds it in being? And why was this universe created?

The study of science in relation to the created universe actually does relate only to the material universe. Science does not explain the creation of the spiritual world. Neither does science grasp the "why?" of creation. Genesis simply affirms, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Gen. 1:26). Humankind is different, is given charge over the other creatures. Human beings are created to share a special love relationship with God their Creator. Recall the tender loving, care-filled image of the great God, who had formed the world out of black nothingness and dazzling atomic frenzy, moving about the garden in the breezy time of day, looking for his brand new people (Gen. 3:8). That is the "because!" of creation. God created us to enjoy a relationship with him in this world and in eternity. God is "crazy" about us, his creatures, and he did it all for us. Sadly, our first parents turned away from this relationship. God then promised to send a Redeemer and Salvation History began.

Now, go down the hall to your literature class: you have been given an assignment to express all this – not in the form of a science or philosophy text, but rather, in the imagery-rich, right-brained, poetic, mythical style of an ancient Semitic writer. Further, you must accomplish your task in 2500 words or less! Stumped? Revisit Genesis, Chapters 1-3!

Catholic Teaching on Tradition

The lived experience of the first generation of Christians, guided, led and taught by the apostles who had lived with and been formed by Jesus became the milieu and matrix out of which the New Testament writings emerged. The life and teachings of Jesus gave birth to these Christian communities: in turn, these communities gave birth to the written Gospel texts and the other texts of the New Testament. Sacred Scripture was put into writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Sacred Tradition transmits the entirety of the Word of God entrusted to the apostles and their successors. It flows from the same divine “wellspring” and both present us with the teachings of Christ (CCC 80). We may call this lived experience “Tradition” with a capital “T” in order to differentiate it from specific practices that arose later.

It may be difficult for those of us who live in an era in which the printed word dominates our education systems and our whole productive adult work life to appreciate the value and accuracy of oral transmission as it was practiced in the ancient world. Ancient peoples were accustomed to recalling stories and events with great precision. The teachings of Jesus and stories about his life were passed on, remembered, practiced, lived, reflected upon and died for by the apostles and by the people of the communities the apostles founded. These communities benefitted from the experience, guidance and teaching of their leaders, the apostles, who had been carefully schooled by Jesus. The Scriptures of the New Testament gestated within this nascent Christian apostolic community life: the inspired human writers of the New Testament Scriptures lived and wrote from within these communities decades after Jesus died.

Therefore, Tradition is an integral part of the “Deposit of Revelation” left by Jesus and transmitted to us through the mediation of the apostles, the authors of the New Testament and the earliest Christian communities under the leadership of the apostles. Some treasured beliefs simply cannot be found in scriptural writings. The belief that Mary was assumed into heaven when her earthly life was over cannot be found in any biblical writing, yet it has been believed consistently since earliest Christian times.

Questions & Answers

Which came first, Scripture or Tradition?

This is not just another “chicken and egg” type of dilemma. The lived experience of the earliest Christian communities and the development of the New Testament texts were the interaction more of a marriage or an inseparable partnership than a cause and effect. Together they contain the fullness of the revelation left to us by Jesus and the Holy Spirit through the apostles. That is why we reverence them together as a unified gift from God.

I read the whole Bible, but I never had the advantage of learning all this, because I never came to Church before. They never taught us about Scripture in school because they were afraid they would be teaching religion. How do I start?

This is your year of grace: you are in a great time and place to learn how to read and understand Sacred Scripture as the self-disclosure of a loving personal God, rather than as a mere collection of human literature. First of all, you are attending Mass on a regular basis as an integral part of your Catechumenate. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are read during Sunday Mass over the course of a three-year cycle. The Gospel of John is sometimes read during Lent, during the summer in one cycle and on special feast days. The first and second readings are taken from the Old Testament and from the Epistles and other readings of the New Testament, respectively. Usually the Old Testament reading bears some relationship to the Gospel. The

homily or reflection is based on the Scripture texts of the day, and you continue to ponder their meaning in your "Breaking Open the Word" sessions. If you attend daily Mass, you will be exposed to a comprehensive selection of Scripture within a two-year period, "broken open," or reflected upon, in short homilies. The rituals of the Mass and sacraments are deeply immersed in Scripture. Look also in your Sunday bulletin for offerings of special classes at various times during the year, and for the selections read at daily Mass.

The New American Bible ©1986 or later gives you the text in the same version as the Lectionary, the book from which the readings are proclaimed at Mass. This will spare you any confusion. A good study edition of this Bible that bears an "imprimatur" will help you understand how the Church interprets Sacred Scripture. Just glancing at the footnotes will benefit you. Many other approved books and publications also present the above outlined Catholic teaching on Sacred Scripture. You will gradually come to see Scripture, not just as history, but also as the story of your Salvation.

In summary, Catholics neither go to the extreme of interpreting the entire Bible literally, nor do they accept the opposite extreme of considering it to be pious fiction. We continually seek to deepen our understanding of Scripture through the human disciplines of language, archeology and anthropology even as we trust the Church's teaching authority and pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance. Just as we believe that in the Eucharist the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ is truly present, so also we believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to us of God's saving acts through Sacred Scripture, in the words of its human authors. This is vibrantly evident through the primacy of place we give to the Holy Scripture within our celebration of the Eucharist.

This does not imply that our Deposit of Revelation was fully and definitively understood by these earliest Christians: we will see in the next section how the Fathers of the early Church, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, clarified these teachings.



God Creating the Sun and Moon by Michelangelo

Guided Imagery:

A Meditation on the Cure of the Centurion's Servant Luke 6:17- 7:10

Guided Imagery is a form of meditation, led by a group leader, in which we place ourselves in the center of a scriptural scene, especially a Gospel setting depicting the life of Jesus. We imagine how the scene looked and felt, and we envision ourselves interacting with Jesus. This type of prayer helps us reverence the sacred humanity of Jesus.

You spent the afternoon on a grassy plain listening to Jesus. You sat on stones, watched out for prickly thistles, chewed on a juicy wild oat stem, felt the balmy breezes and covered your head and shaded your eyes against the searing sun. You just heard the Master preach: he called the poor, the hungry and the sorrowful blessed! He instructed you to love your enemies and to do good to them. Strange thoughts you find hard to hear! You would love to send your enemies packing! This teacher is different—he teaches with authority, not like the scribes. There must be something to his ideas: he also healed the sick and cast out devils. You wish to touch him yourself.

Now evening approaches, and Jesus heads toward Capernaum. Shadows lengthen. The crowd thins out, so you try to work your way closer to Jesus as you walk. Get one shoulder in front of the man on your left. Shove. Now ease ahead of the woman on your right. Swoosh! You get within reach of Jesus! Suddenly you hear a rush of men and you yourself are brusquely pushed to the sideline. It is a group of elders, town leaders too dignified to be jabbed by your plebeian elbow! The elders beg Jesus to come and cure the servant of a Roman Centurion, a leader of that despised Empire that occupies your country and extorts your tribute! Why are the elders bothering Jesus to go help a Gentile? And an enemy at that! The occupying enemy! It should have been your turn to shake his hand!

It seems as though this Centurion has been good to the local people and actually built your people a synagogue. Jesus follows the elders. Yes, he will cure the servant of an enemy. As Jesus approaches, another message arrives: with profound humility the Centurion says he is not worthy to have Jesus enter his house. He understands authority. Jesus need only say the word and his servant would be healed. Jesus marvels at the Centurion's great faith. The servant is cured from a distance. You hear the sounds of rejoicing.

As night falls, the air chills. The remaining crowd disperses. A hot meal awaits you at home. You didn't touch Jesus that day, but Jesus touched you. The choking hatred and resentment you harbored against the occupying force suddenly melt away: you behold an enemy who manages a household just as you do, has a wife, perhaps, and seeks help for a sick servant. He built a synagogue for your people, and believes in the Master. Jesus' teaching about love penetrates your heart. That is a miracle too.

My thoughts on this meditation...





Reflection Worksheet

Chapter Three

What are your favorite types of literature? Do you enjoy poetry? Novels? Epic myth? Do you prefer history or books that interpret recent historic events? Do you recognize any of these types of literature in the Bible?

Have you studied ancient Near-Eastern culture in school, or, perhaps, have you been in that part of the world? How does it differ from our culture?

Your most elementary study of science gave you vastly more scientific theory than the ancient writers had at their disposal. What specifically religious or moral teachings can you glean from the stories of Creation? Share your understanding of Genesis Ch. 1-3.

How has your reading of the Gospels helped you come to know Jesus? Is there any particular passage of Scripture that you find especially inspiring or which can serve as a beacon in your life?



The Bible tells the story of humans sinning, being punished, God calling us back, repentance, forgiveness, prosperity, and then sinning again. How many times did God give the Israelites one more chance? When did God give you one more chance?

Have you ever played the “telephone” game? You whisper something to your neighbor; your neighbor repeats it to the next person and so on through a full circle of people. Try it now! When the last person reports the message, it usually comes out, well, not so accurate. If you lived in the ancient Near East, this game would be no fun because everybody would listen closely, get the message straight, remember it accurately and transmit it carefully.

Anchor other known events of secular world history onto the brief time line below.

Prehistoric time 1800-1600 BC 1250-1200 BC 1000 BC 721 BC 587 BC BC/AD 50-100 AD

Adam Noah Abraham Moses, Sinai, Judges, David, Solomon S. King., N. King. Birth of Christ N.T.

Creation Population Call Egypt Desert 10 Comm. Conquest Kingdoms Prophets Exile Repatriation Wisdom Lit. Early Christians

Suggested reading:

Catechism of the Catholic Church: “The Revelation of God”, “The Transmission of Divine Revelation”, “Sacred Scripture”, Nos. 50 to 141; “Man’s Response to God”, Nos. 142 to 184; Want to get acquainted with some early Christian Communities? Delve into this one!
The Churches the Apostles Left Behind, by Raymond E. Brown, Paulist Press

Suggested websites:

<http://www.newadvent.org/bible/> Bible home page: this site offers several versions of the Bible
<http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/index.htm> Complete *New American Catholic Bible*, indexed
<http://www.usccb.org/nab/index.htm> Readings used every day in the Catholic Mass

