



# Pastor's Column

St. Peter Catholic Church

July 22, 2018, Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

## *Sola Scriptura and Apostolic Tradition*

Question: "How can Catholics claim to prove theological beliefs with reason, history, and tradition when Scripture alone is all that God allows?"

Answer: Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura* in Latin) might be a foundational principle for Protestants, but not for Catholics. Furthermore, it does not even meet its own test.

Catholics do not accept the principle of *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone"), and so we have no need to justify our theological beliefs using only the Bible. In many apologetic discussions, it can be helpful to do so, since many Christian and non-Christian groups see Scripture, or part of Scripture, as an important source of information, and its role as a commonly recognized authority is helpful. But one should not fall into the trap of thinking that Catholics are always obliged to rely exclusively on Scripture; we also have recourse to our own God-given reason, our human history, and Apostolic Tradition.

Now, it can be helpful in discussions with Protestants to challenge *sola scriptura* directly, for it has a serious problem: if theological beliefs need to be proved by Scripture alone, then that includes the theological belief of *sola scriptura*! Its advocates need to demonstrate the verses which show that every theological belief must be provable by Scripture alone, and this cannot be done. Though there are verses that are sometimes appealed to for justification in this matter (for example, Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 3:16-17), none of them actually say or even imply what Protestants claim.

We can point out that all such verses were written before the canon of Scripture was ever completed. At that time, *sola scriptura* was not in operation, for Christians were bound to accept the teaching of the Apostles (hence Apostolic Tradition), whether that teaching was written or oral (see 2 Thess 2:15 and 1 Cor 11:2). Consequently, for a verse to prove *sola scriptura*, it would need to indicate that there would be a shift in how Christians form their beliefs in the post-apostolic age.

And yet, there are no verses that say things such as, "After we Apostles are dead, everything we said orally loses its authority; you are to look on to Scripture," or, "We Apostles have agreed to make sure that all of our teachings are written down in Scripture, so use only what is written to settle theological questions after we are gone." There is *nothing* of that sort, either written or even implied, in all of the Bible; *sola scriptura*, therefore, fails its own test and is a self-refuting theological belief.

Now, as for Apostolic Tradition, the challenge presented against us is that Jesus warns us that tradition makes void the word of God (see Mt 15:6, Mk 7:8, Col 2:8). But Jesus did not speak with regard to tradition as such but specifically to the Pharisees and their use of tradition.

In fact, the Bible's general attitude toward tradition is positive. For Christians, the faith that is handed down to us from Christ and the Apostles is of unparalleled importance. For us Catholics, this is known as Apostolic Tradition. Initially, the Apostles *orally* handed the faith onto others – by their preaching. And in time, some of them and their associates wrote down the teachings of their oral tradition, and the New Testament writings thus were produced. But this took well over a full century; in the meantime, are we to conclude that there was no Christianity because there was as yet no written Bible? That would be an absurd conclusion.

Because Sacred Scripture has been handed down to us from the Apostles, it is the inspired, written component of Apostolic Tradition. But whether written or oral, aspects of Apostolic Tradition are important and binding for the faithful. Thus, the New Testament authors exhort their readers to maintain Apostolic Tradition (see 1 Cor 11:2, 2 Thess 3:6). And in 2 Thess 2:15, St. Paul tells his readers to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours."

And so, not only does Scripture itself actually refute *sola scriptura*, the Bible also actually promotes and emphasizes the importance of Tradition.

~ Fr. Lewis