

# The Assumption of Mary - Part III: Sacred Tradition

By Greg Witherow

On November 1, 1950 the **Magisterium** of the Church raised the Assumption of Mary to be an infallible dogma stating - *Mary, the immaculate perpetually Virgin Mother of God, after the completion of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into the glory of heaven.* **Sacred Tradition** also attests to this belief. In a sermon dated 730 A.D., Saint John of Damascene speaks of the Church's conviction in the Assumption as he states - *we have received [the teaching of the Assumption of Mary] from ancient and most truthful tradition.* But to the evangelical, appeals to the Magisterium and Sacred Tradition do not matter as only the Bible is regarded as a source of authority for our Faith. How should the Catholic respond? This short essay will address the use of Sacred Tradition<sup>1</sup> and why we as Catholics view it as authoritative.

Christ deals with tradition as he confronts the Pharisees<sup>2</sup>, accusing them of hypocrisy. He states - *You leave the commandment of God and hold fast the tradition of men.* He goes on to say - *in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.* The source of this tradition was Man and it was in conflict with Scripture. But the Bible elsewhere speaks of a tradition with its source from God and it does not conflict with Scripture. As we will see, the former should be avoided and the latter embraced.

In Corinthians 11, Paul begins a discourse reminding women to wear veils<sup>3</sup>. The directive to wear a veil is nowhere mandated in the Old Testament or in Christ's recorded teachings. As such, Paul does not appeal to Scripture, as there is none to appeal to. Rather, Paul appeals to natural law and Tradition. In verse 2 he states - *I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain **the traditions** even as **I delivered them to you.*** He goes on to say about veil wearing, - *If anyone is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God.* Note again the appeal to Tradition, not Scripture nor a quote from the Gospels. It is true that there are Biblical principles involved in the teaching of veil wearing, for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church. But does the headship of a husband in and of itself warrant a veil? It takes Tradition to say Yes. In writing the letter to the Corinthians, Paul transfers this oral Tradition into the written Tradition. But it was still binding before it was written and it appears to have no direct tie in to previous Scriptures. And yet it was binding and not a matter of conscience.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Church looks to sacred Scripture (with a primacy attached to it), sacred Tradition and the Magisterium working in harmony as the sources for our dogmas. For brevities sake, we will not address the Magisterium in this essay. Catholic teaching holds that all public revelation terminated with the close of the apostolic era. The deposit of faith was received in both the written tradition (Sacred Scriptures) and the oral tradition (Sacred Tradition). The Magisterium of the Church is to guard and teach her dogmas based only on this deposit of faith.

<sup>2</sup> This confrontation is recorded in Matthew 15:1-15 and Mark 7:1-23. The topic is touched upon again in Luke 11:38.

<sup>3</sup> The point of this essay is not the role of veils in the Church. The point is Tradition was as an authoritative and binding reason for wearing them.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:15 Paul states - *So then brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, whether by word of mouth or by letter.* What are the traditions by letter? Sacred Scriptures. What are the traditions by mouth? Sacred Tradition. Unlike the tradition condemned by Christ, the source of this tradition is God and is therefore authoritative and binding. Later in the letter Paul speaks of the binding nature of tradition. He says - *Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.*

It must be noted that Scripture is dependent upon Tradition. While all Christians hold that the Bible, *as it was originally composed*, is infallible and inspired, we are not (as far as we know) in possession of any of these original inspired documents. Of the Hebrew Scriptures, we are far removed from the originals. And of the Hebrew Scriptures it should be noted that they were initially written without the use of vowels. The Jews inserted vowels into the Hebrew text (after the advent of Christ) by utilizing both context and oral tradition. This same technique was required when the Hebrew was translated into the Greek Septuagint (before the advent of Christ)<sup>4</sup>. Of the New Testament, we only have copies of the original manuscripts, the copies dating from as early as 180 - 200 A.D.

And it cannot be denied that the list of canonical books is a product of Sacred Tradition. Nowhere within the books of the Bible is there a list of the books of the Bible. R.C. Sproul, a highly regarded Evangelical theologian of the Calvinist tradition notes this. He has stated that - *The Catholic Church holds to an infallible list of infallible books whereas the Protestant holds to a fallible list of infallible books.* Is it only me, or is there something amiss in this logic?<sup>5</sup> Evangelicals are forced into such formulas, because to concede our Bibles have an infallible index on Page 1 is to concede the existence of an infallible Tradition. But this notion undermines the doctrine of sola scriptura and therefore must be discarded. But our Bibles are the product of the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit, who works through Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium to safeguard the deposit of faith. Therefore we have certainty in an infallible list of Biblical books and we have confidence in their content and meaning.

Lastly, the Church has always embraced Sacred Tradition. Saint Irenaeus (A.D. 140 - 200) writes: *As I said before, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although she is disseminated throughout the whole world, yet guarded it, as if she occupied but one house. She likewise believes these things just as if she had but one soul and the same heart; and harmoniously she proclaims them and teaches them and hands them down, as if she possessed but one mouth. For, while the languages of the world are*

---

<sup>4</sup> The Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament composed about 150 years before Christ) was the Bible of the apostles and is used extensively by the New Testament authors. It was the vernacular Bible of its day. The Jews who translated the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Septuagint used both context and oral tradition (with its vowels) to derive the Greek text. The Eastern Orthodox Church and many Church Fathers regard the Septuagint as an inspired translation. Of the 340 quotes from the Old Testament in the New, 300 are from the Septuagint.

<sup>5</sup> I often note that I was moved to Catholicism because as an evangelical the math didn't work. This is one example of what I mean.

*diverse, nevertheless, **the authority of the tradition**<sup>6</sup> is one and the same. And... nor will any of the rulers in the churches, whatever his power of eloquence, teach otherwise, for no one is above the teacher; nor will he who is weak in speaking **detract from the tradition.***

There are many questions about the faith that Scripture does not indisputably answer. For example, what is the proper form of church government? How many sacraments are there and where is the list? Who should be baptized? How should they be baptized? Once they are baptized, what does it mean? While you can scour the texts, it is easy to come up with different answers using Sacred Scripture alone. But Sacred Tradition answers these questions, allowing for Saint Irenaeus to speak of the uniformity of the faith found around the world during his time. Yet Protestantism has always been marked by chaos, not uniformity as they have discarded Sacred Tradition. But how do we know what the Sacred Tradition is? The same way we know what the Scriptures are. We look to the Church, which Paul describes in 1 Timothy 3:15 as **the pillar and foundation of truth.**

In summary, the Church has declared the Assumption of Mary a dogma received with the original deposit of faith. The dogma is derived from both the written tradition (Sacred Scripture)<sup>7</sup> and oral tradition (Sacred Tradition) under the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit who leads the Church into all truth. As such, the Assumption of Mary is something that we can be confident in, rejoice in and look to in hope, as each of us will someday too be bodily assumed into heaven with all of the saints.

---

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis is mine.

<sup>7</sup> The scriptural case for the Assumption is found in Part I and II of this series.