

Americans of Protestant faith or Protestant upbringing use the Bible in a way that it was never intended to be used.

The New Testament: Witness to the Catholic Faith

By Thomas Storck

■ Any Catholic today who cares about the welfare of Christ's Church is surely aware that in the last fifteen or twenty years millions of Catholics have lost their faith for one reason or another. Though many of these have drifted into some form of secularism or New Age thought, perhaps the greatest number, both here and abroad, have fallen prey to the efforts of evangelical Protestant groups and of pseudo-Christian sects such as the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. And when Catholics do join these Protestant groups or other sects, it is usually due to their susceptibility to arguments based on the Bible, particularly the New Testament. For example, Protestant proselytizers might demand justification for certain Catholic practices in the text of the New Testament. "Where," they might ask, "can you find scriptural warrant for scapulars or the Rosary or prayers for the dead or indulgences?" The list can go on and on. Now in some cases the problem here is that the Catholic being confronted

does not know that there are indeed references in Scripture to the particular belief or practice being challenged. And though this ignorance on the part of many Catholics is obviously not good, the problem goes deeper than this, I think, because it is true that in many cases there are no obvious references in Scripture to much of Catholic faith and morals. The problem lies rather in the kind of use we are to make of the Bible, and I think that the heart of the problem is this: Americans of Protestant faith or Protestant upbringing use the Bible in a way that it was never intended to be used, and as a result they have a hidden advantage over Catholics in such disputes—*unless* Catholics not only know the Bible but know how the Bible is to be used. The Protestant approach to Sacred Scripture, which is familiar to most of us because it is part of American culture, basically consists of testing every Christian belief or practice against the Bible, usually the New Testament, and usually against isolated verses.

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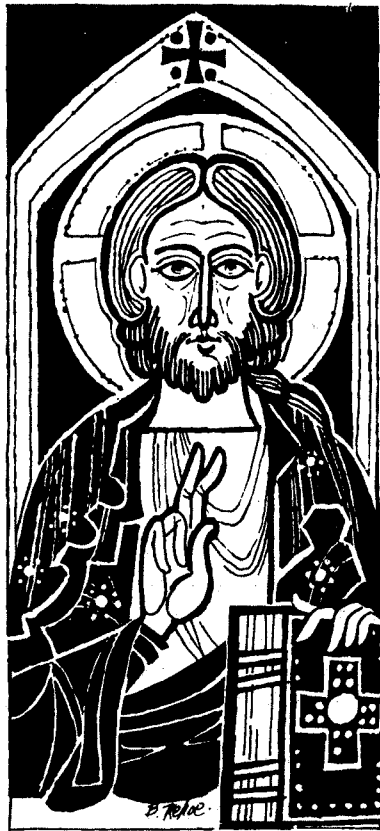
THE NEW TESTAMENT: WITNESS TO THE CATHOLIC FAITH

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And although the application of the method differs with the sophistication of the one applying it, reduced to its simplest form it may be stated as "If the Bible speaks, we speak; if the Bible is silent, we are silent." Thus every doctrinal belief or point of conduct or practice is supposed to be able to be proven by clear warrant of Holy Scripture. This method justifies, for example, the snake handlers of the Appalachian mountains by Mark 16:18, and on the other hand, since instrumental music is never mentioned in the New Testament, is the reason why at least one Protestant sect does not allow such music in its worship services. Now, though these are admittedly extreme examples, still they are indicative of the Protestant approach, an approach which treats the New Testament as something God never intended it to be, namely, as *the* standard or rule of faith and morals, a sort of law-book or complete rule-book for Christians. But if we examine it as history, common sense, and indeed the New Testament itself suggest, we will find that far from being a catchall for favorite Protestant doctrines, the New Testament is a profound and compelling witness for the Catholic faith.

Before beginning, we should first look at what exactly the 27 New Testament books are. First of all, of course, are the four Gospels, chiefly narratives of the ministry and teaching of Jesus Christ; then, the Acts of the Apostles, an extremely valuable account of the early Church; then various letters, mostly written to meet immediate crises or respond to questions; lastly, the Book of Revelation, a work in the apocalyptic genre, a type of literature popular in the first century. Now in the first place, as historical

scholarship shows, we must accept the Gospels and Acts as trustworthy historical works,¹ that is, as telling what historical people really said and did and which are derived from the testimony and accounts of those who took part in those events, even though the Evangelists narrated them "in the manner most suited to satisfy their purpose and their audience's condition" and from "the many elements at hand they reported some, summarized others, and developed still others in accordance with the needs of the various churches."² But despite this selection and arrangement of their material, the Gospels and Acts are genuine accounts of



what Jesus and the Apostles said and did, the work of eyewitnesses or the companions of eyewitnesses, not fabricated stories created by the Church and based only loosely on history.

Having settled this most important matter of the historicity of the New Testament books, we must next ask what these books can tell us. And first we should notice that if the New Testament is meant to be the sort of rule-book or law-book, the sole doctrinal authority for Christians, that Protestants tend to make it, where did the Church find its authority between the time of our Lord's Ascension and the writing of the New Testament, a period of several decades and which included much intense missionary activity on the part of the Church? Immediately before his Ascension into Heaven our Lord had commissioned his Apostles to go throughout the world teaching his message to everyone (Matt. 28:18-20). At this point not one book of the New Testament was in existence. On the Protestant view, how were the Apostles and their companions to know what to teach? Were they supposed to wait until the books of the New Testament came into being so that they would have some standard of faith by which to preach and teach? Obviously not. In fact, our Lord himself told them what the standard or rule of faith was to be. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe *all that I have commanded you . . .*" (Matt. 28:19-20).³ So rather obviously, by the express command of Jesus Christ, it is his oral teaching as preserved by the Apostles which was to be preached throughout the world. There is, at this point, no mention or hint that someday any written work would replace this original rule of faith.

The history and fortunes of the early

Church are chronicled by both Acts and the New Testament epistles, especially those of St. Paul. In all the controversies that from time to time disturbed the first-century believers, many of which controversies were precisely over matters of faith and conduct, what was the standard that was appealed to in matters of faith? Well, here again, the rule of faith that Paul and others pointed to again and again was the Faith itself, that is, the body of teachings handed down from those things Jesus had himself taught and "commanded" before his Ascension and subsequently taught to the new converts. St. Paul, for example, in Rom. 16:17, warns his readers about those who "create dissensions and difficulties, *in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught.*" Likewise in 2 Cor. 11:4 and Gal. 1:8-9, St. Paul tells the churches in those places that the Gospel they have received is not to be replaced by a new Gospel. The important thing about these passages is that Paul does *not* tell these early Catholics that they are to search the Scriptures to find out what the true Gospel is, as a Protestant preacher might tell his flock to do today. No, they already had the true Gospel, even if no book of the New Testament ever came to be written. The letters to the various churches which comprise the bulk of the New Testament were not meant to promulgate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That had already been promulgated by the apostolic preaching. Rather these epistles were written to confirm the churches in their faith, clear up and develop doubtful points, encourage them in the living of that faith, and so on.⁴ And we must remember that when they first received the Faith these newly-converted Catholics received it *orally*. Right from the start oral tradition is thus one of the means of conveying the deposit

of faith. And the equal status of this oral teaching with the written is highlighted by 2 Thess. 2:15, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, *either by word of mouth or by letter.*"⁵

Some Protestants will argue that the guidance of the Holy Spirit took the place of the New Testament during this period, and indeed the guidance of God the Holy Spirit has always been very important for the Church. Jesus himself promised (John 16:13), "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. . . ." But the interesting thing is that, in regard to determining doctrine, the guidance of the Holy Spirit on the early Church was not on each individual believer, but was exercised through the Apostles, and especially through Peter, the head of the apostolic band. Let us examine some of the instances where Peter acts under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In the very first chapter of Acts, Peter takes the lead in the matter of the selection of someone to replace Judas, and in the midst of the community of believers, prays and supervises the casting of lots by which Matthias was selected. Though the Holy Spirit is not specifically mentioned as guiding the proceedings, nevertheless it is by prayer that the assembly proceeds, and it is by an intertwining of the office and leadership of Peter with direct divine guidance that the Church acts.

Peter interprets the Spirit

The next example of the exercise of Peter's office is both more important and more dramatic. The question of whether gentiles had to submit to circumcision

and obey the law of Moses in order to enter the Church first arises in chapter 10 of Acts. Although in this instance, the case of Cornelius the centurion, the will of God is manifested directly by the action of the Holy Spirit, it is again Peter who perceives and interprets it. But in fact some continued to dissent from Peter's interpretation of the will of God, and the matter is again raised in chapter 15. On this occasion a formal council is convened in Jerusalem, and it is Peter and then St. James, first bishop of Jerusalem, who speak authoritatively. This question is not settled by everyone going to his Bible and finding proof texts, nor by each one praying and testifying what he himself thinks the Holy Spirit is saying. Instead, after Peter gives his judgment, "all the assembly kept silence" (15:12) and listened to Paul recount his missionary experiences among the gentiles. Then St. James suggests the text of the decree which the council is to issue, and "it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church" to send men to the various churches with their decision. And note carefully how the actual decree begins, "*For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. . . .*" (15:28)! The guidance of the Holy Spirit is exercised in and through the hierarchy meeting together, with the leader of the Apostles taking the principal role! This is how the New Testament Church in fact operated. Nowhere in the Acts of the Apostles do we see the early Church relying on individual testimonies as to the guidance of the Holy Spirit on matters of doctrine nor treating Scripture as the sole source for doctrine as Protestants do, and nowhere among the epistles do we see Paul or any of the other writers recommending either of these practices.

On the question of Peter's role in the

New Testament Church, it might be well to point out, moreover, that there are more than one or a few New Testament passages which ratify and confirm Catholic teaching on this point. Sometimes Protestants seem to think that we Catholics base our article of faith that Peter was the first vicar of Jesus Christ simply on Matt. 16:18, the great text where our Lord confers the primacy on that apostle. And although this is a very impressive text, and hard to explain on any but the Catholic interpretation, even here I would claim that were it not that the leadership of Peter is fully confirmed by the rest of the New Testament, i.e., by the actual life of the New Testament Church, we might be in some doubt as to the text's meaning. But in fact, coupled with the conferral of leadership on Peter is the fact that Peter actually exercises that author-

ity. For example, Jesus, at the Last Supper, gives Peter the command to "strengthen your brethren" in the confusing period during and after the crucifixion (Luke 22:32); after Christ's resurrection and ascension it is Peter who takes the lead to enroll a new apostle in place of Judas (Acts 1:15-25); it is Peter who speaks to the crowd on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40); it is Peter who deals so firmly with Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5 of Acts; it is Peter's shadow which the sick hoped would fall on them so they might be cured (Acts 5:15); it is Peter who brings peace to the gathering at Jerusalem called to decide about the obligation of gentile converts to keep the Mosaic law (Acts 15:7-12). In all the lists of the Apostles (Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:13-16; Acts 1:13) Peter is named first. When Jesus first meets Peter he

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changes his name from Simon to Rock (i.e., Cephas or Peter) (John 1:42). In the light of all this, *and together with* the solemn commission to Peter in Matt. 16:18-19, can anyone doubt but that Peter, and Peter alone, was given a very special office in the Church? What exactly that office was it is impossible to determine from the text of the New Testament itself. But in the ongoing life of the Church, which was actually lived by the New Testament Christians and their successors, the nature of that office becomes clearer and clearer. It was never meant to be settled simply by appeal to the New Testament text. The scriptural text confirms the Catholic view, but it is in the ongoing life and teaching of the Church that the specifics of Peter's office and functions must be found.

Now it is true that in the New Testament the Scriptures, meaning there the Old Testament, are used as an important source. But it is a source of prophecy and witness to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. It is not the source and au-

thority for teaching of faith and morals. For example, in the sermon that Peter preached on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40), he quoted extensively from the Old Testament. But it is in testimony to the coming of Jesus Christ to fulfill the Old Law. Similarly, in Acts 17:2, Paul is described as arguing with the Jews of Thessalonica "from the scriptures" of the necessity for the death and resurrection of Christ. And later he went to Beroea where the Jews diligently began "examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so," i.e., whether the *facts* of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were prophesied by the Old Testament (Acts 17:11). Naturally the Old Testament had to be examined to see whether Jesus Christ was the Messiah who was to come, but this is a far cry from using the biblical texts, either individually or collectively, as *the* source of Christian doctrine.

Moreover, if Christ himself stated that his oral commands were to be the basis of the new faith to be preached throughout the world (Matthew 28:20), why does anyone suppose that *all* of those oral commands were in fact written down somewhere in the New Testament? We know that much of what Jesus did was never recorded (John 21:25), and we know that sayings and deeds of Jesus circulated in the early Church that are not mentioned in the Gospels (see, e.g., Acts 20:35 and 1 Cor. 15:6). There is nowhere the least hint or suggestion that the New Testament is to play the role that Protestantism has assigned to it, no notion that it was to be a complete handbook of faith and morals or the final authority for determining doctrine.

Moreover, when the New Testament and Protestant practice are both looked at carefully, it will be found that Protes-

tants are very selective in their use even of isolated texts. For example, the discourse on the Eucharist in John 6:32-58, in which Jesus boldly tells his followers that they would have to eat his flesh and drink his blood, hardly fits in with Protestant denials of transubstantiation. And when many of our Lord's followers balked at his frank words about eating his flesh (6:51), instead of saying that of course he meant it only symbolically, Jesus repeated it at greater length (6:53-58), even though this caused "many of his disciples" to leave him (6:66). If the Eucharist were merely a symbol, as most Protestants believe, Christ could easily have reassured his scandalized disciples in order to prevent their leaving him.

And similarly, though it is of course true that St. Paul teaches that men are justified by faith (Rom. 3:19-4:21; Gal.

3:7; 3:23-29; Eph. 2:8, and elsewhere), how are we to deal with the equally plain statement in the epistle of James, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (2:24)? (See 2:14-2:26.) Now clearly any attempt to pit Paul against James is silly; we must be able to make sense of both teachings. And the Catholic Church does just that. Protestants naturally believe that they do full justice to St. Paul's teaching, but what do they make of James? Martin Luther, for one, dealt straightforwardly with James—he attempted to excise the book from the New Testament! The usual Protestant interpretation of the Pauline texts does not allow them to give full weight to St. James. Only if the words of Paul can (without violence) bear a different meaning from that commonly given by Protestants, can we make sense of *both* Paul and James.⁶

Another matter mentioned more than once in the New Testament is confession of sins. At the end of John's Gospel, after his resurrection, Jesus says to the Apostles, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:22-23). Now, if we believe that Jesus actually spoke these words and, being God, was able to confer that power, do we ever see it exercised in the New Testament Church or even mentioned? In the letter of James we find the following, "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." Now it is true that there is by no means a clear reference here to the Catholic practice of confession of sins to a priest. Some may perhaps see nothing here but a general recommendation to confess to one another in the local Church. But, given that at the end of John's Gospel Jesus specifically gave



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power to some in his Church to forgive sins, is it foolish to see here an allusion to the practice of confession? I am aware, of course, that for a few centuries after the writing of the New Testament it was common to make public confession to the congregation of one's sins, coupled with later sacramental absolution by a priest. But my point here is that in the Gospel of John Jesus clearly gives the Apostles power to forgive sins; later there is an allusion to confession of sin. While this does not amount to a proof, might we not see that something more was going on in the apostolic Church than exists among Protestants? Who among them claims power to forgive sins? Of course, the New Testament does not say whether the power that Jesus conferred on the Apostles was handed down to later generations after their death, but why should we expect it to say so? Unless we have the notion (not supported by any text of Scripture), that *all* doctrine is stated somewhere in the Bible, we can hardly expect the New Testament Christians to have written down everything, since so much of what they believed and did was simply a part of the life of the Church. The Church was an ongoing reality with its own doctrine and practices all through the period of the composition of the New Testament. Naturally, after the death of the Apostles this ongoing reality of the Church simply continued, nor did these disciples of the Apostles ever feel the need to subject all the life of God's Church to the kind of "proofs" from the New Testament that Protestants expect. They were living in the Church founded by Jesus Christ, developed by the Apostles under the Holy Spirit's guidance, and which was itself the "pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). They did not need the New Testament to tell them what their faith

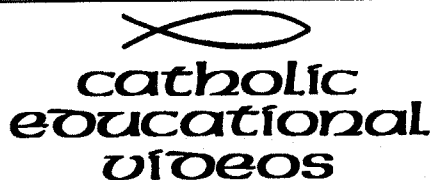
should be, for they had been believing and living it from its first preaching by the Apostles.

What Protestants ignore or forget is that throughout the period of the composition of the New Testament the Church already existed, already had a life of worship, preaching and organization. This life is presupposed in the New Testament, but not necessarily set out in detail. In fact, there was no need to set it out in detail because the next generation of Christians was expected to learn about these practices of the Faith from participating in the ongoing life of the Church, the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ. In order for a Protestant to understand how Catholics view the connection between the New Testament and the rule of faith, it requires a shift in perspective, from the perspective of looking at the New Testament as the only divine source of rules for Christian doctrine and living to seeing how the Christians of the New Testament Church regarded it. They never expected us to get all of our Christianity by induction from the text of the New Testament. For, as I said above, the early Church never gives the slightest hint that the Protestant way is the correct way of using the Bible.

Although in theory Protestants base their beliefs and practices on New Testament texts, in fact there is more than one matter in which they commonly follow not a clear command of the New Testament, but the continuing practice of the Catholic Church. The clearest of these is the question of Sunday observance. Now the New Testament itself teaches (Heb. 10:25) that Christians should meet together for religious purposes, but nowhere does it say on what day of the week this should occur. It is true that there are a few references to groups of Christians

meeting on the Lord's Day, i.e., the first day of the week or our Sunday (Acts, 20: 7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2), but this hardly constitutes a clear command or even definite evidence that the Apostles kept Sunday as their weekly holy day. Nevertheless, almost all Protestants keep Sunday, sometimes even applying to the Christian Sunday the prescriptions of the Old Testament Mosaic Sabbath Law. But what in fact Protestants have done here is simply to continue the practice that obtained in the Catholic Church at the time of their separation from it. Evidently at the command of the Apostles the weekly holy day had been moved from Saturday to Sunday, the ongoing life of the Church had hallowed this observance among Christians, and the first Protestants simply retained the practice.

In this matter of Sunday observance, moreover, we can easily see an example of a proper use of the New Testament. The text of the New Testament does not give us a command as to when we should meet together for religious rites, instead it records in passing the practice of the apostolic Church. The practice came first; the New Testament references to it were second and merely in passing. These references simply record the practice of the apostolic Church, acting under the authority Jesus gave to Peter and the other Apostles. If Protestants really were consistent in their professed belief in following only the clear commands of Holy Scripture, then, like the Seventh Day Adventists and a few other groups, they would observe Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, as their weekly holy day. After all, the commands of Almighty God to keep holy the *Sabbath*, the seventh day, are clear in the Bible and nowhere is the observance of the first day plainly substituted for it.⁷



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There are many other doctrines and practices in the life of the Church that are like the question of Sunday observance. Though sometimes alluded to in the New Testament, they are rarely spelled out because they were simply part of the ongoing life of the Christian body, and simply accepted like everything else. Sometimes they are mentioned in passing in Acts or in one of the epistles, sometimes they are presupposed, sometimes there is simply no reference to them. But why should we expect that there always will be such a reference to every doctrine or practice of the Church? As I have said more than once, nowhere is there the slightest suggestion that the role of the New Testament in Christian belief requires that every Christian doctrine and practice be plainly sanctioned by its text.

After this discussion of where the rule of Christian faith and conduct is *not* to be found, I wish to briefly point toward where such a rule *is* to be found. Irenaeus (A.D. 130-200), who had lived in both Asia Minor and Gaul (France) and who was just one generation removed from John the Apostle, concerned with this very question of how to discover the authentic apostolic tradition, wrote, that "every church, that is, the faithful everywhere, must needs agree with the church at Rome; for in her the apostolic tradition has ever been preserved by the faithful from all parts of the world."⁸ It is by adhering to the teaching of the Church of Rome that we adhere to the original commands which our Lord gave orally to his disciples, and which were developed by his guidance of God the Holy Spirit in the Apostolic Age. So by clinging to this doctrine, to *all* teachings of the Catholic Church, we can be sure that we are holding the deposit of Faith given by Jesus Christ, preserved and developed by the

Holy Spirit, preached by the Apostles, lived by the New Testament Church, and given to us and our children to be kept pure and intact until the Lord returns. ■

¹ A few works on this subject include Cornelius Hagerty, *The Authenticity of Sacred Scripture*; Domenico Grasso, *The Problem of Christ*; Arnold Lunn, *The Third Day*; Maisie Ward, *The Authenticity of the Gospels*; F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents, Are they Reliable?*; C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel*.

² *The Historicity of the Gospels, Instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission* (April 21, 1964), Boston: St. Paul Editions, n.d., p. 7.

³ All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, 1966. I have freely added emphasis to these quotes to make particular points.

⁴ Divine public revelation continued throughout the apostolic period and did not cease until the death of the last apostle, St. John, and of course the Apostles did not make use of the New Testament writings to promulgate such public revelation. But the point is that this was not the *only* source for revelation. The oral teaching of our Lord, the oral preaching of the Apostles, and the writings of the Apostles all contained revelation. See the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 7-10.

⁵ Moreover, there is the large question of how we can know which of the many letters and other documents produced in the early Church are in fact inspired by God? Catholics can know easily—God's authoritative Church tells us. Protestants have mostly followed the example of the Catholic Church, but without a clear reason.

⁶ As a matter of fact, many other passages from Paul himself show that the common Protestant interpretation of justification by faith is erroneous. For Paul, when writing to believers—that is, to those who already had faith—states plainly that bad conduct would keep them out of Heaven. See, for example, 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21 and 6:7-8. This hardly squares with the Protestant teaching that works have no bearing on whether a man attains salvation.

⁷ A Seventh Day Adventist spokesman wrote, "As Seventh-day Adventists have never been able to find a single text in the Bible suggesting that Christ authorized a change of the Sabbath from the seventh day of the week to the first, they say, 'What else can a true Christian do but follow the clear teaching of the Word?'" Leo Rosten, ed., *Religions in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963) p. 178.

⁸ *Against the Heresies*, 3, 1.