

SACRED SCRIPTURE (Romans 15:4)

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church in Volo

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“Whatever things have been written, have been written for our instruction, that through the patience and the consolation afforded by the Scriptures we may have hope.”

We all know that Sacred Scripture is the inspired Word of God and that it plays a very important role in the deposit of faith. But how many Catholics can tell you where the Bible came from? Not just the individual books within it, but the Bible as a whole? This is something that the Protestants refuse to address and then when they begin to point out seeming inconsistencies between Catholic teachings and what the Bible says. The trap has been set and they can sometimes seem to make sense. If the Catholic being confronted is firm in his faith (but perhaps not well informed in it) he will just reject the Protestant arguments but not know why. But sometimes, the Protestant begins to make sense and the Catholic under bait begins to waver—sometimes even begins to question the legitimacy of the Catholic claim. This is one of the big reasons why we have lost so many Catholics to the Protestant churches.

So, what is the story of this book we call the Bible? It all began with a man named Moses, to whom, the Israelites believed, God spoke face to face. Moses wrote down many of the things that God told him and these writings, what we now know as the first five books of the Bible, were then revered by the Israelites as the Torah. As time went on, others composed various texts, which the Jews also came to accept as inspired by God Himself. And although they were never compiled into a single work, because they were merely a loose collection of inspired texts, they came to be regarded as the Sacred Scriptures of Israel.

By the middle of the third century before Christ, there were two separate collections of writings accepted by the Jews as unique and inspired by God. We call them the two canons of scripture. One of them, which we now call the Palestinian Canon, was written in Hebrew and used primarily by Jews living in Palestine. But there were also substantial numbers of Jews living in Egypt and in other places outside of Palestine, who no longer spoke Hebrew but Greek. Therefore, a Greek translation of the sacred Jewish scriptures was made in Alexandria, Egypt, which we now call the Alexandrian Canon or the Septuagint. But there was something else that was different about it than just language. The Alexandrian Canon included texts considered to be inspired, which were not found in the Palestinian Canon.

When Christians began interpreting the Old Testament texts in light of Christ's salvic mission, some of the Jews became uneasy. So, in the year 90, a council of rabbis was called in Jerusalem to determine what texts would comprise the Jewish sacred scriptures. Up to that time, both the Palestinian Canon and the Alexandrian Canon had been accepted by all Jews as valid collections of inspired texts. And although the Alexandrian Canon had been in common use for centuries, even in Palestine, the rabbis chose rather to accept only the Palestinian Canon as a way to distance themselves from the Christians.

By then, Christians themselves had begun writing and before long there were various Christian texts circulating all through the Mediterranean world. The earliest writings were the epistles of St. Paul. Very possibly, the first of these was St. Paul's First

Letter to the Thessalonians, which he probably wrote around the year 51. Eventually, other epistles, the gospels and many other texts were written. As time went on, manuscripts of questionable content began to appear, making the need for a determination of authenticity more and more critical. Which ones contained truly authentic revealed truth and which ones didn't? Since the time of Christ, the Church had always used the Alexandrian Canon as the scriptural basis of the Old Covenant. In fact, two thirds of the quotations from the Old Testament found in the New Testament, including those made by Christ Himself, come from the Alexandrian Canon, rather than the Palestinian Canon. But now, the Church needed to also determine which Christian texts were directly inspired by God as part of an emerging canon of the New Covenant.

By at least the year 125 AD, certain criteria seem to have been in place to determine which Christian writings were authentic. They would, for instance, have to be texts with an apostolic tradition, that is, written by an apostle or reflecting the tradition of one of them. They would have to be texts that were in common circulation in the Christians community. And they would have to be texts that were in conformity with the faith. Eventually, in the year 382, during the reign of Pope Damasus the Council of Rome gave the Church's official recognition to those books, which the Church considered to be divinely inspired, establishing the canon of the Bible as we know it: the 46 books of the Alexandrian Canon, which we now call the Old Testament, together with 27 newer writings, which we now call the New Testament. This decree was reaffirmed by the Council of Hippo in 393, and then further reaffirmed by Church councils throughout the centuries.

This collection of sacred texts was undisputed until the sixteenth century when Luther thought that he could help eliminate some of the abuses taking place in the Church at that time by removing and changing some of the books of the Bible. He arbitrarily decided, for instance, that the Palestinian Canon, which contained fewer Old Testament books than the Alexandrian Canon, was more authentic. He also eliminated some of the books of the New Testament (The Letter to the Hebrews, The Epistle of St. Jude, The Epistle of St. James, the second and third Epistles of St. John and the Book of Revelation) and made some changes to existing texts. The most famous of these changes, was Luther's insertion of one word, *sola*, into St. Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy, making it look as if, contrary to fifteen centuries of Church teaching, Scripture alone was the sole authority for the faith: *sola scriptura*.<sup>1</sup> In short, Protestant Reformers removed and changed the inspired books of the Bible because they did not correspond with their theology. It was, therefore, because of this that in 1546, the Council of Trent solemnly affirmed the canon of Sacred Scripture that had been in use by all Christians since the Council of Rome in 382.

Christianity is a historical religion, based upon real historical events and historical persons, who actually existed. In contrast, Protestant Christianity is essentially a religion of the book. It recognizes historical events and persons essential to the faith but the only and definitive source of revealed truth is a book called the Bible, which they in turn have altered so suit their purposes. For Protestants, the book comes first and justifies everything that one believes. For Catholics, the Word made man came first. He inspired faith in men and it was this faith that in time produced a book, which was, in a certain sense, the Word's love letter to man. Protestants don't even seem to realize that Christ did not hand even one written document to his disciples and that for over three centuries a book called the Bible didn't even exist. And when it did come into existence, it was the Catholic Church that gave it to us.

God is the author of Sacred Scripture and the inspired texts of the Bible accurately transmit His Word. We can find what look like contradictions and errors on its pages, but that's because, although the Bible does contain true historic facts, it is not a history book. And although the Bible does contain certain scientific facts, it is not a scientific manual. Sacred Scripture is a collection of texts in which he reveals Himself to mankind and His plan to redeem him. The Bible is above all about truths that we need to know for our salvation. In his Second Letter to Timothy, the one Luther changed, St. Paul wrote, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."<sup>2</sup>

God revealed Himself as a Person, not as a concept or ethic and He inspired certain men to write so that we would know about Him, about His love for us, and about His desire to save us.

Hom-Scripture(Rom15,4)

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

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