

Taking God at His Word

A Catholic Understanding of Biblical Inerrancy

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ISSUE: What does the Catholic Church teach about biblical inerrancy?

DISCUSSION: “Inerrancy” simply means the state of being free from error. The Catholic Church has always taught that Sacred Scripture is inerrant. Since all the books of the Bible were composed by human authors who were “inspired” by the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn. 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21; 3:15-16), they truly have God as their author and communicate without error Our Heavenly Father’s saving truth.

Many Christians are scandalized today when they hear someone say that Jesus did not really multiply the loaves and fishes for the 5,000 people on a hillside in Galilee. Some contemporary scholars say that this Gospel account in John 6:1-14 was merely a story made up by the early Christian community to express Christ’s message on the importance of sharing and serving those in need. They speculate that the story of Jesus’ miraculously multiplying loaves and fishes probably was not an actual event that occurred in history.

This type of interpretation of the Bible casts doubts on the trustworthiness of the Scriptures. Is the Bible a fully reliable source of truth? Or is it merely a collection of writings containing some religious truths alongside a number of exaggerations, errors, and fabrications?

What Does the Catholic Church Teach?

The Catholic Church teaches that Sacred Scripture is truly the Word of God. Through the Bible, God gradually reveals Himself, communicates His plan of salvation, and calls us to a relationship with Him.

The Church has always taught that we can approach the Scriptures with a rock-solid confidence because they are inspired by God Himself and therefore contain no error. This inerrancy is a great gift because it gives the Bible a credibility on which we can base our lives. God inspired the Scriptures in order to give us a fully trustworthy source about what we are to believe and how we are to act. When read within the Church’s living Tradition and magisterial teaching, the Bible is a sure guide for our lives.

The basis for the Church’s teaching on biblical inerrancy is *inspiration*. Here we must remember that the Bible is different from any other book. It is unique because it has a unique author: God Himself. As Saint Paul says: “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Divine inspiration literally means “God-breathed.” This is why the Church teaches that the Scriptures “have God as their author.” God worked through human writers who “consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.”¹ So while the human writers made full use of their own powers and abilities, they were at the same time inspired by the Holy Spirit so that the words of Scripture are written exactly the way God Himself intended. Indeed, the Scriptures contain the very words of God expressed in the words of men (*Dei Verbum* [DV] 13, 16).

Since the words of Scripture are inspired by God Himself, the Church has always taught that every part of the Bible is without error. Otherwise “error” in the Bible would have to be attributed to God, who is supreme Truth and who can neither deceive nor be deceived.

Pope Leo XIII, in his 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (On the Study of Sacred Scripture [PD]), explained:

[S]o far is it from being possible that any error can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true. *This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church* (no. 20, emphasis added).

Pope Pius XII reaffirmed the inerrancy of the Bible in his 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (On the Most Opportune Way to Promote Biblical Studies [DAS]). He compared Scripture's inerrancy to Christ's sinlessness: "For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, 'except sin,' so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error" (no. 37).

Vatican II and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Catechism) likewise affirm that God's inspiration of the Scriptures leaves no room for any error in the Bible:

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully and *without error*, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures (DV 11; Catechism, no. 107, emphasis added, footnote omitted).

Is Inerrancy Limited to Matters of Faith and Morals?

Despite these explicit statements on biblical inerrancy, some have taught that the inerrancy of Scripture is limited to "religious matters," arguing that the Bible is without error only when it deals with matters of faith and morals. When it comes to non-religious matters of history or "background details," however, these critics argue that God may have permitted human errors to exist alongside more important religious truths.

But this position has been refuted repeatedly by the Church because it necessarily limits God's inspiration of the sacred texts. Leo XIII explained that inspiration and inerrancy cannot be restricted in this fashion:

[I]t is absolutely wrong and forbidden, either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of Holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred. For the system of those who ... do not hesitate to concede that divine inspiration regards the things of faith and morals, and nothing beyond ... this system cannot be tolerated (PD 20).

The Bible must therefore be inerrant not only in "religious truths," but in all its intended affirmations.

Pope Benedict XV in *Spiritus Paraclitus* (On the Fifteenth Centenary of the Death of St. Jerome, 1920) also emphasized the Bible's absolute immunity from error. He went so far as to say that "belief in the biblical narrative is as necessary to salvation as is belief in the doctrines of the faith" (no. 24). After explicitly condemning any position that restricts inerrancy only to so-called "religious" elements of the Bible, he quotes Saint Jerome, the Father of biblical science, who wrote more than 1,500 years ago that "[i]t would be wholly impious to limit inspiration to only certain portions of Scripture or to concede that the sacred authors themselves could have erred" (*ibid.*, no. 21).

Avoiding Fundamentalism: The Problem of Literalistic Interpretation

The Church teaches that the Bible is inerrant in all that the sacred writers intended to affirm. The Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* makes the important distinction between the *literal* sense of Scripture and a *literalistic* interpretation. The literal sense is "that which has been expressed directly by the inspired authors." To arrive at the literal sense, one must interpret the text according to the literary conventions of the time and consider the author's intention, literary genre, and historical context. A literalistic reading disregards these considerations.

For example, when Christ warns that it is better for you to cut your hand off if it causes you to sin (Mk. 9:43), He is using a literary metaphor. However, a literalistic reading would take this teaching of Christ at face value and wrongly encourage cutting off portions of the body that cause one to sin! Similarly, when Psalm 73:20 speaks of God awakening, this is not meant to teach that Yahweh actually sleeps at night and gets up in the morning, but rather this figurative language describes how God, after remaining seemingly unresponsive to a situation, begins to take action like a man awaking from sleep.

When it comes to matters of natural science, the Church teaches that the sacred authors did not necessarily intend to teach physics, astronomy, or chemistry. For example, when the Scriptures describe the sun as moving around the earth (cf. Ps. 19:4-6; Eccles. 1:5), the sacred writer was not intending to give astronomy lessons. A literalistic approach would have to deny the modern scientific data showing that the earth revolves around the sun.

However, the writers were intending to report what appeared to their senses, and did so accurately.

As Pope Leo XIII explained:

[T]hey did not seek to penetrate the secrets of nature, but rather described and dealt with things in more or less figurative language, or in terms which were commonly used at the time.... Ordinary speech primarily and properly describes what comes under the senses; and somewhat in the same way the sacred writers ... went by what sensibly appeared (PD 18).

We commonly speak this way. When the weatherman says the sun will rise tomorrow at 6 a.m., we do not accuse him of a great astronomical blunder. He is accurate in his statement because he is not intending to teach about the movement of the sun, but to tell us about what appears to our senses by using common, figurative language. Likewise, the biblical texts cited above that describe the sun's movement around the earth are inerrant. The sacred writers reported without error what they intended to report—not natural science, but what really appeared to the senses.

These principles can be used for demonstrating the inerrancy of other biblical passages that are often accused of being erroneous in light of modern science.

Taking God's Word Seriously

Similarly, when it comes to matters of history, we must consider the writer's intention. If the writer is intending to offer a historical narrative, then the account provides an accurate presentation of what actually occurred in history. But the case is different if the writer is intending to incorporate an allegory or a parable.

For example, Luke 10:29-37 gives the account of Jesus' telling a lawyer the parable of the Good Samaritan. A literalistic interpretation might wrench this parable out of its context and conclude that Luke is reporting a historical event involving an actual Samaritan who helped someone beaten by robbers. However, when this scene is read in context, one recognizes that Luke is simply giving an account of an instance when Jesus told a parable as part of His teaching ministry. We do not need to conclude that there was an actual "Good Samaritan." What we can be sure of, however, is that Jesus really did tell this parable in the way Luke reports it.

Let us return to the account of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Jn. 6:1-14). As mentioned above, some have misinterpreted this passage by saying that Jesus did not multiply loaves and fishes. Rather, they claim that the real "miracle" was that Jesus was able to get the people to share with those who did not have food. They further speculate that the early Christian community invented the part about multiplying loaves and fishes in order to express the deeper miracle of sharing.

In addition to the fact that there is nothing in this passage that would support such an interpretation,² this approach to the Bible simply fails to take God's Word seriously. Since this passage is a historical narrative, we can be certain that it faithfully narrates an actual event in the life of Jesus: His multiplying loaves and fishes to feed the 5,000. It is not a legend arising out of the early Christian community. It is not an exaggerated story based on partial truths. Since the sacred writer intended to narrate an event in Christ's life, the entire narrative in all its parts must be inerrant, communicating truthfully all the author intended to affirm since "all that the inspired authors affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit" (DV 11).

Here we must stress that even the smallest details of a historical narrative are inerrant. Consequently, we know that Jesus multiplied the food from five barley loaves and two fishes and that twelve baskets of bread were left over—just as the narrative tells us. What may appear as mere background information is important because even these details are inspired by God and thus are trustworthy. Besides, if a sacred writer could err on smaller details surrounding Jesus' life, how could he be trusted in reporting larger matters which are much more difficult to believe, such as the Resurrection?

Further, we must keep in mind that historical accuracy of a testimony was important for the Jews (e.g., Susanna's trial in Daniel 13 and the accounts of Jesus' trial before the high priest, in which He could not be condemned because of false testimonies that "did not agree"). Thus, we can expect similar standards for the biblical testimonies to the life of Christ as well as for the historical narratives of the Old Testament.

Contradictions in the Bible?

Some may say that there are contradictions within the Bible itself and conclude that the Bible cannot be one hundred percent inerrant. For example, in Mark 2:26, Jesus says Abiathar was high priest when David ate the bread of the Presence, but 1 Sam. 21:1 says Ahimelech was the priest at the time. On the surface, Jesus seems to be mistaken, because Ahimelech was in fact the high priest at the time of the incident, while Abiathar, his son, was then

an apprentice and soon to be his immediate successor.

However, Jesus was not suffering from memory loss, nor was the inspired sacred writer. Rather, to accurately represent Jesus' intention, Mark uses a Greek construction, also employed in Luke 3:2, that conveys a more general reference to the days of Abiathar's high priesthood that apparently extends beyond the actual time of his tenure. Unfortunately, some translations of Mark 2:26 give the impression that the event took place during the actual tenure of Abiathar's high priesthood.

Jesus refers to Abiathar deliberately and strategically to convict the Pharisees who were, ironically, accusing Him of wrongdoing. Because Abiathar had opposed King David's successor (King Solomon), he was banished, stripped of his priestly status, and his priestly line was thus ended (1 Kings 1:25, 2:26-27, 35). Similarly, because the Pharisees were opposing the ultimate successor of King David (cf. Mt. 1:1; Mk. 11:4-10), Christ was letting them know that their authority in Israel would likewise soon come to an end unless they repented and submitted to Him. The Gospels seem to indicate that the Pharisees heard Jesus' warning on this occasion but responded negatively, resolving shortly thereafter to destroy Him (Mk. 3:1-6; Mt. 12:1-14).

There are dozens of other passages in the Bible that may on the surface appear to be erroneous or contradictory. Many of them can be easily demonstrated as reconcilable, while a few are a little more difficult to understand. But we must keep in mind that God put difficulties in the sacred texts in order to humble us, so that we may trust more in God's inspiration of the Scriptures than in our own ability to study them. Pope Pius XII wrote:

God wished difficulties to be scattered through the Sacred Books inspired by Him, in order that we might be urged to read and scrutinize them more intently, and, experiencing in a salutary manner our own limitations, we might be exercised in due submission of mind (DAS 45).

In the end, the Church calls us to adopt a reverential attitude toward the Scriptures. Saint Augustine never would accuse the sacred writers of the slightest mistake, even in the smallest details. When he came across difficulties in the Bible—difficulties that even his great intellect could not resolve—he did not conclude that there was an error in the Bible. Rather, he humbly accepted the difficult texts as true because he was humble enough to recognize his own limitations in the face of the inspired and inerrant Word of God. In a letter to Saint Jerome, he wrote:

I have learned to hold those books alone of the Scriptures that are now called canonical in such reverence and honor that I do most firmly believe that none of their authors has erred in anything that he has written therein. If I find anything in those writings which seems to be contrary to the truth, I presume that either the codex is inaccurate, or the translator has not followed what was said, or I have not properly understood it.³

¹ Dogmatic Constitution on Sacred Scripture, DV 11.

² This interpretation fails to account for the conclusion of the scene, when the people are so amazed at Jesus' miracle that they want to carry Him off and make Him king (Jn. 6:14-15). Encouraging the people to be generous is hardly an act that would lead to royal enthronement, but some type of miraculous feeding certainly could!

³ Letter of Augustine to Jerome, 82, 1, 3, as found in William A. Jurgens, ed., *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 3 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1979), 4.

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. What is biblical inerrancy? How is biblical inerrancy related to inspiration?
2. Saint Jerome once wrote, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." What does he mean? How can I deepen my knowledge and understanding of Sacred Scripture?
3. How would I explain the Church's teaching on biblical inerrancy to someone who maintains that there are "errors" in Scripture?

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