

# YEAR OF FAITH 2012-2013

## 7th SUNDAY OF EASTER | May 11-12, 2013 (May 12 is also Mother's Day)

On this Mother's Day, with gratitude we honor our mothers who are living and pray for our mothers who are deceased. One of the things for which we should ever be grateful to our mothers is for the central role they played (at least for most of us) in handing on the faith to us. It is likely the case that most of us learned about Jesus and our Catholic faith from our mothers. It was probably our mothers (as well as our fathers) who arranged for us to be baptized, first brought us to Mass, taught us our prayers, read Bible stories to us, and helped us prepare for our first Holy Communion. Indeed, our mothers and fathers did so because parents are the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith. And if we ever asked our mothers where they learned so much about Jesus, they probably told us that it was their mothers who taught them, who handed on the faith to them.

My brothers and sisters, today's liturgy helps us remember another mother in our lives who has handed on the faith to us, namely, the Church our Mother. Indeed, through the Church's Tradition and Sacred Scriptures, the Catholic faith revealed by Jesus to his Apostles has been handed on, generation after generation, all the way down to us today. As the beloved Pope who called the Second Vatican Council, Blessed John XXIII, explained in one of his encyclicals, the Church is truly the "Mother and Teacher of all nations" (*Mater et Magistra*, 1).

However, just as with our own mothers who taught us about the Catholic faith, so also what the Church teaches us is not her own invention, but is something which she has herself received. She received it from Jesus. In the Church's liturgical calendar, we are currently in the days between the Ascension, celebrated last Thursday, and Pentecost, which is next Sunday. When Jesus ascended to heaven, who did he leave behind to continue his work? He left his Apostles, who together with Mary and other disciples, formed the first community of the Church. It was to those individuals that, during his life on earth, Jesus had revealed God's loving plan of salvation. By his words and deeds, and especially by his death and resurrection, Jesus brought to completion the Revelation which God had given to his people Israel, as found in the Old Testament. Moreover, Jesus not only fully revealed God's plan, but as the Son of God and our Savior, he is himself the fullness of God's Revelation to the human race. After Jesus' Ascension, it became the task of the Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to transmit this Revelation received from Jesus, by spreading the faith around the world and by handing it down across the centuries. Thus, in every age and even in our own day, "the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come'" (Rev 22:17), as we heard in our Second Reading. In other words, guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church, which is the Bride of Christ, extends an invitation to all people to "hear" the teaching of Christ and "receive" through Baptism "the gift of life-giving water" (Rev 22:17). So, Jesus revealed his Gospel to the Church, and the Church has then handed it on to men and women of every time and place.

That is why we speak of the Church's Tradition. The word "tradition" itself means the handing on, the handing down, the handing over of something. By the Church's Tradition, we mean the Church's action of handing on, of transmitting to each generation, the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Of course, by the Church's Tradition, we also mean the content of what is handed on—the teachings, the doctrines,

received from Jesus and handed on to us, for example, through the Creed, Church Councils, Liturgy, and Church Fathers. In a special way, the Revelation of Jesus was also committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the early Church, giving us the New Testament, the writings which together with the Old Testament make up the Christian Bible, the Sacred Scriptures. We can thus describe the Scriptures as the written form of the Tradition. This is precisely how St. Paul explains it in his Second Letter to the Thessalonians, where he advises Christians to “stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours” (2 Thess 2:15 NAB). The oral and written forms of what they were taught are what we call Tradition and Scripture. Thus, the Revelation of Jesus Christ received by the Church is handed on to us by the Church through Scripture and Tradition.

Three practical comments need to be made about this topic.

First, the Revelation which the Church has received from Jesus is a precious treasure of beliefs to be safeguarded, the so-called “deposit of faith.” That is why the Church’s beliefs—her teachings on faith and morals—do not change depending on the shifting winds of public opinion. They are not subject to popular vote. With the Church’s beliefs, rooted in Scripture and Tradition, we can be certain that we are receiving the teaching of Jesus Christ. In preaching the Gospel message, the Church thus remains faithful to Jesus, even if it means persecution, as it did for Stephen, one of the first deacons, who died as a martyr for preaching the Gospel, as we heard in our First Reading. Fidelity to the Revelation received from Jesus does not mean, of course, that the Church’s understanding of Revelation, of the deposit of faith, cannot grow over time under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For example, in recent centuries, because of growth in understanding of God’s Revelation regarding the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Church formulated as definitive teaching (as dogmas) certain truths such as her Immaculate Conception (1854) and her Assumption into heaven (1950). However, these were not brand new teachings, since they were already believed in earlier centuries, even if they had not yet been formally proposed as dogmas by the Church’s Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Pope and College of Bishops. So, the point here to remember is that the doctrine of the faith is safeguarded by the Church, in fidelity to Christ and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Second, in speaking about the Church’s Tradition, it is important not to confuse it with human customs and traditions. Catholics throughout history and around the world have expressed the one Catholic faith in ways that, from a human point of view, may differ from one another. For example, the Mass may be celebrated in different languages, or diverse cultures might highlight different devotions to Mary and the saints. Nonetheless, it is the same faith which unites these different expressions of faith. We should not be surprised that in order to present the faith in a way that is accessible to different people in different times, there can be variations or changes in these human customs and traditions. However, what is being handed on is still the same faith. That is why it is important to distinguish human traditions (with a little ‘t’) from the great Tradition (with a capital ‘T’) which comes to us from the Apostles.

Third, it is especially important for us as Catholics to have a good understanding of Scripture and Tradition because we live in a society where so many of our neighbors, friends, and co-workers are Protestant or Evangelical Christians who hold to sola Scriptura—Scripture alone—as the rule of faith. Notice, however, that Jesus did not give his Apostles a finished Bible before ascending to heaven. Rather, he entrusted his Gospel Revelation to the Church, and the Church then went out and preached the Gospel message. Thus, in today's Gospel Reading, Jesus refers to "those who will believe ... through their word" (Jn 17:20), through the word preached by the Apostles, by the Church. Indeed, the faith was first handed on orally, through the preaching of the Gospel message, before the books of the New Testament were written down. Moreover, the list of writings to be included in the Bible (what is called the Canon of the Bible) is not something which the Bible itself can give us. It was the Church that decided which books belong in the Bible. Thus, our faith is based not on Scripture alone but on all the Revelation that Jesus gave to the Church. Scripture itself even tells us that it cannot possibly include everything there is to say about Jesus. At the end of the Gospel of John, for example, we read that "there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written ... the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:25 RSV). Thus, as Cardinal Ratzinger wrote some years ago, before his election as Pope Benedict, "what we call 'tradition' is precisely that part of revelation that goes above and beyond Scripture" (Milestones, 127). Now, that does not mean we should ignore Scripture, because as St. Jerome famously said, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." In this regard, we can learn a lot from our Protestant and Evangelical brothers and sisters, from their love of Scripture. Moreover, the Second Vatican Council and Pope Benedict have emphasized how we as Catholics need to rediscover the importance of the Scriptures in our lives, prayerfully reading the Bible and interpreting it in light of the Church's living Tradition, as indeed we do at Mass. (If a parish has its own Bible Study program, an invitation to participate can be added here.) Thus, to summarize this third point, for us as Catholics, it is not a question of either Scripture or Tradition, but rather of both Scripture and Tradition.

In conclusion, my brothers and sisters, just as we learned what our mothers taught us, so also should we learn the things the Church our Mother teaches us, those truths of Revelation transmitted to us through Scripture and Tradition. During this Year of Faith, we want to entrust ourselves more fully to Jesus by faith. That means that we should also make an effort to understand better the content of our faith, our Catholic faith, which Jesus revealed to his Apostles and which the Church still hands on to us today. We will then be ready ourselves to hand on the faith to the next generation.