

Are Catholics Biblical Christians?

By Fr Paddy Walsh

The Catholic Faith is a living faith that traces its history back to the early Church and the witness of the apostles themselves. Catholics recognise the Bible to be the authentic and divinely inspired written expression of the faith of the early Church. We are, therefore, Biblical Christians in the sense that we reverence Scripture as being the inspired Word of God, but we don't idolise it.

Catholics understand that Christianity aims to lead us into a deeper knowledge and love of the person of Jesus Christ, and this does not necessarily involve being able to quote the Bible, chapter and verse. We are a religion not of a *book* but of an encounter with a *person* – Jesus Christ himself.

Furthermore, Catholics believe that divine inspiration of the Church did not end when the last word in the New Testament was written down, but that the Holy Spirit continues to dwell within and guide the Catholic Church so that it interprets the Biblical revelation authoritatively, without error for each new generation. This means that the Church, in her teaching, will guide us in our understanding of the true meaning of Scripture.

So, we as Catholics see the Bible and the Church as being two sides of the one coin – working in tandem, as it were. In fact, one could say quite accurately that the Bible's New Testament is a child of the Catholic Church. It was the Catholic Church that decided, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to commit the Word of God in the New Testament to writing and faithfully to interpret it. It was the Catholic Church that decided which books of the bible were inspired and which were not (the canon of Scripture). Nowhere in the Bible does it say which books should form part of it – this needed to be decided authoritatively by the Church (definitively at the Council of Carthage in AD 393).

While on Earth, Jesus never asked anyone to put together a written record of His life and teaching. He left that to the Church. Such is the emphasis of some Protestant communities on the words of the Bible that one could be forgiven for thinking that the Bible was invented at the Reformation, but in reality, had the Catholic Church died out in the second century, there would have been no New Testament at all and the Old Testament may not have survived either.

With the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, the number of people who could read translations of the Bible was boosted, but the Church cautioned against interpreting it in an arbitrary fashion without reference to the teaching of the Church as this could lead to confusion. And that is precisely what happened, with the proliferation of protestant sects. Today there are more than 30,000 protestant

denominations and sects – all with their own take on the supposedly clear words of the Bible. Indeed, you get as many interpretations of the Bible as there are preachers, and therein lies the danger. How do we know if any preacher is interpreting the Bible properly? The Holy Spirit may inspire one preacher but the Holy Spirit also seems to be inspiring another preacher down the road with quite a different take on things, often contrary to the first. Jesus says that “a household divided against itself cannot stand”. So it is clear that, without the oversight of the Church and its Magisterium, guided by the Holy Spirit and headed by the Successor of St Peter, the Bible can so easily be misinterpreted and quoted out of context, or even falsified.

The Catholic Church, at the time of the Reformation, was also acutely conscious that translations from the original Greek and Hebrew, as well as from the official Vulgate Latin translation completed in the late fourth century, could easily deviate from what the original authors intended. Calvin's translation of the Bible (the Geneva Bible), for instance, was layered with a heavy anti-Catholic bias with certain ‘Catholic’ words in the original being changed to suit his own 'reformist' agenda.

The Catholic Church has never taught anything which is contrary to scripture. Some teachings may not be immediately apparent from a straightforward reading of Scripture, but all of its teachings are implicit in the words of Scripture and form part of its Sacred Tradition. St John Henry Newman explained this clearly in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) in which he spoke about teachings developing from the form of a bud “into a blossom, and the blossom is opened into a fruit”. This teaching has not been created or changed, but has simply matured from what was always there in Scripture.

There are many disputed moral questions which the Bible says nothing explicitly about. For instance, the Bible says absolutely nothing about in vitro fertilisation, artificial contraception, surrogate motherhood, racial discrimination, stockpiling nuclear weapons, cloning, etc. Yet the seeds of the Church's teachings are all there, and have been brought to maturity by the Church for this generation thanks to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That is why we need the Church to help inform and enlighten our consciences in these and many other vital areas of morality because, without it, we end up in a moral quagmire.