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Pope Francis: "The Word of God Precedes the Bible and Surpasses It"

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On April 12, 2013, Pope Francis, in a meeting with the members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, explained succinctly the Catholic understanding of Scripture, shared with the Orthodox Churches, but rejected by most Protestant denominations.

The meeting was held at the conclusion of the annual assembly of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, and the Holy Father noted that the theme of the assembly this year had been "Inspiration and Truth in the Bible."

As the Vatican Information Service reported, Pope Francis emphasized that this theme "affects not only the individual believer but the whole Church, for the Church's life and mission are founded on the Word of God, which is the soul of theology as well as the inspiration of all of Christian existence." But the Word of God, in the Catholic and Orthodox understanding, is not confined to Scripture; rather, Pope Francis noted,

Sacred Scripture is the written testimony of the divine Word, the canonical memory that attests to the event of Revelation. However, the Word of God precedes the Bible and surpasses it. That is why the centre of our faith isn't just a book, but a salvation history and above all a person, Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh.

The relationship between Christ, the Word Made Flesh, and the Scriptures, the written Word of God, lies at the heart of what the Church calls Sacred Tradition:

It is precisely because the Word of God embraces and extends beyond Scripture that, in order to properly understand it, the Holy Spirit's constant presence, who guides us "to all truth," is necessary. It is necessary to place ourselves within the great Tradition that has, with the Holy Spirit's assistance and the Magisterium's guidance, recognized the canonical writings as the Word that God addresses to his people, who have never ceased meditating upon it and discovering inexhaustible riches from it.

The Bible is a form of God's revelation to man, but the most complete form of that revelation is found in the person of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures arose out of the life of the Church—that is, out of the life of those believers who encountered Christ, both personally and through their fellow believers. They were written within the context of that relationship with Christ, and the selection of the canon—of the books that would become the Bible—occurred within that context. But even after the canon of Scripture is determined, Scripture remains only a portion of the Word of God, because the fullness of the Word is found in the life of the Church and her relationship to Christ:

In fact, Sacred Scripture is the Word of God in that it is written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Sacred Tradition, instead, transmits the Word of God in its entirety, entrusted by Christ the Lord and by the Holy Spirit to the Apostles and their successors, so that these, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, might faithfully preserve it with their preaching, might expound and propound it.

And that is why severing Scripture, and especially the interpretation of Scripture, from the life of the Church and her teaching authority is very dangerous, because it presents a portion of the Word of God as if it were the entirety:

The interpretation of Sacred Scriptures cannot be just an individual academic effort, but must always be compared to, inserted within, and authenticated by the living tradition of the Church. This norm is essential in identifying the proper and reciprocal relationship between the exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church. The texts that God inspired were entrusted to the Community of believers, the Church of Christ, to nourish the faith and to guide the life of charity.

Separated from the Church, either through academic treatment or through individual interpretation, Scripture is cut off from the person of Christ, Who lives on through the Church that He established and that He entrusted to the guidance of the Holy Spirit:

All of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgement of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.

Understanding the relationship of Scripture and Tradition, and the role of the Church in integrating the Word of God as revealed in Scripture into the Word of God as revealed most fully in Christ, is essential. Scripture lies at the heart of the life of the Church, not because it stands alone and is self-interpreted, but precisely because "the centre of our faith" is "a salvation history and above all a person, Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh," and not "just a book." Tearing the book from the heart of the Church not only leaves a hole in the Church but tears the life of Christ from the Scriptures.

(Pope Francis venerates the book of the Gospels at Easter Vigil Mass at St. Peter's Basilica, March 30, 2013. Photo by Franco Origlia/Getty Images)

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