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# What do you know

about

The Church and the Bible  
The "Brethren of the Lord"  
Indulgences

*by Rev. F. J. Ripley C.M.S.*

LONDON

CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY

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# THE CHURCH AND THE BIBLE

WHEN Our Lord, Jesus Christ, ascended into heaven, He left His Church with no written books of His words or works. He preached and did not write His message. He told the Apostles that they were to spread it by preaching: "Going, therefore, teach ye all nations"; "Go ye into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature"; "You shall be witnesses unto Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the uttermost part of the earth." (Matthew 28 : 19; Mark 16 : 15; Acts 1 : 8.)

The Spirit of God would guide them in this task: "The Paraclete, the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring all things to your mind, whatsoever I shall have said to you." (John 14:26).

He would preserve their teaching infallible: "I will ask the Father; and He shall give you another Paraclete, that He may abide with you forever; the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, He shall abide with you and be in you." (John 14:16-17.)

St Paul clearly states that Christ's teaching is to be learned from a divine, infallible teaching authority until the end of the world. Read his words: "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? Or how shall they believe Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they be sent? . . . Faith then cometh by hearing . . . But I say: Have they not heard? Yes, verily. Their sound hath gone forth into all the

earth; and their words unto the end of the whole world." (Romans 10:13-18.)

The Apostles never taught that men were to learn about Christ by reading a book and interpreting it for themselves. But they did teach that the world would receive Christ's revelation from the living voice of authority: "Hold the form of sound words which thou hast heard of me . . . Keep the good thing committed to thy trust by the Holy Ghost who dwelleth in us." (2 Tim. 1 : 13, 14.) "The things which thou hast heard of me by many witnesses, the same commend to faithful men who shall be fit to teach others also." (2 Tim. 2 : 2.)

This is the background to any discussion of the Catholic Church's attitude to the Bible. It is, indeed, the fundamental point. In a sense it would be true to say that there is only one source of revelation, divine Tradition, that is the body of revealed truth handed down from the Apostles. However, a great and important part of that tradition was put into writing and is to be found in the Bible.

Therefore, the Church is accustomed to distinguish two sources of revelation—Tradition and Scripture. By the former, we mean that body of revealed truth which was not committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, but has been handed down by the living authority of the Catholic Church.

It is only by this living tradition that we know the contents of the Bible. When the Holy Ghost came down on the Apostles, the Jews had no definite list of the books of the Old Testament. Nor does the New Testament give such a list.

Christian writers during the first three centuries are unanimous in their testimony that the full list of Old Testament books (including those which Protestants call "apocrypha"—Wisdom, 1 and 2 Machabees, etc.), was authorised by the Apostles.

The fact that Julius Africanus objected to the history of Susanna is so unique that it only serves to prove how strong the Church's tradition was on this point. Later, St. Augustine (who died in 431) gave a list of the inspired books which is exactly the same as that now accepted in the Church.

In 1442, the General Council of the Church held at Florence approved a full list of the books of both Old and New Testaments.

This list was finally repeated by the Council of Trent on April 8th, 1546, with the following decree: "If anyone does not accept these books as sacred and canonical in their entirety, with all their parts according to the text usually read in the Catholic Church, and as they are in the ancient Latin Vulgate, but knowingly and wilfully contemns the traditions previously mentioned: let him be anathema."

The one and only way in which any man can be sure that the books of the Bible are true and inspired is through the infallible authority of the Catholic Church.

A chemist's shop contains many of the medicines useful for curing diseases, but it does not contain all of them. Before you can use those it does contain you must have guidance from a specially qualified person.

So the Bible contains some of the revelation of Christ, but not all of it. Before you can understand it properly, you need an interpreter. Of the Epistles of St Paul, St Peter wrote: "In which are certain things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures, to their own destruction." (2 Peter 3:16.) Christ Himself provided the interpreter — His Church.

The Church existed, converts were made and many sacrificed their lives before the Bible was completed. Until printing was invented most people could not own Bibles and could not read them if they had them.

To argue that the Bible is the only rule of faith is to contradict the Bible itself, which clearly teaches the opposite. It is also most unreasonable.

The Catholic Church is almost the only defender of the real doctrine of the Bible's inspiration left in the world to-day. Here is an extract from the Report of the Commission of Christian Doctrine set up by the Church of England published in 1938: "The tradition of the inerrancy of the Bible commonly held in the Church until the beginning of the nineteenth century . . . cannot be maintained in the light of the knowledge now at our disposal." That is a typical non-Catholic statement. In plainer English it means: "We now believe that there are mistakes in the Bible."



Compare this with an official Catholic statement: "It is utterly impossible for the least error to be divinely inspired. In fact, by its very nature inspiration not only excludes all error, but makes its presence as utterly impossible as it is for God, the Supreme Truth, to be the author of any error whatsoever." Those are the words of Pope Leo XIII written in 1893 and repeated by Pope Benedict XV in 1920.

There is no agreement amongst non-Catholics as to what exactly the inspiration of the Bible means. But Pope Leo XIII gave this definition: "Inspiration is a supernatural action by which God stimulated and moved men to write and so assisted them in their writing that they properly understood and willed to write faithfully and express suitably, with infallible truthfulness all that He ordered, but nothing more. Otherwise, God would not be the author of Sacred Scripture in its entirety."

The men who wrote the seventy-three books of the Bible did not necessarily know God was inspiring them to write. It is wrong to think of them as mere scribes who wrote down the words which the Holy Ghost had dictated. They remained active, free agents, using their own styles and gathering their own information. They did not need special divine revelation for everything they wrote.

But when they passed on for God truths of the supernatural order which they could not know by their unaided human minds God must have revealed these things to them. The simple truth is that God is the author of all that is written in the Bible and man only the instrument of His hand.

We must not look for precise scientific formulas in the Bible. It is not a text-book of science. Nothing in the Bible contradicts the teachings of natural science, for God is the author of both natural and supernatural truth.

Even yet one hears it stated that Catholics are not allowed to read the Bible. The fact is that the Church grants special spiritual favours to those who read the Bible for even a quarter of an hour.

When printing was invented, any Tom, Dick or Harry could publish a version of the Scriptures. Because the Bible is God's book, because the Bible was given by God to the Church and because the Church is bound to safeguard the truth and prevent

the spread of error, she had a duty to ensure that versions of the Bible offered to the people were accurate and to forbid imperfect, defective or misleading translations.

The Catholic Church never withheld the Bible from people by keeping it in Latin. There were translations of the Bible in the popular languages, even before the invention of printing and long before 1530, when, it is claimed, the Bible was first given to the people in German. Previous to that date, more than 70 editions of the Bible had been made in different languages spoken by the people of Europe.

Fourteen translations of the Bible into German and five into low Dutch existed before Luther's translation appeared. And before that time, there were Catholic translations in Spanish, Italian and French.

The Bible is a treasure of the Catholic Church. Before printing was invented, she carefully preserved authenticated copies of the sacred writings. She kept learning alive through the industry of monks and nuns, who went on copying the Bible.

Through her instructions, liturgy, mystery plays, pictures, statues and stained glass, she did her utmost to make the contents of the Bible known to the people.

Then in the first half century after the arrival of printing, she approved no less than 124 editions of the Bible.

To-day non-Catholic scholars agree that some of the best translations come from Catholic sources—witness that by Monsignor Ronald Knox and the Westminster version in recent years. Cheap editions of the Bible are published in many languages (you can buy one in English for six shillings from the Catholic Truth Society).

The Popes have written many great letters to the Church on the reading and study of the Bible. Recently, Catholic scholars have produced a magnificent commentary in English on the whole of the Bible (published by Nelson for four guineas).

For the ordinary people, the day-to-day worship of the Church is constantly bringing long or short extracts before them for their instruction and meditation.

The Bible is a Catholic book; it was given by God to the Catholic Church. It is by the Catholic Church and only by the

Catholic Church that it is safely preserved, authoritatively guaranteed and infallibly interpreted.

**For further reading:** Biblical Studies — Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Sc 30, 6d. The Bible Only, C 48, 4d. Why not be a True Bible Christian? C 267, 4d.

## THE "BRETHREN OF THE LORD"

THE difficulty may well be framed like this: "As the Gospels refer several times to 'the brethren of the Lord' and even name them, how can the Catholic Church teach that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was always a virgin?"

The constant, unchanging tradition of the Church has always been that Mary was a virgin at the time of Christ's birth, during His birth and until the end of her life. For example, the Creed of Epiphanius, drawn up in 374 speaks of the "ever-Virgin Mary." The Second Council of Constantinople, a General Council of the Church, refers in one of its decrees to the "ever-Virgin Mary."

In the second half of the fourth century, a certain Bishop called Bonoso was denounced to the Bishops of Illyricum for having said that Mary had children other than Jesus. They deprived Bonoso of his episcopal functions and, in 392, the Pope, St. Siricius, wrote to Bishop Anysius of Thessalonica praising their action.

Here are his words:

"We surely cannot deny that you were right in correcting the doctrine about children of Mary, and Your Holiness was right in rejecting the idea that any other offspring should come from the same virginal womb from which Christ was born

according to the flesh. For the Lord Jesus would not have chosen to be born of a virgin if He had judged that she would be so incontinent as to taint the birthplace of the body of the Lord, the home of the eternal King, with seed of human intercourse. Anyone who proposes this is merely proposing the unbelief of the Jews saying that Christ could not be born of a virgin. For if we accept the doctrine on the authority of priests that Mary had a number of children, then they will strive with greater efforts to destroy the truths of faith."

In October, 649, Pope St. Martin I, summoned a council to the Lateran palace in Rome. Its third canon states the belief of the Church at that time:

"If anyone does not profess according to the Holy Fathers that in the proper and true sense the holy, ever-Virgin, immaculate Mary is the Mother of God, since in this last age, not with human seed but of the Holy Ghost, she properly and truly conceived the divine Word, who was born of God the Father before all ages, and gave Him birth without any detriment to her virginity, which remained inviolable, even after His birth; let such a one be condemned."

Shortly after the Reformation Pope Paul IV condemned certain Unitarian errors in a Constitution issued in 1555. Here are his strong words:

"With our apostolic authority we call to account and warn . . . on behalf of the omnipotent God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, all those who have asserted or have believed . . . that (the Lord) was not conceived of the Holy Spirit according to the flesh in the womb of the most Blessed and ever-Virgin Mary . . . or that the same most Blessed Virgin Mary is not the true Mother of God and that she did not remain a perfect virgin before, while, and forever after she gave birth."

This has always been the teaching of the Fathers of the Church and the early Christian writers. St. Jerome appealed for support for it to the writings of Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenæus, Justin and others.

Undoubtedly, the use of the word "brethren" shows that there was real and close kinship between those to whom it refers and Our Lord.

In the Old Testament the word translated as "brethren" is used of various relationships. For example, Moses said to Oziel's sons: "Go and take away your brethren from before the sanctuary" (Lev. 10:4). The context shows that the word here refers to distant cousins.

When the book of Job tells us that "all his brethren" came to him (42:11) or records Job's complaint, "He hath put my brethren far from me" (19:13), the reference is clearly to relatives in general.

Lot was Abraham's nephew but his uncle is recorded as saying to him: "Let there be no quarrel, I beseech thee, between me and thee... for we are brethren" (Genesis 13:8). Similarly, in Genesis 29:13, 15: "Who, when he heard that Jacob his sister's son was come, ran forth to meet him... He said to him: Because thou art my brother, shalt thou serve me without wages?" Therefore, one cannot argue from the word itself that those described as the Lord's brethren were also the children of His Mother, Mary.

The Old Testament writers had to use the word *âh* to describe various relationships. Its first meaning would be "brother," but as there is no Hebrew or Aramaic word for cousin *âh* had to be pressed into service to indicate other degrees of kindred as well. The New Testament writers, who had been brought up in familiarity with the Aramaic tradition, would find it quite natural to use one Greek word (literally translated as "brother") to denote all the various relationships embraced by *âh*.

The Gospels never refer to "the brethren of the Lord" as the sons of Mary. It seems clear that at the time when Jesus was lost in Jerusalem at the age of twelve He was Mary's only child. The expression of St Mark seems to make a distinction between Our Lord as "the son of Mary" and those named as His brothers: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph and Jude and Simon?" (Mark 6:3). The form of the expression in Greek indicates that Jesus was Mary's only son.

St Luke describes Our Lord as Mary's first-born son. Therefore, if Our Lady had had any other children, they would have been younger than Jesus. But the attitude of His "brethren" suggests that they were older than He.

They wanted to direct His activities: "And His brethren said to Him: Pass from hence and go into Judea, that Thy disciples also may see Thy works which Thou dost..." (John 7:3).

Incidentally, those who, according to St Mark, went out "to lay hold on" Jesus, and who said "He is become mad" (Mark 3:21) are not necessarily His relatives. The Greek text has a much wider meaning and would embrace disciples, followers or members of a household.

From the Cross Our Lord gave His Mother into St John's keeping. He would scarcely have done this if other children of Mary were living, who would be able to look after her. We might well ask with Lightfoot: "Is it conceivable that Our Lord would thus have snapped asunder the most sacred ties of natural affection?" The use of the article before "son" in the Greek confirms our interpretation.

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Our Lady to tell her she had been chosen to become God's Mother, her reaction makes it quite obvious that she had resolved to remain a virgin: "How shall this be done, because I know not man?" (Luke 1:34).

St Luke tells us, too, that the parents of Jesus "went every year to Jerusalem at the solemn day of the pasch" (Luke 2:41). It is hard to believe that Our Lady could have made this journey regularly if the burden of child-bearing and the care of a number of young children (at least four sons and several daughters, cf., Matthew 13:56) had pressed upon her.

No argument against our contention can be drawn from the use by St Luke of the word "first-born": "She brought forth her first-born son." (Luke 2:7.) The suggestion that because Jesus is referred to as the first-born there must have been other children gives to the word a meaning it does not have.

It is a Hebrew technical term. By employing it, St Luke wished to stress a point of Mosaic Law, which gave privileges and imposed duties on the first-born. "Sanctify unto me every first-born that openeth the womb among the children of Israel." (Exodus 13:2.) St Jerome in the fourth century pointed out that in Scripture "first-born" is used whether or not other children followed (cf. Exodus 34:19 ff.; Numbers 18:15).

The same is true of the phrase "before they came together" used by St Matthew: "When as His mother Mary was espoused

to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child, of the Holy Ghost." (Matthew 1:18.). St Jerome pointed out that from the words "before they came together" it does not follow that they came together afterwards. The evangelist merely indicates what did happen.

Against Helvidius, a heretic, who denied the virginity of Our Lady, St Jerome urged: "If I say Helvidius died before he did penance for his sin, does it follow that he did penance after his death?" One might quote other scriptural passages to prove the point. For example: "Micol, the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death." (II Kings, 6:23.). We cannot gather from that that she bore children afterwards! Similarly: "And they went up to Mount Sion with joy and gladness and offered holocausts, because not one of them was slain till they had returned in peace." (I Mach. 5: 54.) This does not mean that any of them was slain afterwards.

Who, then, were the "brethren of the Lord"? Of the four mentioned by name, James, Simon, Jude and Joseph, the first three were Apostles. Consider James first. St Matthew tells us that among the women present on Calvary was "Mary, the mother of James and Joseph." (Matthew 27: 56.) St John refers to this same woman as "His mother's sister, Mary of Cleophas." (John 19: 25.)

The passages are obviously parallel. How, then, is Mary said by St John to be the wife of Cleophas when James, her son, is described as the son of Alpheus. (Matthew 10:3)? Cleophas and Alpheus were the same person. It is a matter of how the Aramaic for Alpheus would be rendered in the Greek; or Alpheus might have taken a Greek name rather like his Jewish one (rather as Saul became Paul).

James, therefore, was probably the son of Cleophas and Mary. His brother was Joseph, as St Mark states (Mark 15:40). Jude is also called "the brother of James" (Luke 6:16) and begins his epistle with the words: "Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James." (Jude 1.)

Simon was probably a fourth brother of the same family. Writing in the fourth century Eusebius quoted Hegesippus as saying that Simon is also the son of Cleophas, and that Cleophas

was a paternal uncle of Our Lord, being a brother of St Joseph. Thus the four brethren mentioned are probably Our Lord's cousins. But whatever the relationship, they were certainly not Our Lady's children.

It is worth pointing out that the Virgin Birth is not the same as the Immaculate Conception. The former refers to the birth of Christ. Mary, always a virgin, was His real mother; but St Joseph was only His guardian or foster-father.

The Immaculate Conception, on the other hand, refers to Mary herself. It is the doctrine, always believed by the Church, but defined by the Pope in 1854, that the Virgin Mary from the first instant of her conception was preserved immune from original sin, in view of the future merits of Christ.

## INDULGENCES

WHEN we sin we enjoy something unlawfully; we disturb the order God has arranged for us. Therefore, when we are sorry and the guilt of sin is taken away through Confession, a further liability remains. We must make up our debt to God.

"The Lord also hath taken away thy sin. Thou shalt not die," the prophet Nathan told King David, "Nevertheless, because thou hast given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, for this thing, the child that is born to thee shall surely die." (2 Kings 12:13-14.).

St Paul told the Colossians: "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for his body, which is the church." (Col. 1:24.)

St Paul compares himself to a poor man trying to contribute towards a sum which a richer man has paid in advance. Christ's sufferings are more than to atone for all possible sin, but



God wills that we add our prayers, works and sufferings to those of Calvary to make up for our sins. That is an essential point.

Another is that the Church has at her disposal an infinite treasury of merits. As St John tells us, Christ, "is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." (1 John 2:2.) Not only do the merits of Christ belong to the Church, but all the merits of all her members.

This truth was set forth by Pope Clement VI in 1343: "This treasure (of Christ's satisfaction) He has committed to the care of St Peter, who holds the keys of heaven, and to His successors, His own vicars on earth, who are to distribute it for the good of the faithful . . . It is also known that the merits of the Mother of God and of all the elect, from the first just man until the last, add something to the store of this treasure."

The third essential point is that the Church has the power to remit satisfaction. This is clearly stated by Our Lord who placed no limit on the power of loosing He conferred on St Peter and the Apostles: "Whatsoever you shall loose upon earth shall be loosed also in heaven." (Matt. 18:18.)

St Paul actually did this for a sinful man in Corinth: "This punishment inflicted on Him by so many of you is punishment enough for the man I speak of, and now you must think rather of showing Him indulgence . . . I myself, wherever I have shown indulgence, have done so in the person of Christ." (2 Cor. 2:6 ff.)

The fourth essential point is an historical one: the continuous practice of the Church in this matter. In the earliest days sinners used to be given severe penances for their sins. They might last for years. But the penitents would go to those awaiting martyrdom and obtain from them letters asking the Bishop to remit some of the penance in virtue of the pains the martyrs were about to endure.

When the persecutions were over, the Bishops continued to remit the canonical penances, as we know from many writings and the decrees of Councils. We can still read in the old books of penances examples of relaxation. For example, the Penitential of Egbert, Archbishop of York, says: "For him who can comply with what the penitential prescribes, well and good; for him who cannot we give counsel of God's mercy. Instead of one year on bread and water, give twenty-six solidi in alms, fast till Noon on

one day of each week and till Vespers on another, and in the three Lents bestow in alms half of what he receives."

From the 8th century onwards the very severe penances of the early Church were changed into prayers, fastings, pilgrimages, almsgiving and such like.

Bearing in mind these four essential points we study carefully the definition of an Indulgence: It is the remission by God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven; a remission which the Church grants apart from the Sacrament of Penance.

When a man sins gravely his soul is deprived of grace and he cannot go to heaven unless he repents. When he does repent, the eternal punishment (condemnation to hell) is taken away with the guilt of the sin; but, as we have seen, he must still try to make up to God for the way he has disturbed right order and the unlawful pleasure he has enjoyed. This debt is called *temporal* punishment, as opposed to eternal. It will end sometime; eternal punishment will not.

It is this temporal punishment the Church takes away by Indulgences. She applies to souls the satisfactions of Christ and the Saints which are in her treasury.

The living members of the Church gain Indulgences by way of absolution, that is through the direct jurisdiction of the Church. The souls in Purgatory gain them by way of prayer, for they are beyond the direct jurisdiction of the Church.

Today, many people misunderstand Indulgences. They are not pardons for sin, nor permissions to commit sin, nor exemptions from some law, nor the automatic release of a soul from Purgatory. The Church has never taught that an Indulgence can be applied to any given soul with unfailling effect.

There are two kinds of Indulgences: Plenary, by which the entire debt of temporal punishment is taken away; and Partial, by which only a part of that debt is remitted.

If, in a Catholic prayer book, you see "100 days Indulgence" at the end of a prayer, it does not mean that if you say that prayer you will be let off 100 days in Purgatory. What it does mean is that the Church regards the saying of that prayer as roughly equivalent now to the doing of 100 days of the old canonical penance in former times. But as these penances varied, there can

be no absolute or constant standard. The Church has never really defined what is meant by an Indulgence of so many days or years. The present terminology has its roots in the remissions of the canonical penalties as we have described.

Many benefits have come to the Church and her members through the practice of Indulgences. They remind us of the need for penance; they encourage us to pray to gain them; they are a splendid form of charity for the departed; they are a means of promoting the glory of God.

**For further reading:** The Catholic Doctrine of Indulgences, Do 126, 6d.

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