

*A proper exegesis of Sacred Scripture
will always agree with
the teaching of the Catholic Church*

Is the Bible Protestant?

By Thomas Storck

■ It seems to be confidently assumed by nearly all Protestants that the Bible is firmly in their camp. Whatever Catholics may find in the dusty avenues of tradition and the little-known writings of the Fathers of the Church, Scripture at least is theirs. After all, did not Martin Luther base his revolt against the Church of Rome solely on the Bible? Thus Holy Writ teaches (it is asserted) justification by faith, the total depravity of man, the congregational mode of church governance and denies the perpetual virginity of our Blessed Lady. Unfortunately for Protestants, not one of the above statements is true. Rather Holy Scripture is a thoroughly Catholic book, and if we examine a few of the major Protestant doctrines, we will not find them in the pages of the Bible. In this article, then, I will point out this lack of support from Scripture, and show instead how the Bible supports, or at least points toward, Catholic truth in every case.

Before beginning, however, let me say just a word about the prior question of the role of Holy Scripture in establishing Christian doc-

trine. Protestants, of course, claim to base their beliefs on Scripture alone; *sola scriptura*, by Scripture alone, is one of the cardinal points of nearly all Protestants.¹ However, there is not one passage in the Bible which justifies such a stance. The passage most commonly appealed to, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, states that all Scripture is inspired, but never says that only Scripture is inspired. Nowhere else is there even a hint that the written Bible is to be the only authority or rule of faith for the Church. In fact, if one looks at such texts as Matthew 28:19-20, Romans 16:17, 2 Corinthians 11:4, Galatians 1:8-9, 1 Thessalonians 4:1 or 2 Thessalonians 2:15, he will see that it was the Gospel as preached by the Apostles, that is, the Faith as taught by the Church, which is the authority appealed to. It was this Faith that the newly-converted gentiles were exhorted not to depart from. Logically, then, Protestants cannot reasonably appeal to the text of Holy Scripture against the teaching of the Catholic Church. But since they constantly do make this appeal, and since they feel that in doing so they are pointing out contradictions be-

tween the teaching of the Church and the teaching of Scripture, it behooves us to look at the favorite doctrines of Protestants to see whether their appeal to the biblical text, however illogically made, does support them.

Justification by faith

Along with *sola scriptura, sola fide* (by faith alone) is one of the foundational doctrines of Protestantism. And at first glance, this doctrine does seem to find foundation in Scripture, because there are many passages where St. Paul seems to teach this. But this is only because Protestants focus on certain isolated passages and fail to understand St. Paul's admittedly difficult style of writing.²

Paul's epistle to the Romans is his great treatise on the question of justification. In it one can find verses that seem to teach that all a Christian need do is turn to the Lord with his heart and make confession of his belief and trust, and he will be saved. Thus we have such Evangelical Protestant devices as the so-called sinner's prayer, a short prayer in which one acknowledges his sinfulness, the fact of Christ's substitutionary death, and places his hope for salvation in Christ alone. Thereafter, it is held by many Protestants, the salvation of the person sincerely praying such a prayer is infallibly guaranteed. He has "eternal security."

Now what did St. Paul write that could lead one to this erroneous opinion? Protestants appeal to such passages as these:

... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. (Romans 10:9-10)

Or,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)³

The problem with this interpretation is that it conflicts with explicit statements made both by our Lord and St. Paul, again and again, that make it clear these verses could not possibly mean what Protestants think they do. Here are just a few of these statements.

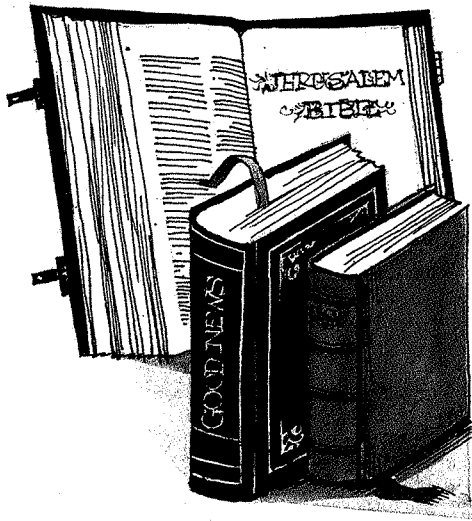
Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)

For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done. (Matthew 16:27)

For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. (Romans 2:6-8)⁴

As we just saw, St. Paul himself makes it very clear that we will be judged by our works (Romans 2:6-8), that those who persist in doing certain evil acts cannot be saved (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21), and that only if we continue in faith and charity can we find salvation (Romans 11:22, Colossians 1:21-23). Does Paul then contradict himself? No, for it is true that we do not earn our salvation, it is a gift of God.

No deed of any human person could possibly have reconciled the human race, or even one human sinner, with God. If a grave sinner who has led a life of continual sin makes a good confession and receives absolution and then immediately dies, whence does he obtain salvation? What good work has he done that earns him salvation? Clearly none; he has obtained his salvation through the merciful grace of God in the sacrament of Penance. This instance shows most clearly that it is by the blood of Christ only that anyone can be saved. But if this same person does not die immediately after his confession, he must thereafter avoid offending God seriously if he hopes to be saved. Yet in neither case is it his works that earn him salvation. That comes



from God alone. So although Paul teaches both that we will be judged by our works and in other places that we are saved by faith, not works, these two truths harmonize perfectly. In the Protestant reading of Scripture, inconvenient passages must be ignored or explained away, but under the guidance of the Church, we see how salvation by faith means not that our works do not matter, but rather that our works could not earn our way into Heaven. Our evil deeds can indeed prevent us from being saved, but no good deed of ours could ever save us—that is the work of the salvific death of Christ. And in the case I instanced above, that of a continual sinner who makes a good confession and immediately dies afterwards, the Catholic doctrine is brought out especially clearly, as such a person has no opportunity to do anything to earn salvation.⁵

The total depravity of man

Another fundamental Protestant doctrine is that of the total depravity of mankind, that is, that at the fall of Adam man's nature was not only wounded or weakened, but entirely vitiated. Here are a few typical classical Protestant expressions of this doctrine.

Original sin (inherited sin) is the total corruption of our whole human nature.⁶

Original sin...is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered

of the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil. . . .⁷

In contrast to that, the Catholic Church teaches a less radical version of the fall of man. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, by "original sin . . . human nature has not been totally corrupted: it is wounded in the natural powers proper to it; subject to ignorance, suffering, and the dominion of death; and inclined to sin . . ." (CCC 405). What does Holy Scripture teach? With which position does it agree?

Protestants quote such passages as Psalm 14:3, "They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one," or Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me," or Isaiah 64:6, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment,"⁸ or Romans 7:18, "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh."⁹

What of these texts? What do they teach? Although much could be said here, the important points to remember are first, that denunciations of man's sinfulness and evil conduct need not imply the total corruption of man's nature, and secondly, none of these texts expresses itself with sufficient precision to use as an argument for the doctrine of total depravity. And, as in the other cases, when we have a text that does express itself clearly for the Catholic point of view, then we must interpret the texts which Protestants appeal to in a sense different from the Protestant manner. And we do have such a text, namely Romans 2:12-16, which runs:

All who have sinned without the [Mosaic] law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When the Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law

to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

This great passage is the chief biblical witness to the existence of the natural law, "written on [men's] hearts." But if this is true, if not only can sinful man recognize the law, but sometimes even obey it—"When the Gentiles . . . do by nature what the law requires," and their consciences perhaps "excuse" them on the day of judgment—then we can hardly say that man is totally corrupted and incapable of any good deeds. Of course, one cannot deny that, as the Catechism says, man is "inclined to sin," but this is a long way from saying that this evil inclination is from man's nature; rather it is from the wounding and weakening of his nature. As the Baltimore Catechism so lucidly puts it, "Although we have a strong inclination to evil as a result of original sin, our nature is not evil in itself; it can perform some good actions in the natural order without the aid of grace."¹⁰

As in so many other cases, Protestants take rhetoric as if meant to be interpreted with theological precision. But we cannot let ourselves be carried away and go beyond the exact meaning of the Scriptural text. We may and ought to denounce man's sins with vigor, but this says nothing about their precise source within man's being. St. Paul's discussion, on the other hand, of the possibility of gentiles recognizing and sometimes keeping the natural law, makes it clear that he could not have believed that original sin entirely vitiated human nature. Moreover, the Catholic doctrine on the fall and its effects on man's nature harmonize perfectly with observed facts: there is indeed much evil in the world, but there are acts of goodness too, great achievements, beauty and knowledge obtained or produced by sinful men. The Protestant doc-

trine of total depravity is difficult to reconcile with human life and civilization.

The nature and government of the Church

The question of the Church concerns chiefly two points: what exactly is the Church of Jesus Christ, and how is it to be governed? The first part of this question chiefly concerns whether the Church is visible or invisible.

Although Protestants have hundreds of organizations which often call themselves churches, for the most part they do not claim to be the Church, that is the Church founded by Jesus Christ. They are conceived as man-made institutions, for the real church, according to most Protestants, is invisible and consists of all who truly believe in Jesus Christ: "the Church is invisible, since no man can look into another's heart and see whether he believes."¹¹ But does this square with the New Testament picture of the Church?

In the New Testament we see the Church founded by Christ and governed by the Apostles as a visible body, with a visible rite required to become a member (baptism), appointed officials and authority to teach and even to punish erring members.¹² The Apostles do not seem to have distinguished between the outward and visible Church and an inward and invisible church. Although there are certainly many examples in the New Testament of members of the Church behaving badly, it is not suggested that they are not part of the Church. Moreover, if the Church were really invisible, it would be hard to see how she could have designated officials. At most they would be officials of some man-made organization. Let us turn then to the second part of this question, how the Church is to be governed, and briefly look at the New Testament's teaching on this subject.

When we move to the subject of whether and what the New Testament teaches on the organization or government of the Church, we

move into an area in which even Protestants differ profoundly among themselves; Luther retained bishops, but without recognizing them as of divine institution; Calvin taught a complex system of government with ruling elders, teaching elders, deacons, sessions, presbyteries; other Protestants hold that each congregation is self-governing. But in spite of their many disagreements, they all tend to hold one error: that the New Testament gives us a complete and clear pattern of church government.

It is obvious that at first the Apostles ruled the Church. It is also clear that they appointed lesser officials, deacons (Acts 6:1-6) and "elders" or presbyters as well as bishops.¹³ Who exactly were these officials and what powers did they have? Although there are hints in the New Testament, there is no authoritative statement there of how the Church should be governed. And this is exactly what a Catholic should expect. For the Church of course came before the New Testament, and all the while the New Testament was being written the Church was worshipping, teaching, evangelizing. There was no need to specify every thing in writing, for no one ever dreamed that the New Testament was supposed to take the place of the living Church and her tradition.¹⁴ The way to know what offices and officials Jesus Christ intended his Church to have is to look at that Church as soon as she is sufficiently revealed by the light of history. And if we do so, we see bishops, presbyters (priests) and deacons, and even the See of Rome as holding a special place, a place the meaning of which becomes clearer as time goes on. Not until the First Vatican Council in 1870 would the meaning of the primacy given to Peter and the Roman See become entirely clear, but it was sufficiently clear even in the early days of the Church.¹⁵

The perpetual virginity of our Lady

Another point on which Protestants as-

sume that Holy Scripture and the teaching of the Catholic Church are in conflict concerns the perpetual virginity of our Blessed Lady. Most Protestants take it for granted that the New Testament asserts definitely that Mary and Joseph had normal marital relations after the birth of our Lord and even had other children. What do the New Testament texts assert? That Jesus Christ had brothers and sisters by Mary and Joseph, or that Jesus was the only son of Mary and perhaps even that Mary was a perpetual virgin? In fact, there is one series of texts which, taken by itself, might lead a reader to believe that Mary had other children with Joseph after the birth of Jesus, but another text which makes this interpretation impossible. Let us consider first those texts which seem to indicate that Mary had other children.

The first one is Matthew 1:24-25, which reads "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus." Now if this verse were all that we had on the subject, I concede that it would strongly imply, if not prove, that Mary and Joseph lived an ordinary married life after the birth of Christ. However, this verse need not bear this interpretation, and in view of the other text which we will look at presently, it cannot. For the word until, although it often means that the action spoken of will take place after the conditional event, does not always mean this. Consider the sentence, "I will be faithful to you until I return." This of course does not mean that the speaker will then become unfaithful after his return, just that his thought is focusing only on a certain period of time.

Next, Luke 2:7a, which reads "And she gave birth to her first-born son." Although again, this might incline us to suspect that Mary had other sons, in fact it is referring to the legal status of first-born sons in the Mosaic Law.

There are several references to “bothers” and “sisters” of Jesus. They are mentioned in Matthew 12:46-48, 13:55-56, Mark 3:31-32, 6:3, Luke 8:19-20, John 2:12, 7:3, 20:17 (this verse may be referring to the Apostles, however), Acts 1:14, 1 Corinthians 9:5 and Galatians 1:19. In two of the texts their names are specified as “James and Joseph and Simon and Judas” (Matthew 13:55) or “James and Joses and Judas and Simon” (Mark 6:3).

In the first place, we must note that sometimes the Hebrew and Greek words denoting brother in the proper sense could also mean cousin or other relative; cf. Genesis 14:14, 29:12, Leviticus 10:4, etc. This usage is not unknown today, in the sense that sometimes brother is used more widely than simply the children of the same parents. But more conclusively, two of these same four individuals, James and Joseph (Joses) are specifically identified in Mark 15:40-41 as being the sons of another Mary, often called Mary of Cleopas.

In this connection, we should note the statements of Hegesippus, an early Catholic writer from Palestine who lived during most of the second century. Although his writings are lost, Eusebius records much of what he wrote. Hegesippus interviewed descendants of our Lord’s relatives, and gave us much information on these four “brethren” of the Lord. He states that these four individuals were not half-brothers of Jesus Christ, but rather related to him in various other ways.¹⁶ It is clear then that we cannot say that the New Testament definitely asserts that Mary had other children after Jesus, even if a few of the passages could be interpreted in that way.

Next let us look at the passage which teaches the opposite, namely, that Mary intended not to have normal marital relations and therefore was probably vowed to virginity before her marriage to Joseph. The text here is Luke 1:34, “And Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I have no husband?’” Literally: “since a man I know not.”

In the Protestant reading of Scripture, inconvenient passages must be ignored or explained away, but under the guidance of the Church, we see how salvation by faith means not that our works do not matter, but rather that our works could not earn our way into Heaven. Our evil deeds can indeed prevent us from being saved, but no good deed of ours could ever save us—that is the work of the salvific death of Christ.

This, part of the dialog between Mary and the Archangel Gabriel, is difficult to understand on any other interpretation than that Mary had vowed virginity. For ordinarily a young woman on the eve of her marriage would not be surprised or disturbed on being told that she was to become the mother of a son. Mary, note, does not express surprise at the prophecies that Gabriel utters about her son, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High,” etc. (1:32-33), but only about the question of the child’s conception.

Moreover, Mary does not reply as she does because Joseph had not yet taken her as his wife and thus she was still a virgin, for Gabriel’s words refer to the future, “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son” (1:31). It is true that she speaks of the present, “a man I know not,” but the prophecy did not require her to have already conceived a son or to conceive a son at any particular time, only that she will do so. Mary’s words then may be taken as absolute, i.e., as a sign that in her mind she saw a contradiction between herself and motherhood. Had Mary been planning an ordinary marital relationship with Joseph, there is nothing in Gabriel’s words that should have disturbed her as regards the mere fact that she would conceive a son.

It is also suggestive that at his death, Jesus entrusts his mother to the care of one of his apostles, John (John 19:26-27). If Mary had had other children, this seems like an unusual arrangement. I grant though, that not too much can be read into this, since other explanations are possible, and since our Lady was not entrusted to the keeping of her nephews or nieces, although she apparently had some of those.

The texts that seemingly indicate Mary's having borne other children or that Joseph and Mary began normal marital relations after the birth of Jesus either do not mean this or can be explained otherwise. On the other hand, Luke 1:34 is hard to interpret in any other way than as referring to a vow or intention of perpetual virginity on the part of Mary.

A proper exegesis of Sacred Scripture will always agree with the teaching of the Catholic Church. But how laborious to subject every doctrine, every moral teaching, to such an investigation! And how prone to error, since, as experience has revealed many times over, it is frequently hard, because of man's pride, ignorance and stubbornness, to obtain agreement. As Msgr. Ronald Knox said in regard to divorce, if you set a committee of theologians to examine the Scriptural texts "it is fairly certain that you will be left with a majority and a minority report."¹⁷ So in his mercy, Jesus Christ has not left us with simply a written text, subject to interpretation and misinterpretation, but also with the Sacred Tradition of the Church and with the Magisterium as guide and interpreter of both Scripture and Tradition. For this, as well as for the many other graces and privileges of being Catholic, we ought everyday to thank Almighty God.

Today Christ's true Church is passing through very difficult times. But although there is much confusion among Catholics and much that can puzzle believers, we can rest confidently in "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Even if we

cannot at present satisfactorily explain every difficulty that arises, we know that God will never abandon his Church. We therefore ought never to abandon her either, but instead say with Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). ■

Notes

¹ I say "nearly all Protestants," because some Anglicans, especially High-Church or so-called Anglo-Catholics, have sometimes advocated reliance on tradition and reason along with Scripture. This despite the clear statement in their Articles of Religion (the Thirty-Nine Articles) that "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation" (Article Six). Presently, however, the Anglican Communion is in such a state of theological collapse that it is hard to say what it does or does not believe.

² St. Peter himself (2 Peter 3:16) gave the following warning about Paul's letters: "There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction. . . ."

³ Other passages that could be alleged (wrongly) to teach this doctrine include Mark 16:16; Acts 16:31; Romans 1:17, 3:20, 3:28, 5:1, 8:1, 8:38-39; Galatians 2:16, 3:10-14.

⁴ Other passages that clearly teach this doctrine include Matthew 10:22b, 24:13, 25:31-46; Mark 10:17-19, 13:13b; Romans 11:22; Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 1:21-23.

⁵ This would also be true if a grave sinner who had never been baptized repented and was baptized and died immediately afterwards.

⁶ *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia, c. 1943) p. 87.

⁷ Anglican Articles of Religion, Article Nine.

⁸ In the King James (Authorized) Version, this verse is rendered more colorfully as, "We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags," (in Douay-Rheims-Challoner

this last is “our justices as the rag of a menstruous woman.”).

⁹ Other passages that are cited by Protestants include Romans 3:11-18 and Ephesians 2:1-3.

¹⁰ *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine: Revised Edition of the Baltimore Catechism* (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, c. 1941, 1949) p. 46, question 60 (d).

¹¹ *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism*, p. 132.

¹² For an example of the New Testament Church teaching with authority, see Acts 15:1-35; for an example of punishment (perhaps a kind of excommunication), see 1 Corinthians 5:1-5.

¹³ Elders (presbyters) are mentioned in Acts 11:30, 14:23, chap. 15, 16:4 20:17 and 28, 1 Timothy 5:17 and Titus 1:5-7, James 5:14 and 1 Peter 5:1. Bishops are mentioned in Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1 and Titus 1:7. In this latter passage bishop seems to mean the same as elder (presbyter). This fact has led most Catholic commentators to conclude that during the lifetime of the Apostles the terms elder (presbyter or priest) and bishop were used more or less interchangeably, but after the Apostles died those who received the fullness of Holy Orders received the latter name to distinguish them from presbyters. By the time of St. Ignatius of Antioch (died 110 A.D.), the terms bishop, presbyter (priest) and deacon in our current sense would seem to have been the terms commonly employed, for Ignatius uses them continually.

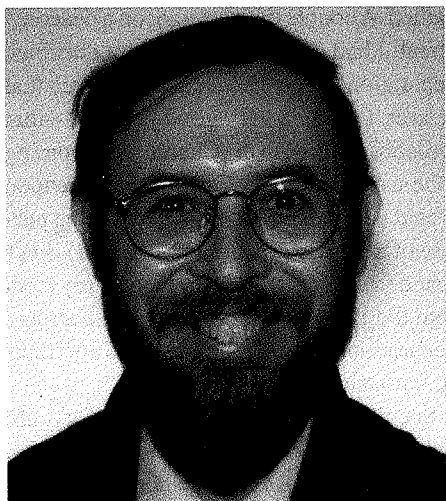
¹⁴ See 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

¹⁵ A little noticed passage in Paul’s letter to the Romans, (16:16), contains this highly suggestive greeting to the Roman church, “All the churches of Christ greet you.” Nowhere else in the New Testament do all the churches salute another local church. And of course there are many references to the primacy of Peter in other places: For example, see Matthew 16:17-19 for the solemn conferral of the primacy; for the recognition of his leadership among the Apostles, see Luke 22:32, Acts 1:15-25, 2:14-40, 5:15, chap 15. 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 meets Peter he changes his name from Simon to Rock (i.e., Cephas or Peter) (John 1:42).

Among the early Patristic writings, probably the clearest statement of the primacy of the Roman See is that by St. Irenaeus, who died shortly after 200 A.D.: “For this church has a position of leadership and authority; and therefore 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” (*Adversus Haereses*, III, 1).

¹⁶ Cf. Ferdinand Prat, *Jesus Christ, His Life, His Teaching, and His Work* (Milwaukee: Bruce, c. 1950), volume I, pp. 500-506.

¹⁷ *The Belief of Catholics* (Garden City : Image, 1958) p. 109.



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