

GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW

INTRODUCTION

There is only one Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and there are four inspired versions of the one Gospel: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Gospel means "good news." It reveals the "good news" about the salvation of mankind. As Paul explains, "I mean that God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's transgressions against them." (II Cor. 5:19) The Gospel brings to us divine revelation. It reveals the love of God in Christ and His work of universal salvation.

The Church emphasizes, "By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man is made clear to us in Christ who is the Mediator and at the same time the fullness of all revelation." (Div. Rev. 1-2) Through Christ we come not only to know God and experience salvation, but we encounter in Christ the fullness of revelation because Christ is God Incarnated. The Church clearly rejects any claims to be public revelation between apostolic times and the Second Coming of Christ, ".. .we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Div. Rev. 1-4)

God chose certain individuals called prophets and apostles to make known divine truth. This Divine Revelation, when revealed through the preaching of prophets and apostles, became Religious Tradition within the community. This Divine Revelation, when recorded by inspired scribes, became Holy Scripture within the community.

INSPIRATION AND REVELATION

However, we must not deduce from the above that the entire written Bible is divine revelation. Much of what is written in the Scriptures concerns itself with the circumstances surrounding the revelation and the effects and the reactions to God's revealed Will. We will have no trouble if we bear in mind the distinction between revelation and inspiration. Revelation concerns those "deepest truths about God and the salvation of man." The word "inspiration" comes from the Latin "inspirare" which means, "to breathe into." To say the Scriptures are "inspired" implies that the Holy Spirit of God, in some manner, influences these writings. The Catholic Church, through the teaching of its bishops in council, confirms the divine inspiration of the Bible and

defines the nature of inspiration.

"Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors, or sacred writers, must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation." (Div. Rev. 111-11) This teaching is subtle and easily misunderstood. It insists inspiration is limited to "that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation." In other words, it is not the purpose or the intention of the sacred authors to teach anything but that sacred truth needful and useful for salvation - regardless of whatever literary means may be devised through which to express these truths. We are not to read more into the Scriptures than was intended by the Holy Spirit. Every word of the Sacred Scriptures is inspired, but not every inspired word is a divine revelation. To know what God intended to communicate through the sacred writers - and actually did communicate through their writings - calls for proper interpretation of the Scriptures.

INTERPRETATION OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

A proper interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures seeks to know the literary meaning or sense of what was written. The literary sense of the Scripture is that sense intended by the inspired human author and that sense actually expressed by the words used by the sacred writer. Therefore, a proper interpretation of the Scriptures seeks to know what the words actually expressed at that historical moment and what the author actually intended to express in the words and literary form used. Obviously, this is no simple task. Not only must the ancient usage of the language be understood, but equally important would be the circumstances and the culture in which the author lived and wrote.

We must seek to go back, at least nineteen hundred years, to properly interpret the Sacred Writers. The past is the past and different from the present. The past must be permitted to give its own account. The ancient writers and their world must be understood if the full message of the Sacred Scriptures is to shine forth. This demands much scholarship and research.

One of the most valid principles for proper interpretation has been that the best interpreter of the Scriptures are the Scriptures themselves. Any

interpretation of a passage from the Scriptures must be seen in the light of the entire revelation. It must be reflected against the background of the entire Scriptures. For an example, we can read in Exodus 33:11: *"The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another."* In the next verse, we read that the Lord says to Moses, *"You are my intimate friend. You have found favor with me."* The most literal interpretation of those words would be that Moses looked upon the face of God. This seems to be plainly stated in the text. Furthermore, a relationship of friendship and intimacy appears to substantiate such an interpretation. However, this is not what the author intended. We have only to read further and we know that the author never intended this interpretation even though his previous words said to Moses, *"But my face you cannot see, for no man sees me and still lives."* Often we must not only read other verses of the text but other sacred books - to maintain the harmony which rightly belongs in divine revelation.

We know there is harmony between the divine realities and truths taught both in the Scriptures and within the Church. For anyone's interpretation of Scripture to be proper it must be in harmony with the teaching of the Church concerning matters of faith and morals. The Bible does not claim to be the fullness of divine revelation. The Church proclaims Jesus Christ to be the fullness of divine revelation. Christ remains with the Church and guides it through His Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit the Church possesses the complete treasure of revelation. She acknowledges this Holy Spirit to be "the living voice of the gospel" in the Church. The Church holds that a proper interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures must be in harmony not only with the rest of the Scriptures, but likewise in harmony with the traditional teaching of the Church. Since the Holy Spirit is the author of both - there is harmony between the revealed elements of faith. "Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is committed to the Church."

Prayer must accompany the reading and studying of Scripture. Unless the Holy Spirit enlightens the reader or student the effort becomes, in the words of St. Jerome, as effective as stones skipping across a frozen pond. Without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, the Scripture does not reveal its depths nor serve up that food which gives life and nourishment to the spirit. The Church teaches that divine revelation demands no less than "the obedience of faith," which consists in a "full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals." The faithful Christian not only believes the truths revealed, but is guided in everyday life by those truths. For the Catholic Church, both the

Bible and Sacred Tradition are the supreme rule of faith. There can be no contradiction between the two.

THE FOUR GOSPEL ACCOUNTS

Concerning the four Gospel accounts, in particular, the Church gives to them the position of "pre-eminence" within the Bible and speaks of them as "the foundations of faith." The four Gospel accounts are a product of the revelation received by the Twelve Apostles from Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This revelation the Apostles preached first in the world and the Christian community conserved correctly. The Church attributes the four written Gospel accounts both to the Apostles and apostolic men such as Mark and Luke. The Second Vatican Council authoritatively taught, "The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what the apostles preached in fulfillment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of faith, namely, the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John ..." "The authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explicating some things in view of the situation but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus." (Div. Rev. V18-19)

Biblical scholars generally agree that an analysis of the contents of the Gospels reveals the existence of smaller literary units such as miracle stories, parables, accounts of the passion and resurrection narratives. These literary units existed within the Christian Community and were passed on through the preaching and teaching ministries within the Church. Because of a need to preserve the apostolic teachings within the churches, they began to be compiled and joined together in written accounts -ultimately assuming the present four Gospel accounts.

The four evangelists did use the material available to them to present a theological understanding of Jesus Christ for that Christian community for which they wrote. In order to present this material logically, the sacred writers followed a pattern of presentation already accepted within the Church. The Jesus presented in these four Gospel accounts is indeed the Jesus perceived by the early Church. One biblical scholar has wisely observed, "... those who base their faith on the Christ of the Gospels are really basing their

**faith on what the early Church taught about Christ. From Pentecost on it has been impossible to approach Christ except through the Church's preaching."
(Raymond E. Brown)**

THE GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW

With this foundation, let us now proceed to reflect upon St. Matthew and the gospel account credited to him. Matthew first appeared on the historical scene in the Gospels probably as a government employee of King Herod Antipas working for the office of internal revenue. Matthew gives this account of his call to discipleship: "As he moved on, Jesus saw a man named Matthew at his post where taxes were collected. He said to him, 'Follow me.' Matthew got up and followed him." (Mt. 9:9) The name Matthew comes from the Aramaic "mattai" - a shorter form of the Hebrew "Mattanyah" - which means, "gift of Yahweh." Jesus would teach that no one comes to Him unless the Father draws him. Evidently, Matthew was a gift to Jesus from the Father.

Both Mark and Luke refer to Matthew as "Levi." Some have suggested a name change because Matthew had such a bad reputation under his old name. However, we know that name changing was not uncommon and it often denoted a complete change of life and personality. In the account Luke gives, he adds this statement, "Leaving everything behind, Levi stood up and became his follower." It is a story of a complete conversion. Luke goes on to say, "After that, Levi gave a great reception for Jesus in his house, in which he was joined by a large crowd of tax collectors and others at dinner." (Lk. 5:28,29) Apparently, Matthew introduced as many sinners as possible to Jesus. The name "Matthew" appears in all four enumerations of the Twelve Apostles. However, only in Matthew's account do we read "Matthew the tax collector." Obviously he was profoundly impressed that God, in Jesus, could love and call, to be an apostle, anyone like himself.

Early Church records and tradition confirm that Matthew the Apostle wrote the first of the four inspired gospel accounts. By the beginning of the second century, the Gospel attributed to Matthew was accepted in Antioch and Rome - important Christian centers. Writing around 170 A.D., Irenaeus gives this account, "Matthew wrote a version of the Gospel for the Hebrews in their own tongue, at the time that Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel and founding the Church in Rome." Origen, writing around 233 A.D., said that it was a truth rooted in tradition that the Apostle and publican Matthew wrote the first Gospel in Hebrew characters for converted Jews. St. Jerome wrote

around 400 A.D., "Matthew, also called Levi, first a publican and later an apostle, was the first to commit to writing the Gospel of Christ; he wrote in Aramaic; it was later translated into Greek, but the translator is unknown." When the authors spoke of "Hebrew," it has been understood they referred not to the classical Hebrew of antiquity, but to Aramaic — "the mother tongue" of the Palestinian people of apostolic times.

If Matthew wrote in Aramaic for a Palestinian community, it would have been previous to 70 A.D. Between the years 66 to 70 A.D., during the Jewish war with the Romans, most Palestinian Christians would have fled or been destroyed. As already noted - Irenaeus places its composition prior to 68 A.D. Those who support this theory would place the writing of the Gospel in Jerusalem. Those who argue for a date after 70 A.D., suggest Antioch in Syria as the place of composition.

Despite the testimony of antiquity, the existence of an original Aramaic version is denied by many modern scholars, mainly on the grounds that the Greek Matthew which we possess is manifestly not a translation from Aramaic.

It is commonly held today by scholars to have been originally written in Greek by an unknown author - probably in Antioch around 85 A.D. However many do not accept this theory. In all fairness to modern scholarship, it still must be said that the evidence presented by them is insufficient to reject the traditional Christian belief.

THE INTENTION OF ST. MATTHEW

There is little disagreement among biblical scholars over the purpose for which Matthew wrote. He wrote to assist a people who were making a spiritual transition from being Jews to being Christians. It was a time of traumatic change in faith for them. If Matthew wrote before the fall of Jerusalem, he wrote for a people who were members of what would be seen as a Jewish sect that accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah - a group called "Nazoreans." This community underwent religious persecution rather early in its existence. The ordinary people may have tolerated these "Nazoreans" and even admired them, but the religious leaders and the zealots did not. The deaths of Stephen and James and the attempts upon the lives of Peter and Paul give proof of this. If Matthew wrote after the fall of Jerusalem, he wrote for a Jewish Christian community that had to face the end of temple worship,

a religious life and a Judaism they knew. He also wrote for a group of people who found themselves being forcefully excluded from synagogue worship and being attacked as heretics for their faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Matthew presents Jesus of Nazareth to his readers as the kingly son of David and the New Prophet foretold by Moses—and a prophet superior to Moses. He presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Matthew emphasizes particularly that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. Matthew pictures Jesus delivering His greatest discourse from a mount. He deliberately seeks to evoke the image of Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Law from Yahweh. Matthew suggests a new authority superior to Moses' and that Jesus himself was superior to the Mosaic Law. By His own authority, he makes and changes divine laws. The changes demanded by Jesus call men to a high level of holiness. The holiness and the perfection of the Heavenly Father became the pattern for human holiness.

Scholars agree, and history confirms, that the genius of Matthew lay in this unique presentation of the teachings of Jesus. Matthew compresses the thought of Jesus into bullet-like quality carrying an explosive force upon impact. It is not without reason that the sayings of Jesus most quoted, in the present and in the past, come from the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew presents Jesus as a Person possessing extraordinary power. He follows a certain recognized pattern in the presentation of miraculous deeds: a person is introduced; the request made and Jesus' response; its effect and its effect upon the crowd or the witnesses. One author observed that these miracles have the appearance of being removed out of time and space and create the impression of an imbreak of heavenly power into an earthly situation.

Jesus appears in the Gospel with respect for the law and authority of Israel. However, when this authority rejects the authority of the Messiah - the power of the kingdom passes out of the hands of Israel. Matthew's originality has been noted in that he identifies the kingdom of heaven with the Church on earth. It is made clear in those parables recounted in 13:24-30, 36-44, 47-50 that the Church - the kingdom of God - is a visible society upon this earth of which the present disciples are members. It is a hierarchical society, and its future governing body is revealed in Chapter eighteen.

When it is all said and done, Matthew, from the opening scene in his gospel

account, has been moving his readers towards that final presentation of the Risen Christ upon the mountaintop; to which his disciples have been summoned to hear his final proclamation, "All power in heaven and earth has been given to me!" and, hearing, they believe, and "leaving everything behind," they answer when he calls to them, "Come follow me!"

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INTRODUCTION

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS

With the exception of your introductory lesson you will be given Scripture readings and questions for six days. You should prayerfully meditate on them and seek guidance from the Holy Spirit in answering the daily questions. Do not worry if you cannot answer all the questions. The Holy Spirit may wait to give you the answer during communal sharing. Your daily meditation on these Scriptures is the important element. The questions are to aid and direct your meditation and your answers are to add to your communal sharing.

SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (MEMORIZE PLEASE)

"TEACH THEM TO CARRY OUT EVERYTHING I HAVE COMMANDED YOU. AND KNOW THAT I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, UNTIL THE END OF THE WORLD!" (MT. 28:20)

First Day: Read from Summary: Introduction, and from II Corinthians 5:16-21 and I John 1:1-4.

- 1. What is meant by Divine Revelation?**
- 2. What do you see to be the very heart and essence of Christian Revelation?**
- 3. Why do you think the Church accepts no further public revelation after the time of the Apostles?**
- 4. What are the two means through which Divine Revelations still exist in the church today?**

Second Day: Read from the Summary: Inspiration and Revelation, and from 2Timothy 3:1-17.

- 1. What do you understand by divine inspiration of the Scriptures?**

2. What would you say is the difference between revelation and inspiration?

3. What do you understand by "all Scripture is inspired but not all Scripture is revealed."

4. What do you learn from the readings from second Timothy?

Third Day: Read from Summary: Interpretation of Sacred Scripture and from John 14:16,25,26; 16:13; 20:30,31; 21:25.

1. How would you describe the difference between a literal interpretation and a literary interpretation of the Scriptures?

2. What do you understand by the expression that the Holy Spirit is "the living voice of the gospel" in the Church?

3. What do you understand by the statement that the best interpretation of the Scripture is the Scripture?

4. What do you learn about the Scriptures from John 20:30,31 and 21:25?

Fourth Day: Read from Summary: The Four Gospel Accounts and from Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1,2.

1. According to the teaching of the Church what is the position of the Four Gospels in the Bible?

2. What does the Church teach about the origin and nature of the Four Gospels?

3. What does St. Luke teach you about the composition of his gospel account?

4. What role do you see the Church playing in the creation of the Four Gospels?

Fifth Day: Read from Summary: The Gospel of St. Matthew and Luke 5:27-32

- 1. What do we learn from Luke's account of Matthew's conversion?**
- 2. What does the call of Matthew teach you?**
- 3. What does the testimony of the early Church tell us about the origin of the Gospel?**
- 4. What do many modern scholars teach about the authors and origin of this Gospel?**

Sixth Day: Read from Summary: The Intention of St. Matthew, and Deuteronomy 18:15-21.

- 1. What do you learn from the reading in Deuteronomy?**
- 2. For what purpose does Matthew write?**
- 3. How does he present Jesus Christ to his readers?**
- 4. What do you learn from Matthew 28:20?**