

Is the Bible Enough?

The correlation between the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition has been hotly contested between the Orthodox and the Protestants for centuries. It was as early as the 16th century that Protestants proclaimed their famous doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* (Latin for “only the Scripture”), claiming that the text of the Bible is enough for proper Christian living.

They declared that the Bible contains just enough information for our salvation and that the Tradition was a later and useless invention, which Christians had to get rid of as quickly as possible.

Orthodox theologians radically oppose this approach.

The Church teaches that Holy Tradition is the earliest way of transmission of the Divine Revelation.

Holy Tradition existed before the Holy Scripture and served as its basis. It isn't hard to grasp it: even during our everyday lives we experience something first and then express our experiences in written form, if necessary. Aside from that, even the Bible admits that the Holy Tradition comes first.

Thus, we learn from the book of Genesis that God talked with Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses directly. We see that Abel already knows how to make a sacrifice of *the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof* to God (Gen. 4:4). Noah knows which animals are “clean” and which are “unclean” (Gen. 7:8). Abraham knows the tradition of tithing when he gives tithes to Melchizedek, king of Salem (Gen. 14:20). It is worth pointing out that none of them read the Scripture because there weren't any written Scriptures at those times.

Old Testament Jews lived without sacred texts of any Scripture for many centuries. Likewise, early Christians did without the written New Testament, because they tuned their spiritual and everyday lives in accordance with the oral Tradition of the Church.

Therefore, Scripture is essentially the recorded part of Tradition, which is why the former cannot exist without the latter.

Furthermore, the very fact that divine revelation had to be put to paper, according to Saint John Chrysostom, indicated a steady decline of morals and spiritual deafness, which was spreading among people.

“Blank Spots” in Holy Scripture

Interestingly enough, if we “remove” Holy Tradition from Divine Revelation, there will appear “blank spots” in the biblical text immediately — and it is impossible to fill in those gaps without additional sources.

Moreover, there is a more fundamental problem, too. Readers of the New Testament must have faced it when they read the entire biblical corpus but could not find a detailed doctrine regarding certain basic tenets of Christianity, such as sacraments. The question is: Why is the Bible silent about all those matters? This question can’t be resolved within the *Sola Scriptura* mindset.

Besides, the structure of the New Testament without Holy Tradition appears vague due to discrepancies and incomprehensible passages. For example, what does Jesus Christ have in mind when He refers to the heavenly bread, to the grapevine and to the water that flows into the eternal life? What does Apostle Paul urge us to do when he says, “**Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself not discerning the Lord’s body**” (1 Cor. 11:28-29)? What do the grapevine, the water, the bread and the cup refer to? The New Testament text doesn’t provide us with a clear explanation.

However, all those questions disappear as soon as we put the Scripture into its original context, i.e., the Holy Tradition.

Archpriest John Meyendorff stresses that the aforementioned words of Jesus “**cannot be fully appreciated without knowing that Christians of the first century performed baptisms and celebrated the Eucharist**”. Sayings about the cup, the grapevine and the bread become clear, as soon as we put them in the context of Holy Tradition. Again, it shows that Scripture and Tradition are reciprocally connected and inseparable. Their unity is the prerequisite for the conceptual completeness of the divine revelation.

Holy Tradition is the prerequisite for true understanding of the Scriptures, the point of reference based on centuries-long reading and analysis of the Bible, which allows every Christian to read God’s revelation without the risk of distorting its meaning.

Remember the story from the book of Acts where Apostle Philip asked the Eunuch who was reading the Old Testament, “**Understandest thou what thou readest?**” The eunuch replied, “**How can I, except some man should guide me?**” (cf. Acts 8:30-31)? It is the Holy Tradition that “guides” a believer. It instructs

us not only how to read the Scripture but also how to get saved.

There's Neither Tradition Nor Scripture Without The Church

Both, Holy Tradition and Holy Scripture exist only for the Church and only within the Church. There is neither Holy Scripture nor Holy Tradition outside the Church.

One can speak about Holy Scripture and read hundreds and thousands of scientific papers about the Scriptures and the Tradition. Sadly, without a personal encounter and the unmediated experience of building one's own life on Scripture and Tradition, they will merely remain curious artifacts of human history. One can encounter them and discover them only in the Church, which lives and breathes the Scripture and the Tradition for several millennia already. The Church has an uninterrupted succession of those who dedicate themselves to preserving the Scripture and the Tradition, i.e., the saints.

Holiness means that a certain person lives according to Holy Tradition and Scripture, that the fullness of divine revelation is fully embodied in the lives of certain people but first of all in the life of Jesus Christ. Tradition and Scripture are fully revealed to us only if we are in the Church, if we participate in her holiness. The most profound experience of Holy Tradition is possible through the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. It is the crossroads where Tradition and Scripture meet.

The fullness of the divine revelation was given to the Church only once, on the day of Pentecost. Christians of the subsequent centuries merely unveiled and gradually explained this diverse Tradition.

Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, doctrines of the Church, works by Holy Fathers, iconographic canon, church architecture and the biblical canon — all of those are parts of Holy Tradition.

Saint Augustine who discovered Holy Tradition and Scripture only after he met Saint Ambrose of Milan, wrote the following paradoxical words: **"I wouldn't believe the Gospel if not for the authority of the Orthodox Catholic Church." The authority in the Church is the Holy Spirit who dwells in it.**

(Tichon Sysoev)