

# Scripture and Tradition

ST. VINCENT OF LÉRINS, D. 450?

Think back on the days of old,  
think over the years, down the ages.  
Question your father, let him explain to you,  
your elders, and let them tell you! DEUTERONOMY 32:7

St. Vincent, a fifth-century monk and scholar, set out to devise a general rule to distinguish Christian truth from heresy. So he studied Scripture, the fathers of the church, and the general councils. He summarized his findings in a little book, the *Commonitory or Reminder*. In the following selections from that book, he reminds us that in order to interpret Scripture correctly we need the guidance of the church. We must understand the Bible in the context of the living Tradition, which the Holy Spirit communicates to us in the doctrine, life and worship of the church.

**I** have often inquired most earnestly and attentively from very many experts in sanctity and learning, how and by what definite and universal rule I might distinguish the truth of the Catholic faith from the falsity of heretical perversion. And I have always received an answer of this kind from almost all of them—that whether I or anyone else wished to detect the frauds of newly rising heretics, to avoid their snares, and to remain secure and whole in the sound faith, one ought with the Lord's help

*to fortify one's faith in a twofold manner: first, by the authority of the divine law, and secondly, by the tradition of the Catholic Church.*

*Here perhaps someone will ask, "Since the canon of Scripture is complete and is in itself sufficient and more than sufficient on all points, what need is there to join to it the authority of ecclesiastical interpretation?" The answer of course is that, owing to the very depth of Holy Scripture itself, all do not receive it in one and the same sense. But one in one way and another in another interpret the declarations of the same writer, so that it seems possible to elicit from it as many opinions as there are men. For Novatian expounds it one way, . . . . Donatus, another, . . . . and quite lately Nestorius another. So it is most necessary on account of the great intricacies of such various errors that the rule for the interpretation of the Prophets and Apostles should be laid down in accordance with the standard of the ecclesiastical and Catholic understanding of them.*

*Also in the Catholic Church itself we take great care that we hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.*

*For that is truly and properly 'Catholic,' as the very force and meaning of the word show, which comprehends everything almost universally. And we shall observe this rule if we follow universality, antiquity, consent. We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith to be true which the whole church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is plain that our ancestors and fathers proclaimed; consent, if in antiquity itself we eagerly follow the definitions and beliefs of all, or certainly nearly all, priests and doctors alike.*

For today's Catholic, the first places to look for guidance in interpreting Scripture are the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, articles 1 to 141, and *Dei Verbum*, Vatican Council II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Among many reliable books that offer an introduction to a Catholic understanding of the Bible, the following are especially practical and popular: Kevin Perrotta, *Your One-Stop Guide to the Bible*; George Martin, *Reading Scripture as the Word of God*; and Jerome Kodell, *The Catholic Bible Study Handbook*.

[Note: In 2010, after the publication of the above article in the *New Jerusalem Bible, Saints Devotional Edition*, Pope Benedict issued the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini (The Word of the Lord)*, the most important Church document

on Sacred Scripture since the Second Vatican Council's *Dei Verbum*, which is referenced in the article. *Verbum Domini* was released on November 11, 2010, but is dated September 30, the memorial of St. Jerome.

*Verbum Domini* (2010), *Dei Verbum* (1965) and three papal encyclicals—Pope Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), Pope Benedict XV's *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920), and Venerable Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943)—are milestones in the development of the Church's teaching on Sacred Scripture.]