

Q: Why do Catholics believe in Sacred Tradition? Doesn't Jesus condemn "tradition" in the Bible?

This question is profoundly important and really gets to the heart of the differences between Catholics and most Christian denominations. Protestants accept Sacred Scripture alone as the sole source of God's revelation to us, and most denominations completely reject any sense of a doctrinally binding "tradition".

Since the time of the Apostles, the Catholic Church has always taught that the fullness of Divine Revelation does not rest in the Bible alone, but comes to us in two complimentary streams: the written Word (Sacred Scripture) and the spoken/oral Word (Sacred Tradition). Additionally, the Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] also states that Sacred Tradition is how the Church knows which books are truly inspired and belong in the Bible, and that it is also the source of the proper interpretation of Sacred Scripture (cf **CCC 120, 84-113**).

But this is where problems tend to arise, as most Protestants are under the impression that the Bible strongly condemns all forms of "tradition", and that only the Bible is authoritative as a source of Christian doctrine (see my earlier column on Scripture Alone). But what does Scripture itself actually have to say about all this?

Jesus certainly did strongly condemn "*traditions of men*" in **Mark 7:9**, where He upbraided the Pharisees for instituting their own traditions that ultimately contradicted God's laws. In this case, they used a legalistic rule of their own making that allowed them to break the 4th Commandment of honoring father and mother by "dedicating" their money to the temple in a way that they could still use it themselves, but not be obliged to support their parents in their old age. It sounds incredible, but that's what they did –and tried to justify it by enshrining laws to this affect. No wonder Jesus condemned them so harshly!

But Sacred Scripture is also **VERY** clear that there is a second form of tradition that we absolutely **MUST** adhere to. St Paul shows this unequivocally in **2 Thessalonians 2:15** where he writes: *So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the **traditions** which you were taught by us, either by **word of mouth** or by letter.* Here, St. Paul is clearly indicating that there is good tradition that we must hold to, **AND** that it can be passed along orally, "*by word of mouth*". Similarly, in **1 Corinthians 11:1-2** he states: "*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold fast to the **traditions**, just as I handed them on to you.*" And again, in **2 Thes 3:6**, he instructs his followers to "*shun any brother who conducts himself... not according to the **tradition** they received from us.*"

It is precisely this "*tradition*" that St Paul refers to repeatedly here that Catholic teaching calls "Sacred" or "Oral Tradition", separating it out from other "small 't' traditions", such as changeable customs, cultural practices and other non-doctrinal practices. Sacred Tradition faithfully preserves and transmits the entirety of the Gospel or Deposit of Faith in a living way in the Church, through the Apostles and their successors (the Bishops), all accomplished in the Holy Spirit, and it is every bit as authoritative as Sacred Scripture (see **CCC 76-78 and 81-82**).

And unquestionably, the Church in the first 400 years of Christianity was very much a church of Oral (Sacred) Tradition. The New Testament writings were not even finished or available in the first 40 to 60 years of the Church, and the books of the Bible would not be finally discerned by the Catholic Church until the late 300's AD. So there was no actual finalized Bible to follow until then, and many different writings were being proposed as "inspired" before the Canon [list of books in the Bible] was finally closed.

And even after all the books of the Bible were finally discerned, there were no printing presses to get it into the hands of individuals until the 1500's, and most couldn't read anyways. Additionally, many Christian teachings are just not clear from the Bible alone –there must be an authoritative means to interpret it, or we end up with exactly what we have today: 35,000 plus Christian denominations and growing, all with their own contradictory twists to interpreting Scripture – and some of them involving VERY important issues!

The idea of following the Bible alone as the sole authority for Christian doctrine was not only unheard of in the first 1500 years of the Church, but it was also completely impractical. And ultimately, it just didn't work! The fruit of following the Bible Alone, apart from Sacred Tradition and the teaching authority of the Church, has been massive disunity – in complete opposition to the unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17:17-23. No, the Early Church was very much an oral church. "*Faith comes from what is heard*", St Paul would write in Romans 10:17.

But still, many wonder how Sacred Tradition could be preserved over the centuries and then passed on uncorrupted to the present day. They may feel confident that God was able to inspire the human authors of Sacred Scripture centuries ago to write without error, but quickly become doubtful when it comes to protecting Sacred Tradition.

Perhaps there is an image in their minds of a favourite children's party game: a group of kids sit in a row and the first child is given a tongue-twisting sentence and asked to whisper it to the next child and so on down the line. The last child stands up and announces what they've heard, and invariably, the results are hilarious, the final sentence being miles from the original.

But of course this is not how God works. Imagine the children are bishops, and the original sentence is the great oral deposit of faith – everything that Jesus did, said and taught. As the truths of the faith are handed on from Bishop to Bishop, from Pope to Pope, in a living and sacred way, imagine the Holy Spirit whispering in each of their ears, confirming the message they have heard, resulting in the final transmission being preserved perfectly intact – by the Holy Spirit. This is, in part, what Catholics call, Apostolic Succession, and it is how the Church has preserved all the teachings of Jesus from the time of the Apostles to the present day. Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit that is the great preserver of truth.

The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 gives us a perfect example of this concept in action, and represents how the Church has worked over the centuries. After defining a difficult doctrinal decision, the council prefaced its decision with: "*it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us that we tell you these things...*". The Holy Spirit guided the council to rightly answer a doctrinal question, which is what still happens in ecumenical Church councils today.

So let me give a brief snapshot from Sacred Scripture itself as to how this could actually work.

In **John 14:26**, Jesus promises that *“the Holy Spirit... will **teach you all things**, and **bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.**”* Then, in **John 16:13**, He goes on to say: *“When the Spirit of truth comes, **he will guide you into all the truth... and he will declare to you the things that are to come.**”* St. Paul picks up this thread in **2 Tim 1:13-14**, adding: *“Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have **heard** from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; **guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us**”. And a few verses later, he adds, *“and what you have **heard from me** before many witnesses **entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also**” (2 Tim 2:2).**

That’s it. That’s how the Holy Spirit does it: He teaches the Church all things, guiding it into all truth. Then the Church guards this truth entrusted to it by the same Holy Spirit, entrusting it to faithful men who will teach others also.

The writings of the Early Church Fathers are literally packed with quotes confirming the absolute necessity and doctrinal certainty of Sacred Tradition, but St. Irenaeus (remember, he was taught by St Polycarp, a disciple of St John the Apostle) summarizes things perhaps better than any when, addressing various heresies of his time around 195 AD, he would write: *“(We do this)... by indicating that **tradition** derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome... which comes down to our time by means of **the successions of the bishops**. For it is a matter of necessity that **every Church should agree with this Church** (Rome) **on account of its pre-eminent authority.**”*

Additionally, St. Irenaeus would add that *“it is necessary to obey the presbyters who are in the Church – those who... **possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate** [office of Bishop], **have received the certain gift of truth... But it is also necessary to hold in suspicion others who depart from the primitive succession, and assemble themselves together in any place whatsoever.**”* Powerful words!

But let me close with one of my favorite verses of Scripture. It captures the heart and essence of Sacred Tradition perfectly, with the poetic beauty that only the Holy Spirit can: *“**You yourselves are our letter** of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, **written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts**” (2 Cor 3:2-3).* Awesome! May every one of us go out as *“tablets of human hearts”*. We could change the world!

From Tim Staples, Catholic.com: We also have evidence from extra-biblical Christian sources that the apostles appointed men to succeed them for the sake of preserving what they taught. Clement of Rome's first-century letter to the Corinthians (c. A.D. 70) is one example. He writes in chapter 44,

"Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect foreknowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned [bishops—at chapter 42], and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry."

Irenaeus of Lyons, a bishop of the late second century, affirms that the apostolic traditions were preserved in this line of succession from the apostles. Here's what he writes in his classic work Against Heresies:

It is within the power of all, therefore, in every church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about (III:3:1).