

# OUR LIFE IN THE CHURCH



Faith and Life Series

8

Third Edition

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## CHAPTER 4

# The Teaching Church

They asked him, “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God.”

Luke 20:21

*“This gospel was to be the source of all saving truths and moral discipline. This was faithfully done: it was done by the apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by the example they gave, by the institutions they established, what they themselves had received” (DV, 7).*

As we have already seen, Our Lord left to the Church the *deposit of Faith*. His final command to the apostles was to teach all that he had instructed them. He relied on his apostles and their successors to carry his message to the world. This is made known to us today through the living voice of the Church—the Pope, the bishops, the priests—even the laity. Each of these conveys to us the message of Christ, especially the clergy, who are, by their office, the representatives of Christ. The Church bases her teaching on the deposit of Faith revealed to us by God. Before we look at the source of this teaching we should first consider what is meant by *revelation*.

### What Is Revelation?

**Revelation** literally means to “draw back the veil” or to uncover. God is primarily a mystery to us. On our own we can have only a lim-

ited knowledge of him. However, God has unveiled some of the mysteries about himself so that we might come to know and love him. He has helped us to know who he is and what he expects of us.

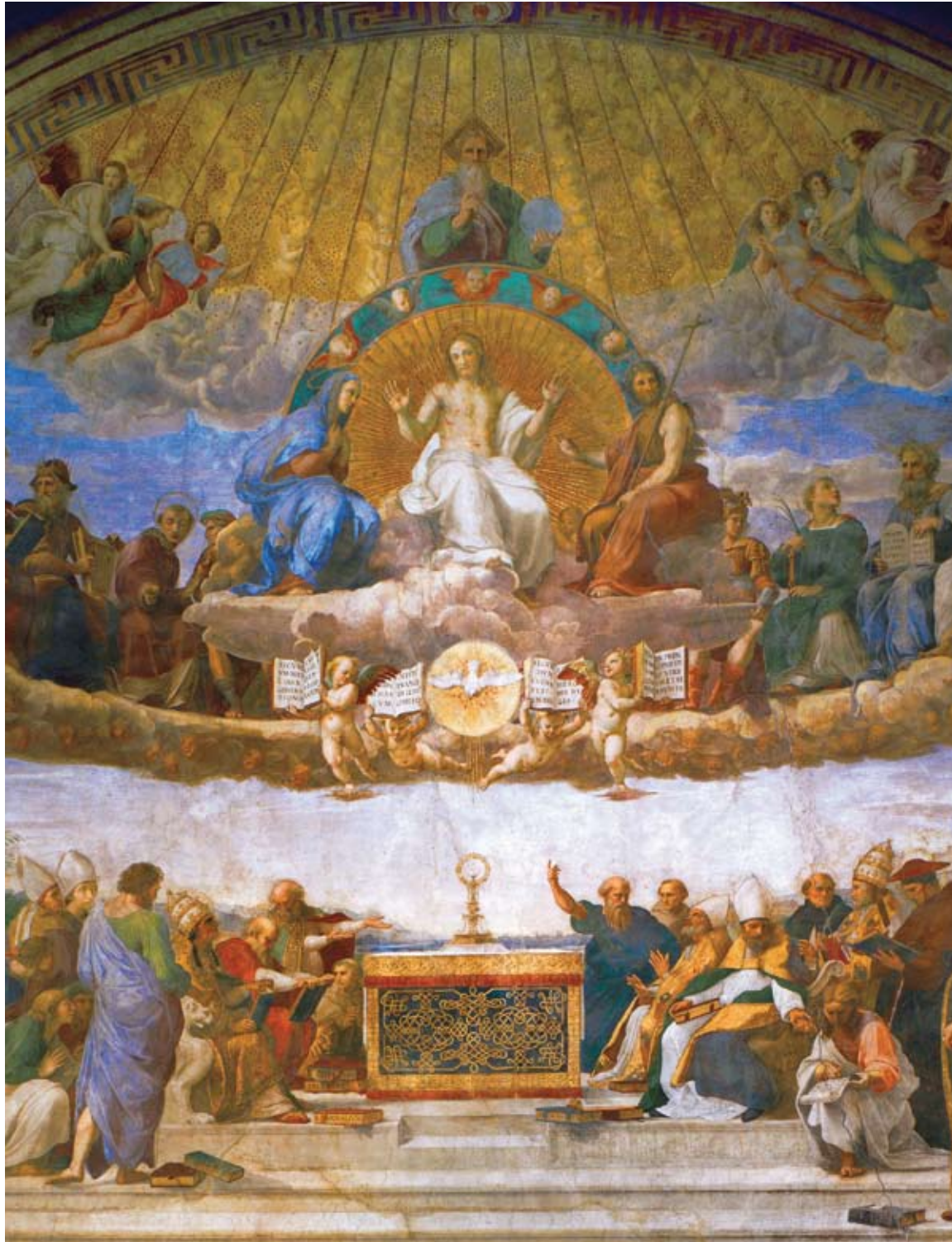
In other words, revelation is the communication by God to man of the truths about himself that he wants man to know but that man could never uncover on his own. These truths are known as doctrines or teachings of our Faith.

God did not reveal these truths about himself all at once but only gradually with the passing of time. The process of public revelation began with Adam and Eve and ended with the death of the last apostle, St. John.

The first phase of God’s revelation can be found in the Old Testament. Because this revelation took place long before the birth of Christ, we call it “pre-Christian” revelation. If we look at the Old Testament, we can see that God gradually revealed more about himself as the centuries passed.

This revelation was completed when God fully showed himself to us by becoming man and living among us. This phase is known as “Christian” revelation. It contains the truths revealed by Jesus Christ to his apostles. These





revelations include the most important mysteries of our Faith. Among them are the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Eucharist.

### Source of Revelation

“God graciously arranged that the things he had once revealed for the salvation of all peoples should remain in their entirety, throughout the ages, and be transmitted to all generations” (DV, 7). This sacred deposit of the Word of God has been entrusted to the Church.

There is only one single sacred deposit of the Word of God, but from it flow both Sacred **Tradition** and **Sacred Scripture**, the Bible. It is important to recognize that Tradition and Scripture are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. “Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit” (DV, 9). By means of Tradition, the books of the Bible are known to the Church, and the Scriptures are more thoroughly understood and interpreted.

Sacred Scripture, the Bible, is the written Word of God. It is made up of a collection of books written at various times by different men who wrote under God’s inspiration. As we know, the Bible is made up of the Old Testament, which contains pre-Christian revelation, and the New Testament, which contains Christian revelation.

The New Testament, however, does not contain all that Jesus did and said. In fact, the various books of the New Testament were not even begun until some twenty or thirty years after the death of Christ. The apostles began to preach the message of Christ first, and only later were some of these teachings committed to writing. Scripture itself testifies to the fact that the Gospels do not include all of Jesus’

words. At the end of his Gospel, St. John says, “. . . there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (Jn 21:25).

What Jesus taught his apostles was passed on to their disciples. For example, St. Polycarp of Smyrna, St. Ignatius of Antioch, and St. Clement of Rome all lived during the last part of the first century and the beginning of the second century. Because they were personally taught by the apostles, they are known as **Apostolic Fathers**. Their writings contain some of Jesus’ teachings that are not explicitly found in the New Testament.

Over the centuries many varied and contradictory interpretations of the Bible have arisen. Who had the authority to decide which was the right one? It is important to note that the Church—which, as we have seen was given authority by Christ (Mt 16:19) to settle all disputes on earth—is the interpreter of Sacred Scripture. She is the custodian (or guardian) of Scripture and Tradition because she was promised the guidance of the Spirit of Truth.

The Second Vatican Council says, “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture make up a single deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church” (DV, 10).

### Creeds

An important written expression of Tradition is found in the *creeds*, or statements of belief, of the Church. These creeds are summary statements of the main doctrines proposed for belief by the Church. The earliest of these dates back to very early times and is called the *Apostles’ Creed*.

The *Nicene Creed* was formulated at the council of Nicaea and approved in its final form at the Council of Constantinople in the fourth century. It is an expansion and explanation of



the Apostles' Creed. In the first creed, and in fact in the early days of the Church, most doctrines were stated in plain and simple language. Over the years questions and difficulties arose concerning many of these doctrines. The later creeds, particularly the Nicene, were written to explain more fully some of these doctrines.

### Councils

A second written expression of Tradition is found in the statements of the ecumenical councils of the Church. An ecumenical council is a gathering of bishops from all around the world to discuss matters of concern to the Church under the authority of the Pope. We

call them *ecumenical*, meaning whole or world-wide, because they involve all the bishops. Over the centuries councils have frequently been called in response to controversies over basic doctrines of the Faith. The councils have given the Church the occasion to explain more completely and accurately certain beliefs.

The earliest controversies were over the Trinity and the human and divine natures of Christ. The Council of Nicaea addressed these questions. It is evident that when there was a controversy there had to be an arbiter (or umpire) to decide what the true teaching was. Later councils addressed questions about which books were in fact inspired and thus to be included in the Bible, the nature and num-

ber of the sacraments, and the nature of the Church. The decisions of these councils clarify or define the teaching of the Church.

### Fathers and Doctors of the Church

The writings of the *Fathers* and *Doctors* of the Church are also written records of witnesses. The **Fathers of the Church** are saintly Christian writers of the early centuries of the Church who are recognized as special witnesses of the Faith. Among the more well-known are the following: St. Athanasius, a bishop during the fourth century who defended the doctrine that Christ was both God and man against the Arian heresy; St. Augustine, a bishop of the fourth century who converted after leading a life of great sin and became one of the greatest theologians in the Church; and St. Jerome, a monk and a scholar during the fourth century who translated the Bible into Latin, the common language of the people at that time.

The **Doctors of the Church** are the saintly theologians of any century whose writings are outstanding in guiding the faithful at all times and who have been recognized officially as such by the Pope. One of the foremost among these is the great Dominican St. Thomas Aquinas, who lived in Italy during the thirteenth century. Three women are included among the Doctors: St. Teresa of Avila, St. Catherine of Siena, and St. Thérèse of Lisieux. To help you understand more about the Fathers and Doctors, you might want to choose one from the list in this chapter and read about his life.

The writings and decrees of individual Popes are another expression of the teachings of Christ. Some of these are known as **encyclicals**, letters sent by the Pope to the bishops and the faithful, expressing the teaching of the Church on matters of faith, morals, social responsibility, and other important topics.

Over the centuries, the faithful have believed a consistent body of truth. The thoughts and

The lists that follow contain some of the most important of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church.

#### FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

St. Ambrose	St. Jerome
St. Augustine	St. John Chrysostom
St. Basil the Great	St. John Damascene
St. Benedict	St. Leo the Great
St. Cyprian	St. Paulinus of Nola
St. Gregory the Great	St. Polycarp
St. Ignatius of Antioch	

#### DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH

St. Albert the Great	St. Francis de Sales
St. Alphonsus Liguori	St. John of the Cross
St. Anselm	St. Peter Canisius
St. Bernard of Clairvaux	St. Robert Bellarmine
St. Bonaventure	St. Teresa of Avila
St. Catherine of Siena	St. Thérèse of Lisieux
	St. Thomas Aquinas

#### BLESSED JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman was born in England in 1801. He was an Anglican scholar who founded the Oxford Movement in England in order to reform the Anglican church. In many sermons, lectures, and books, Newman expounded the "Anglo-Catholic" position. One of his most important works was a book entitled *On the Development of Christian Doctrine*, in which he discussed how the Church's understanding of her Faith deepens over time. His discussion of this question was the most complete treatment of it up until that time.

Eventually John Henry Newman was led to the true Church of Christ through his studies and his writings. Toward the end of his life he was made a cardinal of the Church by Pope Leo XIII.

writings of the saints, as well as the actions and prayers of the faithful, are part of this sense of the faithful, or **sensus fidelium**, for the truth. Their testimony does not contradict the formal teachings of the Church.

The Church teaches us that the “whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the Holy One cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people, when, ‘from the bishops to the last of the faithful’ they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals” (LG, 12).

### Development of Doctrine

One last point remains to be made here about the teaching of the Church. Although the deposit of Faith was completed with the death of the last apostle, St. John, our understanding of it has developed over the last twenty centuries. We call this the **development of doctrine**. This is the gradual unfolding of the meaning of many things that Christ revealed to us. It is this development of doctrine that we find in the councils of the Church, the writings of the Fathers and Doctors, and the practical experience of the Faith among the faithful of the Church. Since the Holy Spirit, who

continues to guide the Church, is the Spirit of Truth, any further development can never be—and never has been—in contradiction to any previous doctrine. One example to illustrate this is the definition of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady. This doctrine is hinted at in Scripture (“Hail, full of grace,” Lk 1:28), was defended by some of the Doctors of the Church, and was part of the *sensus fidelium* for centuries. Yet it was not officially declared until 1854, by Pope Pius IX. It was not a new revelation, but rather an unfolding of one doctrine over time. Something that is implicit in a doctrine becomes explicit, or it can be the logical consequence of a doctrine.

In this chapter we have discussed the sources of the Church’s teaching. In the next chapter we will consider the authority of the Church, first, as it pertains to matters of doctrine and the teaching of the Church and, second, as it pertains to matters of discipline, the governing of the Church.

#### Words to Know:

revelation Tradition Sacred Scripture  
Apostolic Fathers Fathers of the Church  
Doctors of the Church encyclical  
*sensus fidelium* development of doctrine

#### Q. 12 *What is the Apostles’ Creed?*

The Apostles’ Creed is the summary and profession of faith in the chief mysteries and other truths revealed by God through Jesus Christ (CCC 187, 194).

#### Q. 13 *What is a mystery?*

A mystery is a truth revealed by God which is beyond our reason (CCC 237).

#### Q. 14 *What are the chief mysteries of Faith that we profess in the Creed?*

The chief mysteries of Faith that we profess in the Creed are the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation, Passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (CCC 189–90).

#### Q. 15 *What is the deposit of Faith?*

The deposit of Faith is all that is contained in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, handed on in the Church from the time of the apostles, and from which the Magisterium draws all that it presents for belief as being revealed by God (CCC 84–86).

#### Q. 16 *What is the development of doctrine?*

The development of doctrine is the growth in understanding of God’s revelation through the study and prayer of believers and the teaching of the Magisterium (CCC 66, 94).

#### Q. 17 *What is the sensus fidei?*

The *sensus fidei* is a supernatural appreciation of the Faith shown by universal consent in matters of faith and morals, as expressed by the whole body of the faithful under the guidance of the Magisterium (CCC 92–93, 889).

#### Q. 18 *What is an ecumenical or general council?*

An ecumenical or general council is a gathering of all the bishops of the world with the consent of the Pope, to exercise their collegial authority over the universal Church (CCC 884).

#### Q. 19 *What is an encyclical?*

An encyclical is a pastoral letter written by the Pope and sent to the whole Church to express Church teaching on some important matter. (CCC 892).