

On Holy Scripture

Elder Cleopa of Romania

Inquirer: What do we mean by the term Holy Scripture?

Elder Cleopa: The term Holy Scripture denotes the sum of holy books that were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit within a time period of close to 1,500 years, namely, from Moses, 1,400 years before Christ, until the writer of the Apocalypse, nearly 100 years after Christ.

Inq.: Why don't the bishops and priests sanction Christians, who are members of the Church, to interpret and preach publicly the word of God from the Scriptures?

EC: Each Christian has the need to read Holy Scripture, yet each Christian does not also have the authority or ability to teach and interpret the words of Scripture. This privileged authority is reserved for the Church via its holy clergy and theologians, men who are instructed in and knowledgeable of the true faith. When we consider how our Savior gave the grace of teaching to His Holy Apostles (Mat. 28:20) and not to the masses it is easy for us to see that the prerogative to teach is held only by the bishops, priests and theologians of our Church. It was the Apostles who were sent by Christ to teach and to celebrate the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments). Our Apostle Paul says: How shall they preach, except they be sent? (Rom. 10:15). Accordingly, the bishops are the lawful successors to the Apostles and those sent for the preaching (κήρυγμα) to the people. Paul entrusts the heavy burden of the instruction of the people to Timothy and not to the faithful. He speaks of this elsewhere: Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? (1 Cor. 12:29) Again he says to Timothy that the clergy must be apt to teach others (1 Tim. 3:2). He does not, however, say the same thing for the faithful. He makes a distinction between shepherd and sheep, between teacher and those taught. Still, the teachers cannot teach whatever they would like, but that which the Church teaches universally. They teach in the name of the Church and of Christ. Not everyone has the intellectual ability and the requisite divine grace necessary to expound Holy Scripture correctly. The Apostle Peter also says this in his second epistle, referring to the epistles of the Apostle Paul. He says the following: There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures (2 Peter 3:16).

Inq.: Some say that it is not right that members of the Church don't have the right to interpret and expound upon Scripture. As this excerpt says, each Christian knows how to render Holy Scripture: But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things, and the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you (1 John 2:20, 27).

EC: Holy Scripture is like a very deep well wherein is comprised the infinite wisdom of God. If someone thirsty dives into this well to drink of all its water, he will be drowned within. If, however, he will fetch the water with a bucket and from there will drink with a cup, then there is no fear of being engulfed. What man is so crazed as to wish to plunge into such an abyss of water without knowing how to swim? Holy Scripture, according to the Fathers, is bone and no one will venture with teeth fit for milk to break the strong bones of Holy Scripture - for those teeth will be crushed.

You've read in Scripture about the eunuch of Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians? He was reading the Prophet Isaiah when the Apostle Philip asked him if he understood that which he read, to which he replied: How can I, except some man should guide me? (Acts 8:31).

You realize also that the word unction, or anointing (χρίσμα) that you mentioned above means the effusion of the Holy Spirit in the Mystery of Holy Chrism, directly after Baptism (Acts 8:17).

The phrase you know all things signifies everything that contains Christian truth and salvation, as well as everything that is related to the antichrist and his adherents, to whom the subsequent verse of the epistle of the holy John the Theologian refers. One must not, therefore, teach according to one's own understanding and perception, for one will be deceived.

Inq.: All the same, it is said that each Christian has the right and obligation to read Holy Scripture on his own, as the Savior admonishes us: You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness of me (Jn. 5:39).

EC: Be careful, because many heretics of earlier eras made bold to immerse themselves in the fathomless sea of Scripture and drowned spiritually, thus perishing together with as many as followed them. They don't have all the same spiritual maturity. They are not all able to understand the mystery of Holy Scripture.

Holy Scripture is understood and explained in three ways: 1) according to its literal meaning, namely the nominal, grammatical, verbal and historical, 2) allegorically or metaphorically, which is superior to the former, and 3) spiritually. According to the Fathers, the simplest of senses to alight upon is the first meaning, according to the letter of Scripture; to penetrate with discretion to the nature of Scripture requires modest learning, while to explain the depth of the meanings of Scripture is of the highest spiritual advancement and in need of the most divine grace. The perfect wisdom of Scripture belongs, according to Saint Paul, to the perfect: Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to naught: But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory (1 Cor. 2: 6-7).

Inq.: There are those who contend that it is not necessary for someone to have much learning to be able to understand the teachings of Scripture, since to the unlearned He revealed the wisdom of these teachings, just as the Savior says: I thank Thee, O Father, ... because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes (Mat. 11:25).

EC: Yes, God revealed His wisdom to those that were known to be babes in wickedness but not in mind and judgment. In other words, He revealed His wisdom to those who, with respect to good works, were perfect and had attained to the innocence of infants. That's why Paul counsels the Corinthians as follows: Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be ye men (1 Cor. 14:20).

Inq.: Yet, God rebuked the wisdom and knowledge of men, as this passage indicates: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent (Is. 29:14). Saint Paul also says: Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? (1 Cor. 1:19). Might it not be that God is not able to give the wisdom of understanding the Scriptures to certain people who are worldly-wise, as the Orthodox maintain?

EC: You should know that God does not condemn just any wisdom and knowledge, but that which kills man spiritually. If He were to censure every wisdom, He would have to reject also the wisdom of Solomon, the wisdom of Joshua, son of Sirac, the wisdom of Christ the Saviour, of the Prophets and Apostles, to those whom He gave the commandment to be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves (Mat. 10:16). Yet, it isn't like this in the least. Hence, take care not to resemble those to whom the Savior said: You do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God (Mat. 22:29).

Inq.: Is Holy Scripture sufficient in order to guide man to salvation?

EC: No, it is not sufficient to guide man to salvation, inasmuch as, firstly, it wasn't given to man from the beginning and, secondly, when it was given it wasn't the only authentic text, with regard to the salvation of human souls, because before it there was the Holy Tradition. Many years before Moses began writing the first books of the Old Testament, there was sacred piety in the community of the people of Israel. Similarly, the books of the New Testament began to be written ten years after the formal foundation of the Church, which took place on the day of Pentecost. The Church chose and sealed as inspired by God the books of the two Testaments over one hundred years later. These then comprised the declared Canon of the books of Holy Scripture. Thereafter the Church maintained this Canon of Truth, inasmuch as it is the very pillar and ground of truth (1 Tim. 3:15). The Holy Spirit operates within all of this for the preservation of the truth about salvation. Where the Church is, says Saint Jerome, there also is the Spirit of God and where the Spirit of God is, there also is the Church and all grace - since the Spirit is truth.