

TRADITIONS

What is Sacred Tradition? Sacred or apostolic tradition consists of the teachings that the apostles passed on orally through their preaching. These teachings largely overlap with those contained in Scripture, but the mode of their transmission is different. Basically, Sacred Tradition preserves doctrines passed down from the apostles through the Church, under the leadership of the apostles' successors, the popes and the bishops.

"Wait, wait... hasn't the Catholic Church changed its doctrines through the years?"

Sacred Tradition and doctrines should not be confused with *customs* and *disciplines*, such as the rosary, priestly celibacy, and not eating meat on Fridays in Lent. A doctrine is an unchangeable truth revealed by God (e.g. Virgin Birth), while a discipline is a changeable regulation (e.g. the priest facing the people instead of the altar during the Mass). All doctrines from the early church are preserved in the Catholic Church nowadays, but church disciplines adapt to change of time.

"But, your doctrines are based on traditions instead of the Bible! Isn't tradition condemned in the Bible (Mt 15:3-9; Mk 7:9; Col 2:8)?"

The Bible speaks of two kinds of tradition : *human* and *apostolic*. Bad human tradition is condemned. In Mk 7:9, Jesus clearly condemns human tradition that sets aside the commandments of God. In Mt 15:3-9, it was a matter of the Pharisees feigning the dedication of their goods to the Temple so they could avoid using them to support their aged parents. By doing this, they dodged the commandment to "Honor your father and your mother", which is also a human tradition that needs to be condemned. In Col 2:8, Paul tells us to beware of false reasoning "according to human tradition".

In condemning erroneous human traditions, neither Jesus nor Paul is condemning Sacred Tradition.

"I'm not convinced. I think Jesus and Paul are condemning all traditions."

Not really. Look at Mt 23:2-3. Here, Jesus instructed his followers to abide by traditions that are not contrary to God's commandments. "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice."

Paul also praised those who followed Apostolic Tradition in 1Cor 11:2. "I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you." In 2 Thess 2:15, he also commanded the Thessalonians to adhere to all the traditions he had given to them, whether oral or written.

Indeed, even the Gospels themselves are oral tradition that has been written down (Lk 1:1-4). Paul himself gives a quotation from Jesus that was handed orally to him (Acts 20:35), and an early Christian hymn (Eph 5:14).

"Well, I don't believe in traditions anyways. My church does not have them."

If you believe in the Trinity, you believe in traditions to some degree. The doctrine of Trinity is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible. It was first formulated in the second century and received final approbation in the fourth, as the result of the Arian and Macedonian controversies.

Traditions

“But the traditions the early church observed are not the ones you’re now following!”

This is not true. The writings of the early Church Fathers revealed that the early Church believed in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, confession of sins to a priest, baptismal regeneration, salvation by faith and good works done through grace, that one could reject God’s grace and forfeit salvation, that the bishop of Rome is the head of the Church, that Mary is the Mother of God and was perpetually a virgin, that intercessory prayer can be made to the saints in heaven, that purgatory is a state of temporary purification which some Christians undergo before entering heaven.

If the Catholic Church is in error to hold these beliefs, then it would mean the Church apostatized before the end of the first century, when the apostles were still alive! Sadly, most doctrines were repudiated by the Protestant reformers after 15 centuries.

“Why didn’t the early Church just list all the teachings given to the apostles and contained in a Sacred Tradition handbook?”

No, it can’t because doctrines develop. Sometimes, doctrines become explicit whenever controversies occur. For example, in the 7th century, the Monothelites claimed that Jesus had only one will, the divine. Neither the Bible nor the writings of the earliest Church Fathers explicitly stated that Christ has two instead: a human will distinct from but in harmony with his divine will. However, the apostles taught that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. This contains the implicit teaching of two wills (recognized by current Protestants as well). It was a legitimate doctrinal development that emerged when a heresy struck and the Church was sought a deeper, more explicit understanding of what it already implicitly knew. Simply, no one would have thought to include that proposition before the dispute arose.

Why is Sacred Tradition important? Because it is handed down by Jesus and his apostles. It served as the reference to determine what is and what is not in the canon of the Bible. In places where the Scripture was ambiguous, Sacred Tradition helped us to understand the intent of the apostles. It does not contradict the Bible, rather, it supports it and makes it clearer.

READINGS

Oral Tradition in the New Testament (*This Rock, May 1995*)

Christians R Us (*This Rock, May 1995*)

Further Research

- Did the New Testament authors draw on oral tradition (in addition to the Scriptures) as authoritative?
- What did the early Church Fathers (e.g. Clement, Ignatius of Antioch) say about Apostolic Tradition?
- Do you think that Catholics emphasize too much on customs and disciplines, thus forgetting the real meaning of the Sacred teachings and traditions?