

# What is The Deposit of the Faith?

"GUARDING THE DEPOSIT OF FAITH IS THE MISSION  
WHICH THE LORD ENTRUSTED TO HIS CHURCH,  
AND WHICH SHE FULFILLS IN EVERY AGE."<sup>1</sup>

With these words Pope John-Paul II began his *Apostolic Constitution on the Deposit of the Faith* which prefaces the Catechism of the Catholic Church. John-Paul goes on to say that the purpose of the new catechism is primarily to safeguard the Deposit of the Faith. It is with catechesis (instruction) that we both safeguard and perpetuate the precious faith Christ gave to his Church. But exactly what is the Deposit of the Faith that we are called upon to safeguard and pass on?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) says, "In many ways, throughout history down to the present day, men have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behavior: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth. These forms of religious expression, despite the ambiguities they often bring with them, are so universal that one may well call man a *religious being*."<sup>2</sup> Humans, as a religious beings, have a natural longing for God. There is within the heart of all mankind an emptiness, a sense of incompleteness that fuels the ubiquitous questions of existence; namely "Where did I come from?" "Where am I going?" and most importantly, "Why?"

The Catechism answers these driving questions stating, "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church."<sup>3</sup> God calls, man seeks. "In response to our seeking God reveals Himself to us. "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe..."<sup>4</sup>

God has sought to reveal Himself in many ways but never more directly than with Jesus Christ, His Son. Jesus reveals the Father as no one else could. "No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him."<sup>5</sup> It is Jesus who reveals the Father's great love and mercy.

Christ's revelation was then entrusted to the Church he built and empowered. "And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it."<sup>6</sup> So the Deposit of Faith is nothing less than the revelation of God.

God's revelation of Himself comes to us through three sources:

1. The Sacred Scriptures – God revealed Himself to ancient Israel by prophets empowered to teach the Law and speak His words to the people. In the New Testament we have the life of Jesus chronicled in the Gospels and the activity of the Apostles in forming the early Church. The authority of the Scriptures depends upon the authority of Christ's Church empowered by the Holy Spirit. It was the Church that decided which books

constituted the canon of Holy Scriptures that makes up the Bible. It was the Church's authority that verified these writings as inspired and inerrant.

2. The Magisterium – The living Magisterium of the Church is composed by the Supreme Pontiff (Pope) as the successor of Peter, the Prince of Apostles, in union with the Bishops as successors of the Apostles. The teaching of the Magisterium is guaranteed to be free from error in matters of faith and morals by the promise of Christ. It is Christ's infallibility they are exercising under certain circumstances. The Holy Father speaks with the authority and infallibility of Christ when speaking on matters of faith and morals with the intention of making an infallible statement (ex cathedra, literally "from the Chair" of Peter; actually in Peter's stead). The College of Bishops also enjoys this infallibility, but only when acting together, and in union with the Pope. That is why the pronouncements of ecumenical councils are infallible. When the Pope has not been present at a council, historically the documents were submitted to him for his approval.
3. Tradition – There are two types of tradition in the Catholic faith. The first kind is Sacred Tradition. This is Tradition with a "capital T." Throughout the Scriptures there are references made to things taught by Christ and the Apostles that were never written down. "Therefore, brothers, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours."<sup>7</sup> These teachings are as much a part of the Deposit of the Faith as are those that were written down and became a part of the Bible. Some of these traditions include such things as the Trinity, Sunday worship, and the Immaculate Conception.

The other type of tradition is tradition with a "little t." These are disciplines and customs of the Church that do not have the authority of Sacred Tradition. Some of these include not eating meat on the Fridays of Lent, the celibacy of the priesthood, and the colors of priestly vestments.

So the Deposit of the Faith is the revelation of God; the faith of the Apostles that has been handed down to us through the millennia. The Deposit of the Faith was complete with the death of the last apostle; nothing more can be added to it. However, we are constantly coming to a greater understanding of the Deposit of the Faith. This deposit was entrusted to the Church to protect it and faithfully transmit it as it was received, adding nothing and taking nothing away from it. This is Christ's commission to His Church and to each member of the Church. It is our responsibility to know the teachings of the Church and to share them with the world.

Footnotes:

1. Fidei Depositum
2. Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) No. 28
3. CCC No. 1
4. Hebrews 1:1 New American Bible (NAB)
5. John 1:18 NAB
6. Matthew 16:18 NAB
7. 2 Thessalonians 2:15 NAB