

The Biblical Case for Catholicism

By

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. A Few Words About the Author.....	5
2. Larry.....	7
3. Some Preliminary Questions.....	9
4. The Authority of Peter and His Successors.....	11
5. Salvation by Faith Alone.....	15
6. The Assurance of Salvation.....	19
7. Forgiveness of Sins.....	22
8. Purgatory.....	25
9. The Communion of Saints.....	28
10. Mary.....	31
11. The Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.....	35
12. Suffering, Rejection, Persecution.....	40
13. Unity.....	43
14. Conclusion.....	46

Introduction

One of the tragedies in the history of Christianity is the division between followers of Jesus Christ. One of the sources of this division is the different understandings of what the Bible says on important subjects: the authority of the pope, salvation, forgiveness of sins, purgatory, the communion of saints, the significance of Mary, the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, suffering and Christian unity.

Among many Protestants, there is a shared belief that the Catholic Church is not biblical. Many Catholics who have left the Catholic Church have come to share this belief, and some former Catholics even harbor a resentment toward the Catholic Church, thinking that they were actually deceived by the Catholic Church into accepting certain beliefs and practices that were contrary to the Bible.

It's fair to say that there is much confusion over what the Bible says about the subjects identified above, to the point that there are thousands of Protestant denominations with differing beliefs and practices and yet all claiming to be biblical. It's also fair to say that many, if not most, Protestants are confused by what Catholics actually believe and where the Bible supports those beliefs. Finally, it's fair to say that most Catholics don't know what the Bible has to say about the subjects which divide Catholics and Protestants.

The Bible study which follows is intended to clear up much of the confusion over what the Bible says on the primary subjects which divide Christians. One of my hopes is that our readers will be drawn into a clearer and stronger unity, that the cloud of confusion over what the Bible says will be considerably lifted by this exercise.

For Catholics who read this booklet, the objective is to enrich their knowledge and understanding of their own faith for their own benefit and to enable them to talk intelligently about the Bible with others, including those who challenge Catholic beliefs, those who have left the Catholic Church and the young who represent the future of the Church.

The basic structure of the booklet is to name a topic, identify Bible passages that relate to that topic and then provide some perspective on some of the specific passages. The reader will be encouraged to read on their own the passages that are listed but not specifically discussed.

I will primarily use the New American Bible as the source for quotations in this book. The New American Bible is the translation used in the liturgy of the Catholic Church. Other translations which are recommended are the Revised Standard Version, the New Jerusalem Bible, the Douay-Rheims Version, the King James, the New King James and the New International Version. As we will see, the King James, the New King James and the New International Version do not contain all of the books included in the Catholic Bible.

We will start with some basic issues surrounding the Bible and the Church. Then we will begin addressing the issues that have divided Catholics and Protestants, in the following order: 1) the authority of Peter and his successors; 2) salvation by faith alone; 3) the assurance of salvation; 4) the forgiveness of sins; 5) purgatory; 6) the communion of saints; 7) Mary; 8) the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist; 9) suffering, 10) Christian unity.

We should pray for this exercise, that we will be guided by the Holy Spirit and receive grace and wisdom as we reflect on these issues.

Chapter 1. A Few Words About the Author

This booklet is about Jesus, His Church and the Bible, but I need to provide a bit of information about the author.

I was raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma and attended both college and law school at Notre Dame. My wife, Connie, and I have been blessed with six amazing children, now all young adults. I practiced law in Tulsa for 18 years, when my life took an unexpected turn.

I am what you might call a “born again” Catholic. Though baptized as an infant and raised Catholic, I had what many would consider to be a “born again” experience on July 2, 1988.

My wife and I, parents of 5 children at the time, had been invited by friends to attend a Catholic marriage and family life conference at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. On Saturday afternoon of July 2, 1988, during a break in the conference before dinner, my wife and I decided to be open to having another child.

After dinner that night, a prayer leader took those in attendance through a “repentance” service. I was going through the motions of doing what the prayer leader suggested, not really being conscious of anything in particular. All of a sudden, I had an experience of God penetrating every cell of my being with His presence. I hadn’t asked for this. I didn’t know anything about such experiences. But I knew it was Him. God was communicating to me that He was real, that His love for me was real, and that He knew I didn’t feel worthy of His love, but that we would deal with that over time.

This was an exhilarating experience. There was a physical sensation, a warmth, a tingling, that accompanied the communication. A couple of people have said to me, “You’ll get over that,” referring to the impact of this experience, but I never have.

The day after this experience was a Sunday. At Mass, as the scriptures were read, the passages from the Bible came alive for me in a whole new way. The Second Reading was from 2 Corinthians 12, the passage in which St. Paul says that a thorn in the flesh was given to him, that he begged for God to take the thorn away, and that God said to him, “My power is made perfect in weakness.”

The meaning of this passage to me was so clear and so strong that it made my heart pound. For various reasons, I not only felt unworthy of God’s love but I also had a general sense of inadequacy. The passage from 2 Corinthians told me that my inadequacy was a gift, that it was my weakness, my inadequacy, that made room for God’s grace. Whatever I was lacking in a given situation did not need to stop me, because God would make up for any inadequacy on my part as long as I was trying to do His will.

I realized that, in addition to God revealing Himself the night before, God had given me another gift, a hunger for scripture and some understanding of some of the themes of the Bible. I have been an avid student of the Bible from that day to the present, and I know my hunger will continue and will never be fully satisfied, that there’s always more about the Bible to know, to understand and to integrate into my life.

What happened to me on July 2, 1988 all comes down to a single passage in the Bible. In Matthew 18, Jesus says that whoever receives one of these little ones in His name receives Him. That passage became literally true for me. By my wife and I deciding to receive another little one into our lives, Jesus came into my life in a new way, with a new presence, a new power. And, on June 8, 1989, a beautiful new child, Sarah Elizabeth Sullivan, came into our family.

After this conversion experience, I began to pray more fervently, and for the first time I began to pray with an expectation that God would answer. I somehow knew that God was communicating to me, to all of us, all the time, and that I needed to be attentive to His communication so that I could discern His will for my life.

In response to God's leading, I formed a ministry for men, called Brother House. For several years, Christian men from various denominations met regularly in my office. I was often invited to speak to men's groups at various churches. In 1994, I was asked to become the Family Life Director for the Catholic Diocese of Tulsa, which covered all of eastern Oklahoma. For the next 10 years, I promoted Christian marriage and family life on a full-time basis, giving up my legal practice.

I eventually became Executive Director of Catholic Charities of Tulsa. In 2008, as a result of a surprising message I received in a prayer experience, my wife and I moved to upstate New York, where I served with Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Rochester.

Since 1988, I have been very active in leading Bible studies and making presentations to groups of all ages on virtually every aspect of Christian life. I was ordained a deacon of the Catholic Church in 2000, following 3 years of training. In 1999, I co-authored a book entitled *Signposts: How To Be a Catholic Man in the World Today*, which was published by The Word Among Us and has been a widely-used resource for Catholic men's groups.

I will add only that I am passionate about what God has done in my life, that I'm in love with Jesus and that I am grateful beyond words for God's revealing Himself to me in a special way and blessing me with His grace and His truth.

Chapter 2. Larry

For several years I was a member of a group of Christian men from various denominations who met regularly for breakfast and discussion of books which addressed some aspect of Christianity. The group, called the “Glastonbury Fellowship,” included ordained clergy, theologians and Bible scholars. We met in the cafeteria at Oral Roberts University.

At one such breakfast meeting, I had a conversation with a newcomer to the group, a gentleman named Larry Lewis, who was seated directly across from me. Larry mentioned that he had seen me at a recent event for Catholics focusing on religious education. I asked Larry what parish he belonged to, naturally assuming that he was Catholic. Larry smiled and said, “I’m the pastor at Turley United Methodist Church,” a church located on the north edge of the City of Tulsa.

Larry indicated that for some months he and his wife, Joetta, had been studying the teachings of the Catholic Church. At one point, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a rosary, and said, “I’ve been saying this every day for about six weeks.”

At that moment, the presider over the meeting started to lead the discussion over the book the group was studying. I thought to myself, “Don’t start the meeting! I want to talk to Larry!”

As time went by, Larry and I became very close friends and had many discussions about what Catholics believed and how some Catholic beliefs were misunderstood or otherwise not accepted by Protestants. Larry loved the Bible, knew it well and was passionate as an evangelist for Jesus Christ. His love for the Bible greatly intensified as he became exposed to the Catholic understanding of Biblical passages.

One day Larry called me to discuss, word by word, a passage in 1 Corinthians. He got more and more excited as the discussion went on, to the point that he was virtually screaming. I interrupted, telling Larry I had two things to say. “First of all, Larry,” I said, “I’m afraid that you won’t find many Catholics who are as excited about their faith as you are.” Then Larry interrupted me, saying “I know what you’re going to say next. You’re going to ask me why I never saw this before,” referring to the years when he had an entirely Protestant understanding of the Bible. Larry told me, “It’s like a kind of blindness. You are raised and then trained to see the Bible a certain way, and it’s like you are blind to certain sections of the Bible or certain themes in the Bible.”

Larry helped me identify the issues which divided Catholics and Protestants and learn the Protestant perspective on these issues. He and I eventually teamed up to teach Catholics how the Bible supported Catholic positions on subjects troublesome to Protestants. Larry and Joetta eventually became Catholic evangelists, traveling throughout North America and having a great impact on thousands of people.

After returning from a conference in New Orleans in early 20__, Larry turned on the television to watch a Dallas Mavericks basketball game, while Joetta unpacked from the trip. When Joetta came back to the living room, she found that Larry had died from an apparent heart attack.

In putting this booklet together, just as in so many presentations I have given in the last 15 years, I dedicate my efforts to Larry, who was such an inspiration to me and so many others. I try to honor him by carrying on his work, though I have to acknowledge that I lack the talent and experience that Larry had.

Chapter 3. Some Preliminary Questions

One of the blessings of the Catholic Church is that it is immersed in history. Catholics are taught the history of Christianity. Catholics are still greatly influenced today by what Catholics said and did in the earliest days of Christianity. The lives and writings of saints who lived hundreds of years ago continue to inspire and guide Catholics of today.

One has the impression that many Protestants believe that, following the ascension of Jesus into heaven, the earliest Christian community had the benefit of the Bible, including the New Testament. I've had discussions with several faithful, mature Protestants who knew very little about the history of the Bible as we know it today.

The first pillar of the Protestant Reformation is "sola scriptura," the principle that the Bible is the sole source of authority for Christians. In that regard, it's helpful to reflect on the following questions:

1) Where did the Bible come from?

As far as the origin of the Bible is concerned, there were many Jewish and Christian documents floating around in the early centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The early Church accepted the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament which pre-dated Christ. The Septuagint contained 7 more books than are found in today's Protestant Bibles: Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) and Baruch, and additional portions of the Book of Esther and Book of Daniel. The 7 books and additions to Esther and Daniel are commonly referred to as "Apocrypha" or "Deuterocanonical" books. The so-called "Apocryphal" books were deleted from the Bible by Martin Luther in the 1500's. He based his decision on the fact that Jewish leaders, late in the 1st Century A. D., decided not to accept the Apocryphal books in the Jewish Bible because at that time they could not be found in the Hebrew language.

Pope Damasus, who served from 366 to 384 A.D., issued a decree listing the books that are in today's Catholic Bible. The decree arose out of the Council of Rome in 382. The Council of Hippo in 393 and the Council of Carthage in 397 also approved the same listing of books. Pope Innocent I concurred with these decisions and reaffirmed them in 405. After the Reformation, the Council of Trent reemphasized the validity of the official listing of books in the Catholic Bible.

So, the Catholic Church, through its popes and councils, determined what texts would be included in the Bible. This determination remained in force throughout all of Christianity for 1,200 years, until the time of Martin Luther.

2) How do we know that the Bible we use today is authentic and not some bogus set of writings?

One cannot trust that the writings that are in the Catholic or Protestant versions of the Bible are authentic and reliable unless one also relies upon the authority and validity of decisions made by the Pope and by councils of the Catholic Church. Among the many documents that circulated in the early Christian communities, the Catholic Church decided which of such documents were sufficiently authentic and authoritative to be included in the New Testament. There would be no New Testament as we know it without the Catholic Church.

3) If the Bible is the sole and exclusive source of authority for Christians, where in the Bible does it say that?

Nowhere is it stated in the Bible that the Bible is the sole and exclusive source of authority in Christianity. Quite the contrary. In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, St. Paul states: "Brothers, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours." At 2 Thessalonians 3:6, St. Paul writes: "We instruct you, brothers, in the name of [our] Lord Jesus Christ, to shun any brother who conducts himself in a disorderly way and not according to the tradition they received from us." In Philippians 4:9, Paul once again says: "Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you." The authoritative teachings in the early Church weren't based upon a Bible, which didn't then exist, but on the reliability of the person conveying the teaching. As St. Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:14: "Remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it." St. Paul had already told Timothy earlier in his 2nd letter (2 Tim. 2:2), "From what you heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will have the ability to teach others as well."

Catholics believe and accept the "Tradition" of Christianity, which includes the Bible but also consists of beliefs and practices which were not written down, but which have been faithfully handed down over the centuries.

4) Did Jesus state that there would be a book that would be the sole and exclusive source of authority for His followers?

Jesus never said that the Bible would be the exclusive source of authority for His followers. His actual words were quite clear and quite different. In addition to giving the keys to the kingdom to Peter (a passage we will look at shortly), He said to His disciples, "Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." Luke 10:16. In Matthew 10:40, in almost identical language, Jesus says, "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me."

5) If the Catholic Church includes the Bible as part of its sacred Tradition, how does the Catholic Church define the authority of the Bible for its followers?

The Catholic Church teaches that 1) the Bible is divinely inspired; 2) the Bible, properly understood, is free from error; and 3) no teaching of the Catholic Church can be contrary to the Bible.

Chapter 4. The Authority of Peter and His Successors

As we have previously indicated, the first pillar of the Reformation is “sola scriptura,” the “bible alone,” the belief that the Bible is the sole basis of authority within Christianity. A related principle among Protestants is the conviction that there was no central authority in the early days of the Church. Both of these principles, sola scriptura and the belief that the early Church lacked a central authority, are squarely contradicted by the Bible itself.

The Bible clearly establishes that Jesus delegated His authority to Peter and the apostles, and that they passed on their authority by the laying on of hands to those who could be trusted with the authentic teachings of Jesus Christ. The Bible further confirms that Peter, based in Jerusalem, had the primary authority in the early Church. Outlying churches looked to Jerusalem for guidance. In addition, the local churches had bishops, priests and deacons, who were considered to be acting as representatives of Christ, subject to the leadership of the Church in Jerusalem.

The authority delegated to Peter and the apostles is part of a pattern of delegation in the Bible, beginning with the Old Testament. Witness the authority given Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3 – “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you.”), Moses, the prophets and so on.

When the Israelites battled Amalek in Exodus 17:8-15, why did the success of the Israelites in the battle depend on Moses’ ability to raise his staff in the air? Couldn’t God’s power be sufficient to defeat the enemy of the Israelites whether Moses raised his staff or not? The seat of authority in the synagogues was called the “chair of Moses.” Matthew 23:2.

Here are passages in the New Testament which describe and support the authority delegated by Jesus to Peter and the apostles (key passages are in bold type):

Matthew 16:13-19 (*Peter given the keys to the kingdom; echo of **Isaiah 22:15-24***)

Luke 10:16

John 21:15-17 (*Peter told to feed my sheep*)

Acts 15:6-12, 22, 24, 28 (*the Council of Jerusalem*)

Acts 16:4

1 Timothy 3:15-16 (*Church as pillar and bulwark of truth*)

Matthew 28:19-20

Hebrews 13:7-8

2 Timothy 2:2

John 20:21-23 (*receiving the Holy Spirit & power to forgive sins; we’ll look at this more when we study the sacrament of Reconciliation*)

The most important grant of authority is the delegation of power given to Peter by Jesus in Matthew 16:13-19:

16 Simon Peter said in reply, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”
17 Jesus said to him in reply, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.
18 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.
19 I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Jesus literally gives the keys to heaven to Peter, and He tells Peter that heaven will be bound by the decisions Peter makes on earth. Again, as discussed in paragraph number 3 on page 8, above, Jesus never makes reference to a book which will contain all of the authority which will be binding on followers of Jesus Christ.

The language of Matthew, who was writing for a Jewish audience, echoed language from the Book of Isaiah 22:20-22:

20 On that day I will summon my servant Eliakim, son of Hilkiah;
21 I will clothe him with your robe, gird him with your sash, confer on him your authority. He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah.
22 I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder; what he opens, no one will shut, what he shuts, no one will open.

As more and more Gentiles became followers of Jesus, the disciples had to decide whether the Gentiles would have to accept Jewish practices and customs, since the initial followers of Jesus, including the apostles, were all Jewish. To resolve the issue, the leaders of the Church, headed by Peter, convened in Jerusalem. They reached a decision through prayer and discussion, with minimal guidance from scripture. See Acts 15:6-12, 22, 24, 28. The decision made at the Council of Jerusalem, to require Gentiles to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from meats of strangled animals and from unlawful marriage, was communicated to and accepted by Christian communities outside of Jerusalem (Acts 16:4).

The authority of the apostles is further described in Matthew 28:19-20:

19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, 20 **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.** And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

The whole foundation of the early Church consisted of the teachings of the apostles and their trusted followers. See, for example, Hebrews 13:7:

7 Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

And then there are these passages from 2nd Timothy:

2:2 And what you heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will have the ability to teach others as well.

and

3:14 But you, remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it.

Consistent with all these biblical texts and confirming the existence of central authority in the early Christian communities is this quote from St. Ignatius of Antioch, writing in about 105 A.D., in his letter to the Trallians:

“For, since you are subject to the bishop as to Jesus Christ, you appear to me to live not after the manner of men, but according to Jesus Christ, who died for us, in order, by believing in His death, you may escape from death. It is therefore necessary that, as you indeed do, so without the bishop you should do nothing, but should also be subject to the presbytery, as to the apostle of Jesus Christ, who is our hope, in whom, if we live, we shall [at last] be found. It is fitting also that the deacons, as being [the ministers] of the mysteries of Jesus Christ, should in every respect be pleasing to all. For they are not ministers of meat and drink, but servants of the Church of God. They are bound, therefore, to avoid all grounds of accusation [against them], as they would do fire.

In like manner, let all reverence the deacons as an appointment of Jesus Christ, and the bishop as Jesus Christ, who is the Son of the Father, and the presbyters as the sanhedrin of God, and assembly of the apostles. Apart from these, there is no Church. Concerning all this, I am persuaded that you are of the same opinion. For I have received the manifestation of your love, and still have it with me, in your bishop, whose very appearance is highly instructive, and his meekness of itself a power; whom I imagine even the ungodly must reverence, seeing they are also pleased that I do not spare myself. But shall I, when permitted to write on this point, reach such a height of self-esteem, that though being a condemned man, I should issue commands to you as if I were an apostle?”

In addition to what has been said above, the Bible, rather than revealing everything a Christian needs to know, acknowledges that man’s reason can lead him to know who God is. At Romans 1:20, Paul states as follows:

“Ever since the creation of the world, his [God’s] invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made.”

In Acts 17:26-27, Paul’s message to the Athenians includes the following:

“He [God] made from one the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, and he fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions, so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far from any of us.”

See also, in this regard, Job 12:7-9 and Acts 14:17. Accordingly, even those with no access to the Bible can know through reason who God is by studying the created world.

It is extremely important to know that the Catholic Church does teach that 1) the Bible is divinely inspired; 2) the Bible, properly understood, is free from error; and 3) no teaching of the Catholic Church can be contrary to the Bible.

Chapter 5. *Salvation by Faith Alone*

The second pillar of the Reformation is “sola fide,” which means “faith alone,” the concept that we are saved not by any actions of ours but **solely** by our faith in Jesus Christ. Martin Luther developed the principle of “sola fide” partially in response to the practice of the Catholic Church of granting “indulgences,” which were the partial or total remissions of the punishment for sin as a result of performing certain actions and penances. The process for obtaining indulgences, which sometimes involved the buying and selling of indulgences, had become a source of scandal during Luther’s era.

Even though the scandalous aspects of indulgences have long been eliminated, Catholics are frequently criticized for the perceived belief that they must “earn their way to heaven” by their actions. It’s a fair statement that many Catholics likely don’t have a clear idea of just how they may obtain their salvation.

In addition to the concern over indulgences, Martin Luther was tormented by his concern that even he, as an Augustinian (an order of Catholic priests) monk, was uncertain about his worthiness before Christ. He experienced great relief when he meditated on Romans 3:27-30:

27 What occasion is there then for boasting? It is ruled out. On what principle, that of works? No, rather on the principle of faith. 28 For we consider that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law. 29 Does God belong to Jews alone? Does he not belong to Gentiles, too? Yes, also to Gentiles, 30 for God is one and will justify the circumcised on the basis of faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

With respect to verse 28 in particular, he ultimately re-translated the passage by inserting the word “alone” after the word “faith” in his German translation of the Bible. This insertion is not supported by the Greek text and is not included in the Bibles in use today. The main point for Luther was that his emotional burden was lifted by his conclusion that we are saved by our faith in Jesus Christ and not by our deeds, our “works” of the law. John Calvin took this even further by embracing the concept of predestination, that even our decision to believe in Jesus Christ is given to “the elect” whose faith is determined in advance.

This background helps us understand how some Protestants say that they or others have been “saved” by accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Their belief is that they were saved at a specific moment in time by confessing their belief in Jesus Christ. For support, they point to Romans 10:8-10:

“But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we preach), for, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.”

That sounds relatively clear, but the passages in Romans 3 and in Romans 10 have to be read together with many other passages in the Bible which describe who will be saved and which also address the relationship between belief in Jesus Christ and actions expected and taken by the faithful.

The Bible has many passages that address the issue of salvation. According to John 6, as we will see later, we are saved by receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus. According to Mark 16:16, we are saved by belief AND baptism. As explained by Jesus in Matthew 25, we are saved by how we treat the least of our brothers and sisters, our actions regarding those with basic human needs.

The absolute reliance of Martin Luther on Romans 3:28 is compromised by further passages within the Letter to the Romans itself. For example, the passage in Romans 3:28 is concluded in Romans 3:31 by the following passage:

31 Are we then annulling the law by this faith? Of course not! On the contrary, we are supporting the law.

A more extensive statement on faith and works is contained, also in the Letter to the Romans, Chapter 2, verses 5-13:

5 By your stubbornness and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of **God, 6 who will repay everyone according to his works:** **7** eternal life to those who seek glory, honor, and immortality **through perseverance in good works,** **8** but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness. **9** Yes, affliction and distress will come upon every human being who does evil, Jew first and then Greek. **10 But there will be glory, honor, and peace for everyone who does good,** Jew first and then Greek. **11** There is no partiality with God. **12** All who sin outside the law will also perish without reference to it, and all who sin under the law will be judged in accordance with it. **13** For it is not those who hear the law who are just in the sight of God; rather, **those who observe the law will be justified.**

The strongest statement in the Bible about the relationship between faith and works is found in the Letter of James 2:14-26. This language was so clear and so contrary to Martin Luther's principle of "sola fide" that Martin Luther wanted to have it deleted from the Bible, calling it a "letter of straw." Here is the text of the passage from James:

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? **15** If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, **16** and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? **17 So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.** **18** Indeed someone might say, "You have faith and I have works." Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and **I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works.** **19** You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe that and tremble. **20 Do you want proof, you ignoramus, that faith without works is useless?** **21** Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? **22** You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by the works. **23** Thus the scripture was fulfilled that

says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called “the friend of God.” **24** See how a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. **25** And in the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by a different route? **26 For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.**

The language from James is consistent with passages listed in the citations below. To select just one more, consider the language used by John in 1 John 2:4-6:

4 Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. **5** But whoever keeps his word, the love of God is truly perfected in him. This is the way we may know that we are in union with him: **6 whoever claims to abide in him ought to live [just] as he lived.**

The pillars of the Reformation, the belief that the Bible is the sole basis for authority in Christianity and that one is saved simply by making a profession of faith, are inconsistent with the Bible itself. The Bible actually supports the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church on both issues.

Here are additional passages from the Bible addressing the relationship between faith, works and salvation:

1 Peter 1:17
Matthew 7:24-27
2 Corinthians 5:10
Revelation 14:13
Revelation 20:12-13
John 5:26-29
1 John 2:4-6
Matthew 16:27
Mark 13:13
Luke 8:21

Does all this mean that we can earn our way into heaven? No. We are saved by the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, not by any merit of our own. The good that we do is a function of the grace of Christ present and active in us. The Catholic belief is best captured in Ephesians 2:8:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; it is the gift of God.”

The Catholic understanding of this passage, as reflected in the Biblical passages we have cited above, would be expressed in the following re-translation:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, as evidenced by your works; it is the gift of God.”

Grace, through the mercy of God communicated and distributed through Jesus Christ, magnifies our faith and works, leading to our salvation.

A comment about Catholic culture: we might be critical of non-Catholic Christians who talk about salvation in a sure, simplistic manner. However, many Catholics don't think about salvation at all. Ralph Martin, in a great book entitled "The Catholic Church at the End of an Age," writes that he gives talks at a large number of Catholic colleges. He says he frequently asks Catholic college students this question: "If you died and knocked on the gates of heaven, and St. Peter calls out to you: 'Why should I let you in?' what would you say?" Martin reports that this question consistently stumps Catholic college students. From my experience, I believe that few adult Catholics would have a good answer to this question.

So we Catholics need to think and talk more about salvation, so that we have a better understanding of our ultimate objective in life. However, showing up for an altar call and professing faith in Jesus Christ is not all we have to do to obtain salvation.

Chapter 6. *The Assurance of Salvation*

An issue related to how we are saved is the question of whether our salvation occurs at a single moment in time and is determinative regardless of what happens later (“Once saved, always saved”). Not all Protestants believe that salvation is accomplished in one act, but many do. So, for example, we have the situation where, at a Protestant worship service on Sunday at the end of the summer, the camp director announces how many children were “saved” during the camp sessions.

I have been told by a well-meaning Protestant friend, “I don’t know why someone would be Catholic. I would want to belong to a church where I would know for sure I was saved.”

As discussed earlier, this is all based on Romans 10:9-10:

"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we preach), for, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

The formula for this profession of faith, often called the Sinners Prayer, involves acknowledgment that one is a sinner, that sin leads to death, that Jesus saves us from our sins and that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. We often hear people say that they “accepted Jesus” at a particular moment in time. The formula is typically utilized at altar calls, when people are invited to come forward and express their faith in Jesus Christ.

Here is one example of the Sinners’ Prayer:

"Heavenly Father, have mercy on me, a sinner. I believe in you and that your word is true. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and that he died on the cross so that I may now have forgiveness for my sins and eternal life. I know that without you in my heart my life is meaningless.

I believe in my heart that you, Lord God, raised Him from the dead. Please, Jesus, forgive me, for every sin I have ever committed or done in my heart, please Lord Jesus, forgive me and come into my heart as my personal Lord and Savior today. I need you to be my Lord and my friend.

I give you my life and ask you to take full control from this moment on; I pray this in the name of Jesus Christ."

It's a beautiful prayer, and I know people whose lives have been changed very dramatically by saying this prayer with their heart. The problem is the misunderstanding about the effect of this prayer on our salvation.

The Sinners' Prayer is often accompanied by the notion that once someone has been saved by accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior, they are saved no matter what happens after their profession of faith. If someone who has accepted Jesus commits a public and/or serious sin after making the profession, the usual explanation from those who believe in "once saved, always saved" is that the individual must not have "meant it" when they accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The Catholic position is that, when the Bible is considered in its entirety, salvation is understood as an ongoing process and not a one-time event. **As St. Paul said in Philippians 2:12, "We work out our salvation with fear and trembling."**

Here are some other passages which address the issue of the necessity for perseverance as opposed to reliance on a single event in our lives:

Matthew 10:22:

"You will be hated by all because of my name, but **whoever endures to the end will be saved."**

1 Corinthians 9:24-27:

24 Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. **25** Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. **26** Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. **27** No, **I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.**

Philippians 3:12-16:

12 It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ [Jesus]. **13 Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus. 15** Let us, then, who are "perfectly mature" adopt this attitude. And if you have a different attitude, this too God will reveal to you. **16** Only, with regard to what we have attained, continue on the same course.

Hebrews 6:4-6:

4 For it is impossible in the case of those who have once been enlightened and tasted the heavenly gift and shared in the holy Spirit **5** and tasted the good word of God and the

powers of the age to come, **6 and then have fallen away**, to bring them to repentance again, since they are recrucifying the Son of God for themselves and holding him up to contempt.

2 Peter 2:20-22:

20 For if they, having escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of [our] Lord and savior Jesus Christ, **again become entangled and overcome by them**, their last condition is worse than their first. **21 For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment handed down to them.** **22** What is expressed in the true proverb has happened to them, “The dog returns to its own vomit,” and “A bathed sow returns to wallowing in the mire.”

We are freed from sin and opened to a new life by our Baptism. However, as a result of our weakness and sin, most of us have at times put our salvation at some level of jeopardy. There is always more work to do. And we must be vigilant. We can, and do, stumble and fall, committing actions which are inconsistent with the faith we have professed.

Chapter 7. Forgiveness of Sins

A big question among Christians, even Catholics, is why we should confess our sins to a priest. Can't we be forgiven from our sins by making a private prayer of repentance to Jesus?

The answer is 'Yes,' but there's more to the story, especially with respect to what the Bible has to say on the subject. If Jesus wanted us to simply repent privately in our prayer life, why did He give the apostles the power to forgive sins? He gave Peter the keys to the kingdom, told Peter that whatever the Church bound or released on earth would be honored in heaven and then, after His resurrection, He very clearly delegated to His apostles the power to forgive sins. Was Jesus wasting His time?

Here are some Old Testament passages that set the stage for verses in the New Testament which express the grant and usage of the power to forgive sins.

Leviticus 16:16-22 (placing the sins of the Israelites on the scapegoat)

Leviticus 19:20-22 (guilt offerings brought to the meeting tent)

Leviticus 26:39-42

Numbers 5:6-7 ("Tell the Israelites: If a man (or woman) commits a fault against his fellow man and wrongs him, thus breaking faith with the Lord, he shall confess the wrong he has done, restore his ill-gotten goods in full, and in addition give one fifth of their value to the one he has wronged.")

2 Samuel 12:13

Proverbs 28:13 ("He who conceals his sins prospers not, but he who confesses and forsakes them obtains mercy.")

The strongest, clearest statement regarding the power of priests to forgive sins is at John 20:19-23:

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." **20** When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. **21** [Jesus] said to them again, "Peace be with you. **As the Father has sent me, so I send you.**" **22** And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "**Receive the holy Spirit. 23 Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.**"

Just so you know that this translation is not unique to a Catholic version of the Bible, here is the same passage from the King James Bible:

21 Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: ²³ Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.

The grant of authority in John reinforces the grant of authority to Peter in Matthew 16: 18-19 and to the disciples in Matthew 18:15-18:

15 If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. **16** If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ **17** If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. **18 Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**

See also:

James 5:16 (“Therefore, **confess your sins to one another** and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”)

Luke 22:29-30

Acts 8:18-24

Acts 19:18

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

1 John 1:8-10

The oldest non-scriptural document describing the beliefs and functions of the early Church is the Didache, written in about 60 A.D. The following instruction can be found in Chapter 4 of the Didache: “**In the church you shall acknowledge your transgressions, and you shall not come near for your prayer with an evil conscience.**” From Chapter 14 of the Didache comes the following statement: “But every Lord’s day, gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving **after having confessed your transgressions**, that your sacrifice may be pure.

Here are a few quotes from the early fathers of the Church, taken from Catholic Answers:

*“For as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ are also with the bishop. And as many as shall, in the exercise of penance, **return into unity of the Church**, these, too, shall belong to God, that they may live according to Jesus Christ.”* Ignatius of Antioch, 110 A.D.

“[Regarding confession, some] flee from this work as being an exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day. I presume they are more mindful of modesty than of salvation, like those who contract a disease in the more shameful parts of the body and shun making themselves known to the physicians; and thus they perish along with their own bashfulness.” Tertullian, 203 A.D.

“The bishop conducting the ordination of the new bishop shall pray: ‘God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...Pour forth now that power which comes from you, from your royal Spirit, which you gave to your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and from which he bestowed upon his holy apostles...and grant this your servant, whom you have chosen for the episcopate, [the power] to feed your holy flock and to serve without blame as your high priest, ministering night and day to propitiate unceasingly before your face and to offer to you the gifts of your holy Church, and by the Spirit of the high priesthood to have the authority to forgive sins, in accord with your command.’” Hippolytus, 215 A.D.

“[A final method of forgiveness], albeit hard and laborious [is] the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner...does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine, after the manner of him who say, ‘I said, “To the Lord I will accuse myself of my iniquity.’” Origen, 248 A.D.

The grant of authority to the apostles to forgive sins can be presumed to be intended for successors to the apostles by the selection of Matthias as the replacement for Judas. It would not be logical at all to suggest that the power to forgive sins would “expire” upon the death of the last apostle.

The practice of confessing sins to a priest as the representative of Jesus is consistent with the notion in the Bible that a sinner must be reconciled not just with Jesus but with the Body of Christ on earth. Sin is never private. We will focus on a Christian’s connection with other members of the Body of Christ when we look at the Communion of Saints in Chapter 9.

Chapter 8. Purgatory

Catholics believe in purgatory, which is a transitional state, so to speak, between our time on earth and in heaven. Many of us will not die in a state of sufficient purity for us to enter immediately into heaven. We cannot define or measure what level of purity will be sufficient. That is for God to decide. Purgatory is a means by which we will be purged (the source of the name “purgatory”) or purified over some period of time after which we will be welcomed into the eternal kingdom of heaven. The concept of purgatory is based on scripture, Jewish customs and on the mercy of God.

A key passage relating to purgatory is 2 Maccabees 12:39-46:

39 On the following day, since the task had now become urgent, Judas and his companions went to gather up the bodies of the fallen and bury them with their kindred in their ancestral tombs. **40** But under the tunic of each of the dead they found amulets sacred to the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. So it was clear to all that this was why these men had fallen. **41** They all therefore praised the ways of the Lord, the just judge who brings to light the things that are hidden. **42 Turning to supplication, they prayed that the sinful deed might be fully blotted out.** The noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen. **43** He then took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection in mind; **44** for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. **45** But if he did this with a view to the splendid reward that awaits those who had gone to rest in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. **46 Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be absolved from their sin.**

The basic story in this passage is that some of the Jewish men fighting with their enemies were found dead with indications that they were worshipping false gods. Judas Maccabeus led prayers for the deceased Jewish soldiers, recognizing that the prayers of him and his men could help free those who had died from the penalty for their sins. So those who die and experience purgatory are purified not only by being kept out of heaven for a time but are also aided by the prayers of the living on their behalf. Accordingly, it is common for Catholics still on earth to pray for the souls in purgatory.

In Matthew 5:25-26, we read as follows:

25 Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. **26** Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.

How many of us, at the moment of our death, will “have paid the last penny,” in other words,

have made full and complete satisfaction for our sins against God?

The passage in Matthew 12:31-32 indicates that there is a period after death during which we will have the opportunity to make further atonement for our sins:

31 Therefore, I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. **32** And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the holy Spirit will not be forgiven, **either in this age or in the age to come.**

In the Letter to the Hebrews, there is a passage at Hebrews 12:22-24 which relates to purgatory:

22 No, you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, **23** and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, **and the spirits of the just made perfect...**

Once again, how many of us will be “perfect” at the moment of our death?

St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, makes reference to the need for a purifying fire:

12 If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, **13** the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. **It will be revealed with fire, and the fire [itself] will test the quality of each one’s work.** **14** If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation, that person will receive a wage. **15** But if someone’s work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; **the person will be saved, but only as through fire.**

St. Peter, at 1 Peter 4:6, makes a similar reference:

6 For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead that, though condemned in the flesh in human estimation, they might live in the spirit in the estimation of God.

Finally, in the description of the heavenly city in Chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation, we have the following description:

5 During the day its gates will never be shut, and there will be no night there... **26** The treasure and wealth of the nations will be brought there, **27 but nothing unclean will enter it,** nor any[one] who does abominable things or tells lies. Only those will enter whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

As with other passages we have read, how many of us will be perfectly clean when we die?

A traditional teaching in Judaism is that only the very righteous go directly to heaven. The average person goes to a place of purification (Gehinnom). During the time that a person is in the process of purification after death, the prayers of the faithful benefit the one undergoing purification.

Here are a few quotes from early leaders in Christianity:

Tertullian (211 A.D.)

“A woman, after the death of her husband...prays for his soul and asks that he may, while waiting, find rest; and that he may share in the first resurrection. And each year, on the anniversary of his death, she offers the sacrifice.” (quoted from *Catholic Answers*)

John Chrysostom (392 A.D.)

“Let us help and commemorate them. If Job’s sons were purified by their father’s sacrifice [Job 1:5], why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.” (quoted from *Catholic Answers*)

Chapter 9. *The Communion of Saints*

Many Protestants believe there is a “wall” between the living and the dead, across which there is no interaction, no communication. Related to this is the belief that there is no point in seeking the intercession of the deceased. Why ask for prayer support from those who have died, including the saints, when we can pray directly to Jesus?

As Catholics, we believe that the living and the dead both make up the “Body of Christ.” We believe that the believers on earth are united with those in heaven, that their prayers benefit us. For the souls in purgatory, we believe that our prayers benefit them. All of us, the holy ones in heaven, the souls in purgatory and the faithful still on earth, join together in praising Jesus.

Accordingly, the Eucharistic prayers that the priest says at Mass include the following petitions:

“In communion with those whose memory we venerate, especially the glorious ever-Virgin Mary, Mother of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ, and blessed Joseph, her Spouse, your blessed Apostles and Martyrs, Peter and Paul, Andrew, (James, John, Thomas, James, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Simon and Jude: Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus, Cornelius, Cyprian, Lawrence, Chrysogonus, John and Paul, Cosmas and Damian) and all your Saints: we ask that through their merits and prayers, in all things we may be defended by your protecting help.”

“To us, also, your servants, who, though sinners, hope in your abundant mercies, graciously grant some share and fellowship with your holy Apostles and Martyrs: with John the Baptist, Stephen, Matthias, Barnabas, (Ignatius, Alexander, Marcellinus, Peter, Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, Anastasia) and all your Saints: admit us, we beseech you, into their company, not weighing our merits, but granting us your pardon, through Christ our Lord.”

So what does the Bible say? Let’s take a look.

In 2 Kings 13, we learn that the prophet Elisha, the protégé of Elijah, has died. In verses 20 and 21, we read as follows:

20 And so Elisha died and was buried. At that time of year, bands of Moabites used to raid the land. **21** Once some people were burying a man, when suddenly they saw such a raiding band. So they cast the man into the grave of Elisha, and everyone went off. But when the man came in contact with the bones of Elisha, he came back to life and got to his feet.

This is a prominent theme in the Bible, that the bones contain the essence of a person’s holiness. In the passage above, we learn that this is true even of the bones of one who is deceased.

In the Bible, the community of believers is made up of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the

angels, the heavenly hosts, those human beings who have died and those who are still on earth. An example of a supporting text is Psalm 103:20-22:

20 Bless the LORD, all you his angels, mighty in strength, acting at his behest, obedient to his command. **21** Bless the LORD, all you his hosts, his ministers who carry out his will. **22** Bless the LORD, all his creatures, everywhere in his domain. Bless the LORD, my soul!

In 2 Maccabees 15:12-16, Judas Maccabeus recounts for his soldiers a dream in which appeared Onias, the deceased former high priest, and the prophet Jeremiah. In the dream, Onias “was praying with outstretched arms for the whole Jewish community,” and Jeremiah presented Judas with a gold sword and words of encouragement about the upcoming battle.

There are numerous New Testament references to what Catholics call the communion of saints. In Ephesians 1:8-10 and 2:19-20, we read the following:

8 ... In all wisdom and insight, **9** he has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him **10 as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth.**

19 So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but **you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, 2** built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone.

The “holy ones” are the faithful in heaven.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 11, we are told that the gifts of Abel in the Book of Genesis made him righteous in the sight of God, as a result of which “though dead, he still speaks.” The most well-known passage in the New Testament with regard to the communion of saints is also in Hebrews, (Chapter 12:1-2b) a passage that refers to the “great cloud of witnesses” above who are cheering us (those on earth) on:

1 Therefore, **since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses**, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us* and persevere in running the race that lies before us **2** while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.

The “great cloud of witnesses” clearly refers to the great examples of faith described in Chapter 11 of Hebrews: Abel, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon and so on. The image is comparable to that of an Olympic race, with those on earth running the race with salvation as the prize and those in heaven encouraging us and supporting us with their prayers.

In Matthew 17:1-3, the transfiguration of Jesus is described. In this scene, Peter, James and John see Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah, who of course had been dead for many, many centuries.

The Book of Revelation has many references in John’s portrayal of heaven to the prayers of the “holy ones,” the “victors” who are enjoying eternal bliss in heaven. Such references

include Revelation 5:8-14, 6:9-11, 7:9-17 and 8:3-13.

Especially beautiful and powerful is the description in Revelation 5:11-14:

11 I looked again and heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They were countless in number, **12** and they cried out in a loud voice: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory and blessing.” **13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe, cry out: “To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor, glory and might, forever and ever.”** **14**The four living creatures answered, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

The question for every one who professes to be Christian is this: Do we hear this music? Do we hear the song of every creature in heaven and on earth constantly praising Jesus Christ? And if we hear this music, do we choose to be part of the choir? Or would we rather sing a solo?

Chapter 10: Mary

Our previous section featured the Communion of Saints. No human member of the Communion of Saints is in a better position to intercede for us than the Mother of Jesus. To many of our Protestant brothers and sisters, Mary is not particularly special. As we will see, the subject of Mary's profound role in God's plan of salvation is a major theme in the Bible.

To get one thing straight right off the bat, **Catholics don't worship Mary**. We honor her. We venerate her. We acknowledge her prominent role in salvation history. We ask her, as the perfect mother, to take our needs to her Son. **It is the role of Mary to help us to know her Son, to love him and to worship him alone.** She is the mother of Jesus and the spouse of the Holy Spirit. She is far more than an ordinary person.

Before we get to the Bible, let's just use some common sense. We know that Christians are to be like Jesus, right? That's our highest priority, to imitate Him, to see Him as the ultimate model. Well, didn't Jesus have a deep, special love for His mother? So shouldn't we, like Jesus, have a deep, special love for Mary? Shouldn't we prayerfully have in our hearts the same love and affection for Mary that Jesus did? If we don't, then we don't fully share the heart of Jesus.

It says in the Bible that Mary's heart, like that of Jesus, would be pierced by a sword. In other words, the relationship between Jesus and His mother was so deep, so intense, that the piercing of the side of Jesus on Calvary pierced very deeply the heart of His mother. And, while Jesus was still alive on the cross, He gave His mother to His disciple, John, and He gave John to His mother (John 19:26-27). Was that just a meaningless event? The Catholic understanding of this passage is that John represented all of us, so that Jesus was giving His mother to all of those who believed in Him.

In scripture, Jerusalem (Zion, Judaism), Mary and the Church are used almost interchangeably. Jerusalem is portrayed as a mother from whom the inhabitants draw nourishment and protection (Isaiah 66). Mary gives birth to Jesus, God in the flesh, and nourishes and protects Him. The Church gives birth to knowledge of and faith in Jesus by proclaiming His word and offering His flesh to humanity, by nourishing and protecting His message and the lives of those who believe in Him.

In a sense, God's plan of salvation gives us a choice between two women, each of whom offers us fruit. Eve offers us the fruit of human pride, the desire for power and arrogance. Mary offers us the fruit of her womb, the fruit of humility, simplicity, weakness and surrender. The fruit of Mary's womb is Jesus. Which woman will we choose?

In Judaism, the queen was not the king's wife, but the king's mother. For us Christians, Jesus is the King. His mother is the Queen. In this respect, see Jeremiah 13:18-20; Proverbs 31:1-2, 8-9; 2 Chronicles 22:2-4; 2 Kings 11:1-3; 1 Kings 15:9-13; 2 Kings 10:13-14; 1 Kings 2:19.

There is a clear contrast in the Bible between Eve and Mary, and between Adam and Elizabeth, Mary's cousin. Mary is the woman who atones for the sin of Eve. In God's plan of salvation,

Mary is the New Eve. As it says in Galatians 4:4, “God sent his son, born of a woman...” God could just as easily have put Jesus on a hillside somewhere in Israel, but He didn’t. He chose the womb of Mary to be the means by which the Savior of humanity would enter the world. Mary could have been like Eve. She could have said “No.” But Mary’s “yes,” her statement, “May it be done unto me as you have said,” in Luke 1:38, is in clear contrast to Eve’s rejection of God’s commands. And Mary was no ordinary woman. She was, as described in the Bible at Luke 1:28, “full of grace,” the only sinless human being to ever walk the earth.

The next contrast in the Bible we will look at is between Adam and Elizabeth. We recall that after Adam and Eve sinned, God went looking for Adam, who was hiding. When Adam finally responds, he blames God for what happened. “The woman you put here with me,” Adam says to God, “She gave me fruit from the tree, and so I ate it.” In the mind of Adam (the first lawyer?), what happened wasn’t just Eve’s fault; it was God’s fault, too, because God gave Eve to Adam.

Adam’s lame defense, “that woman you put here with me,” is in sharp contrast to what happens to Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin, when Mary finds out that Elizabeth is also with child and comes to support her. I invite our Protestant brothers and sisters to reflect closely on Elizabeth’s reaction to Mary’s presence. Consider carefully what the Bible says in Luke 1:41:

“When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, **filled with the Holy Spirit**, cried out in a loud voice and said, ‘**Most blessed are you among women**, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does it happen to me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?’”

On the basis of this passage, a Bible-believing Christian can conclude that anyone filled with the Holy Spirit (1) will acknowledge that Mary is the most blessed among women and (2) would be filled with gratitude that the Mother of Jesus would come to them. Instead of Adam, who complained about “the woman God put here” with him, we should be like Elizabeth, who expressed thankfulness that the Mother of Jesus should be put in her presence and is available to be present to us as well.

In John 2, the passage describing the events at the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus refers to his mother as “Woman,” which again contrasts her with Eve, the “woman,” in Genesis. And contrary to the disobedience of Eve to God’s commands, at Cana it is Jesus, the Son of God, who responds to the commands of His mother. She disregards the objections of Jesus and says to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” This passage foreshadows the role that Mary continues to play throughout history. She wants every human being to know, to love and to honor her Son, and so she takes the needs of all of us to Jesus, sharing her maternal love for Jesus with every one of us.

Now we’ll consider Revelation 12:1-18, a long passage which describes the role of Mary in the cosmic battle between good and evil:

1 A great sign appeared in the sky, **a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.** **2** She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. **3** Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. **4** Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the

earth. **Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth. 5 She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and his throne. 6 The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God, that there she might be taken care of for twelve hundred and sixty days. 7** Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels battled against the dragon. The dragon and its angels fought back, **8** but they did not prevail and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. **9** The huge dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceived the whole world, was thrown down to earth, and its angels were thrown down with it. **10** Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

“Now have salvation and power come,
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Anointed.
For the accuser of our brothers is cast out,
who accuses them before our God day and night.
11 They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony;
love for life did not deter them from death.
12 Therefore, rejoice, you heavens,
and you who dwell in them.
But woe to you, earth and sea,
for the Devil has come down to you in great fury,
for he knows he has but a short time.”

13 When the dragon saw that it had been thrown down to the earth, it pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. 14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly to her place in the desert, where, far from the serpent, she was taken care of for a year, two years, and a half-year. **15** The serpent, however, spewed a torrent of water out of his mouth after the woman to sweep her away with the current. **16** But the earth helped the woman and opened its mouth and swallowed the flood that the dragon spewed out of its mouth. **17 Then the dragon became angry with the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring, those who keep God’s commandments and bear witness to Jesus. 18** It took its position on the sand of the sea.

Who is the woman who gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod? Who is the woman who had given birth to the male child and was attacked by the dragon? Who is the woman clothed with the sun with the moon under her feet, which recalls the passage in Song of Songs 6:9-10 (“One alone is my dove, my perfect one...that comes forth like the dawn, as beautiful as the moon, as resplendent as the sun...”) ? It’s clearly Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Here are a few quotes from Martin Luther on Mary:

“The veneration of Mary is inscribed in the very depths of the human heart.” (Sermon; Sept. 1, 1522)

“The infusion of Mary’s soul was effected without original sin...From the first moment she began to live she was free from all sin.”

“We can never honor her enough. Still, honor and praise must be given to her in such a way as to injure neither Christ nor the Scriptures.” (Sermon; Christmas, 1531)

“Whoever possesses a good faith says the Hail Mary without danger.” (Sermon; March 11, 1523)

As a final footnote, there is a clear parallel in the Bible between Mary and the Ark of the Covenant. In this regard, compare the following passages:

2 Sam. 6:9 (“David said...’How can the ark of the Lord come to me.”>Luke 1:41-43 (“Elizabeth ...cried out...’How does this happen..that the mother of my Lord should come to me.”

2 Sam. 6:12-14 (When the ark entered the City of David, “David...came dancing before the Lord with abandon>Luke 1:41 (When Mary entered the house of Elizabeth and Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, “the infant leaped in her womb.”)

Exodus 40:34-35 (Moses could not enter the meeting tent, in which was the ark of the covenant, because it was overshadowed by a cloud)>Luke 1:35 (Gabriel said to Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”)

Chapter 11. THE REAL PRESENCE OF JESUS IN THE EUCHARIST

We have finally arrived at the most important topic of all. The theme of the Eucharist ties all of scripture together. If someone says they know the Bible but do not believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, they don't truly know the Bible. And they don't really know the history of Christianity going back to the earliest days of the Church.

The "source and summit" of the Catholic Church is the Eucharist. In other words, the Eucharist is the very heart, the very center, of the mission and identity of the Catholic Church. Properly understood, the Church is the Body of Christ, and therefore in giving the world the Eucharist, the Church gives its very self; it gives us Jesus in the fullest possible sense in which we can receive Him this side of heaven.

The Catholic understanding of the Eucharist is based largely on the Gospel of John, Chapter 6. But before we go there, we will look at the foundation for the Eucharist in the Old Testament.

In Genesis 4, we have the story of Cain and Abel, the first set of brothers. We know the story. Cain envies Abel because God favors Abel's gift over Cain's. So they're out in the field, where Cain attacks Abel and kills him. God confronts Cain, saying, "What have you done to your brother?" We are familiar with Cain's response to God: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Then we need to really focus and meditate on what God then says to Cain: "Listen: your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!"

This is our first clue that God hears the cry of Abel's blood and is going to respond in some way to that cry. The cry of Abel's blood has two dimensions. First is the anguished, shrill cry of Abel for understanding, for appeasement. We can imagine Abel turning, seeing his brother coming at him with a weapon and crying out, "Cain! Why are you coming at me to hurt me? I love you. I'm your brother. I've done nothing to cause you to do this!"

The second dimension of this event is much broader. Abel's blood crying out from the ground also represents the cry of all of the victims of man's inhumanity to man from the beginning to the end of time. Imagine all of the innocent people who have been killed, wounded, neglected, abused, imprisoned, starved, aborted, kept in poverty, all of these people, screaming at one time, and imagine that you can hear that scream. A fundamental question for every Christian, for every Jew, is this: "Do you hear that cry? And what are you going to do about it?"

Well, we know what God does about it. He sends His son, Jesus, and He is going to shed His blood to atone for the innocent blood of Abel. As it says in Hebrews 12:24, "the blood of Jesus cries out more powerfully than the blood of Abel."

And before Jesus comes to earth, we have in the Old Testament the development of the blood covenant, which starts with Abel. In Leviticus, Chapter 17, God tells Moses that "Since the life of a living body is in its blood, I have made you put it on the altar, so that atonement can be

made...” He then adds: “Since the life of every living body is in its blood, I have told the Israelites: You shall not partake of the blood of any meat.”

The meaning of this passage is based on the concept which was prevalent in ancient times that the blood of any living being contained the essence, the very identity, of the being. So a human would not consume the blood of an animal, because that would in effect merge the life of a lower form of life into the life of a human person, which would be beneath our dignity.

So much more could be said about this, but we will fast forward now to the Last Supper, the night before Jesus died, when He was celebrating the Passover, held up a cup of wine, and said to the apostles, all of whom were Jewish, “This is my blood of the covenant, which shall be shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.” When Jesus drank from this cup and then offered it to the apostles, they would have clearly known from their understanding of a blood covenant that He was offering them the very essence of who He was; He was giving them a clear opportunity to take His life into their very beings.

That explains, in short fashion, the background of the cup, of the blood. What about the bread, the body?

The bread of the Eucharist has its origins in the manna given to the Jews when they were wandering in the desert as described in Exodus, Chapter 16. The Jews are starving, so they are upset to the point of rebellion. God hears their complaining. One morning they awaken, and the ground is covered with manna, bread from heaven. They are relieved of their hunger. As part of God’s instructions to Moses regarding the manna, He tells Moses to put some of the manna in the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 16:32-34). As time goes by, the “Bread of Presence,” the bread of angels, as it is referred to in the Old Testament, is shown to the Israelites on the Feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, and the following words are pronounced: “Behold God’s love for you!”

Now let’s turn to the Gospel of John. In the beginning of Chapter 6, the time of Passover is near, and Jesus multiplies the loaves and fishes to feed a crowd of thousands. The crowd then follows Him to Capernaum. Jesus says to them, in John 6:27: “Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” They reply, “What can we do to accomplish the works of God?” Jesus answers, “This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.” Now catch their next question, **“What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you.”** **This is the biggest, most important question that is ever asked of Jesus.** And so what does he answer? His answer is the Eucharist. He says to them, **“Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”**

The Jewish people respond, as one would expect, by saying to Jesus, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus then says to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.” The audience begins to grumble over the statement of Jesus that He is the bread that came down from heaven. Jesus does not back away. He says:

48 “I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate manna in the desert, but they died; 50 this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

Once again, the words of Jesus cause the Jewish listeners to quarrel among themselves, asking how Jesus could possibly give them His flesh to eat. Jesus, however, again does not back off. He doesn't say, “I'm just speaking of the bread and wine as symbols.” He repeats again:

53 “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. 54 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. 55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. 57 Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.”

At this point, even the disciples are struggling to accept what Jesus has said. Once more, He does not back away, even though many of His disciples left Him over these very words.

As we have previously indicated, Jesus took the Passover ritual given by God to the Jews in the Book of Exodus with the instructions that it be celebrated **forever**, and the night before he died he used the Passover ritual as the means by which ordinary bread and wine would be changed into His body and blood (Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:7-16). As part of His instructions to the apostles for celebrating the Passover ritual again, Jesus says “Do this in memory of me.” Luke 22:19

In the account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke 24:13-35, the disciples do not recognize Jesus until the breaking of the bread. The meaning is clear: from that moment on, Jesus will be recognized by His followers in the breaking of the bread. That is how His presence will be made known to believers. We have additional references to the breaking of the bread in Acts 2:42 and Acts 20:7, 11.

St. Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, expounds on his own experience of the Eucharist and on the deep meaning of the Eucharistic ritual. First of all, in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, Paul writes:

16 “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? 17 Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we partake of the one loaf.”

With respect to his own experience, Paul states, at 1 Corinthians 11:23-26:

23 “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, 24 and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ 25 In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.’”

It is significant that, after the passage at 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul states, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord.”

The Eucharist is a foreshadowing of the banquet waiting for us in heaven. See Isaiah 25:6, Luke 14:15 and 22:30, Revelation 3:20 and 19:9.

Martin Luther believed in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. In his “Small Catechism,” he describes “The Sacrament of the Altar” as follows:

“It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under bread and wine for us Christians to eat and to drink, established by Christ himself.”

He adds, in response to the question, “What good does this eating and drinking do?”

“These words tell us: ‘Given for you’ and ‘Shed for you to forgive sins.’ Namely, that the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given to us through these words in the sacrament. Because, where sins are forgiven, there is life and salvation as well.”

Of course, there is so much more that can be said about the Bible and the Eucharist. Many Protestants who have studied the history of the early Church understood how intensely Eucharistic the early Church was, an understanding which brought them into the Catholic Church.

Probably the earliest non-scriptural document describing the life of the early Christian community is the Didache, thought to have been composed around 60 A.D. Passages from the Didache relating to the Eucharist are the following:

Chapter 9. The Eucharist. Now concerning the Eucharist, give thanks this way. First, concerning the cup:

We thank thee, our Father, for the holy vine of David Thy servant, which You madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever..

And concerning the broken bread:

We thank Thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge which You madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever. Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom; for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever..

But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, unless they have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, "Give not that which is holy to the dogs."

Chapter 10. Prayer after Communion. But after you are filled, give thanks this way:

We thank Thee, holy Father, for Thy holy name which You didst cause to tabernacle in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality, which You modest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever. Thou, Master almighty, didst create all things for Thy name's sake; You gavest food and drink to men for enjoyment, that they might give thanks to Thee; but to us You didst freely give spiritual food and drink and life eternal through Thy Servant. Before all things we thank Thee that You are mighty; to Thee be the glory for ever. Remember, Lord, Thy Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in Thy love, and gather it from the four winds, sanctified for Thy kingdom which Thou have prepared for it; for Thine is the power and the glory for ever. Let grace come, and let this world pass away. Hosanna to the God (Son) of David! If any one is holy, let him come; if any one is not so, let him repent. Maranatha. Amen.

But permit the prophets to make Thanksgiving as much as they desire.

Chapter 14. Christian Assembly on the Lord's Day. But every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one who is at odds with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned. For this is that which was spoken by the Lord: "In every place and time offer to me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great King, says the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the nations."

Chapter 12. SUFFERING, REJECTION, PERSECUTION

I have noticed that many of my Protestant friends don't talk much, if at all, about the role suffering plays in Christian life. Former Protestant ministers who have become Catholic tell me that Catholics have a much deeper appreciation for and understanding of the meaning of suffering.

There is a strong conviction among many Protestants that Jesus suffered so that we don't have to. In the part of the country where I live, there are large "Bible" colleges which teach what is called the "prosperity gospel," which in essence is the idea that if we are right with Jesus we will be rewarded with material wealth and physical well-being.

If we are living an authentic Christian life, will we not experience suffering? Will we not be rejected, mocked and even persecuted? What does the Bible say?

At Luke 9:22-24, Jesus lays out a basic principle for His followers:

22 "He said, 'The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.' 23 Then he said to all, 'If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.'"

If we are curious what Jesus meant by denying ourselves and taking up our cross, we have some clues at Matthew 5:3-5, 10-12:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4 Blessed are they who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
5 Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the land...
10 Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11 Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil
against you [falsely] because of me.
12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the
prophets who were before you."

I doubt that any of us are holier or closer to Jesus than Saint Paul, so what does he have to say about suffering? Let's look at Colossians 1:24-27:

24 "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what

is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church, 25 of which I am a minister in accordance with God's stewardship given to me to bring to completion for you the word of God, 26 the mystery hidden from ages and from generations past. But now it has been manifested to his holy ones, 27 to whom God chose to make known the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; it is Christ in you, the hope for glory."

Is Saint Paul suggesting that the suffering of Jesus was insufficient to bring about the salvation of humanity? No. He is communicating the mystery that those of us who are followers of Christ are united to His suffering in a powerful way. As Saint Paul has written in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, we participate in the body and the blood of Jesus. The Catholic and Biblical understanding is that, especially in the Eucharist, Christians offer their own sacrifices, their own trials and challenges, and ask that the Holy Spirit join these sacrifices with that of Jesus and offer the one resulting sacrifice to God the Father.

Saint Paul identifies some of the powerful blessings that we receive from our sufferings in Romans 5:3-5:

3 "Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, 4 and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us."

Those of us who "were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death." Romans 6:3 "If then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him." Romans 6:8 What does this mean? Saint Paul provides a further explanation in 2 Corinthians 4:7-11:

7 "But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. 11 For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

Saint Peter offers his own perspective on Christian suffering at 1 Peter 4:12-14, 19:

12 "Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you... 19 As a result, those who suffer in accord with God's will hand their souls over to a faithful creator as they do good."

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, in Chapter 12, introduces the notion that God, as a

loving father, disciplines his children. He concludes “At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it.” Hebrews 12:11

The teachings of Jesus about the trappings of wealth and material possessions are all well known, though all too frequently ignored. One of my favorites is Luke 14:25-33, which has been often misused. Financial planners and investment advisers are fond of quoting verse 28, in which Jesus says:

“Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion?”

Sounds like a strong endorsement for wise financial investing, doesn't it? Well, Jesus pulls the rug out from us by concluding his statement with the following, at verse 33:

“In the same way, **everyone of you who does not renounce all his possession cannot be my disciple.**”

Christians are to follow the example of Jesus Christ. We should strive to be like Him. The most fundamental way we can imitate Jesus is to live a life characterized by self-sacrifice, suffering for the good of others, suffering for our faith in Christ. A life without sacrifice, without rejection, without persecution, does not resemble the life of Jesus.

Chapter 13. Unity

It's not easy to be Catholic. First of all, you can't just walk into a Catholic church at any age and say, "I want to join," and have immediate access to the sacraments of the Eucharist, Confirmation and so on. There is a process, which requires training. Then there's the issue of conforming to the teachings of the Catholic Church, including what is in the Bible, and accepting the authority of the Pope, the bishops and the priests. The Church is filled with human beings, some of whom occupy positions of authority, and so a Catholic has to be at peace with the human weaknesses that are part of the life of the Church. Catholics are like Peter when he said to Jesus, "To whom shall we go?" Nowhere else can we receive the fullness of life in Christ, especially the Eucharist.

Some of the comments, well-intentioned or otherwise, from our Protestant brothers and sisters can also be a challenge for Catholics. How often has a Protestant told us, "It doesn't matter what Christian denomination a person belongs to. We all believe in Jesus." In conversations Catholics have with Protestants about unity in Christianity, it is often communicated in some way by our Protestant brethren that it is the Catholics who are the source of disunity. Some Protestants, who of course are Protestant because they have rejected the Catholic Church, become upset that they can't receive Holy Communion in a Catholic church. They get mad at us Catholics, as if we are the problem.

It's amazing that of all the teachings in the Bible, the one most often not followed by Protestants themselves is the clear mandate in the Bible for unity. One sees different statistics of the number of Protestant denominations in existence today, but the figure of 20,000 is the lowest estimate I've seen in recent years. Let's see how that measures up to what the Bible has to say about unity among followers of Jesus Christ.

In Genesis 11:1-10, one of the earliest communities of human beings decided to build a tower as a monument to themselves. God frustrated their plans by confusing their speech so that they could not understand one another well enough to finish the tower. The resulting lack of unity was cured at Pentecost in Acts 2:1-12, when the Holy Spirit gave the followers of Jesus the gift of understanding one another's foreign language. The earliest Christian community, then "was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common." Acts 4:32

In Deuteronomy 12:1-6, God commands the Israelites to tear down the altars of the false gods and offer their own sacrifices in the dwelling place chosen by God. King David is directed in 2nd Samuel 4-6, 11-16, 25-29 to build a house for God, with the assurance that God will make His royal throne firm forever. Israel became divided, rebelling against David's house (1 Kings 12:16-19), leading to the promise to Ezekiel that God will make the Israelites one nation with one prince, never again to be divided. Ezekiel 37:21-24.

The emphasis on unity in the Old Testament is given even more intense emphasis by Jesus. We are all familiar with His admonition that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” Mark 3:25; Matthew 12:25; Luke 11:17 In John 10:14-16, Jesus identifies Himself as the good shepherd who will find the sheep that are not of His fold. “These also I must lead,” Jesus says, “and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

The strongest statement about unity in the Bible comes from the lips of Jesus Himself in John 17:20-23:

20 “I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 so **that they may all be one**, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that **they also may be in us**, that the world may believe that you sent me. 22 And I have given them the glory you gave me, **so that they may be one, as we are one**, 23 I in them and you in me, **that they may be brought to perfection as one**, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me.”

Jesus says in his prayer to the Father that the unity of His followers is necessary for the world to believe that he and the Father are one. The inverse is true: lack of unity among Christians will cause “the world” not to believe in Christ. Why should non-Christians take Christianity seriously when Christians themselves are so divided?

In his usual direct style, St. Paul often confronts the issue of unity in the communities he established. At Romans 16:17, he urges his followers “to watch out for those who create dissensions and obstacles, in opposition to the teaching that you learned.” In a long passage in 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, Paul appeals for unity in very strong language:

10 “I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose. 11 For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by Chloe’s people, that there are rivalries among you. 12 I mean that each of you is saying, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ. 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?’”

In 1 Corinthians 3:3-9 and 2 Corinthians 12:20, Paul complains about jealousy and rivalry. At Ephesians 2:19-22, he provides a beautiful description of the Church and exhorts the Ephesians to “preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit...one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism...” Similarly, in Philippians 1:27-28, 2:1-2, he challenges the Philippians to stand firm “in one spirit,” and concludes:

“...complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing.”

Here’s a great quote from St. Ignatius of Antioch, probably written right after the year 100 A.D., which addresses Christian unity:

“So in your harmony of mind and heart the song you sing is Jesus Christ. Every one of you should form a choir, so that, in harmony of sound through harmony of hearts, and in unity taking the note from God, you may sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father. If you do this, he will listen to you and see from your good works that you are members of his Son. It is then an advantage to you to live in perfect unity, so that at all times you may share in God.”

Conclusion

The Catholic Church teaches (1) that the Bible is the inspired word of God; (2) that the Bible is free from error with respect to the truths which it is intended to reveal; and (3) that no teaching of the Catholic Church can be contrary to the truths of the Bible. As we mentioned at the outset, the Catholic Church decided what writings would be included in the Bible. The Bible is the preeminent Catholic book.

For 1,500 years before Martin Luther, the Catholic Church was led and influenced by the greatest minds in the known world. It is illogical and perhaps even preposterous to suggest that key beliefs of the Catholic Church were “unbiblical” and that such “unbiblical” beliefs were not detected by such great minds. This was precisely the response of Anton Zolli, the Chief Jewish Rabbi of Rome during World War II, when asked why he converted to Catholicism and not one of the Protestant churches.

In recent years, hundreds of Protestant pastors and ministers have joined the Catholic Church. While the details of their stories of conversion to the Catholic faith are in many respects unique, there are several common elements: (1) a decision to explore the history and validity of Catholic teachings; (2) research on the writings of the Early Fathers of the Church; (3) reconsideration of Bible passages that were misunderstood or overlooked. In all cases, such converts from Protestant ministry discovered that the earliest Christian communities out of which the writings of the New Testament emerged were thoroughly Catholic.

It has often been said that the problems Protestants have with Catholic teachings and practices are more a matter of misunderstanding than well-informed disagreement. I hope and pray that this collection of Bible passages and accompanying commentary will help dispel such misunderstandings and promote a new, deeper unity among Christians.