

December 26, 2004
Sunday After Christmas

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I truly wonder if Christians have yet come to grips adequately with the invention of moveable type. Indeed, it seems obvious to me that the Christian life has never been quite the same since Gutenberg's publication of the Mazarin Bible at Mainz in 1456. Prior to that date, a person joined the Church and found the Bible there; the Church was the Bible's normal context. More recently, however it has been just as usual for someone to read the Bible and then maybe, just maybe, to find the Church.

Perhaps no one at the time fully realized what would be the far-reaching consequences of the world's first experiment with the printing press. Surely no rational person felt threatened, right away, by the mere printing of a Latin Bible. Indeed, even now no one would dispute that the printing of the Bible was a singular blessing.

Within a short time there would be biblical translations into all the languages of Europe, making Holy Scripture directly available to others besides the clergy and those with a university education. Gradually the Bible would become part of each family's cherished possessions, in all lands from Ireland to Egypt, and within a half century of Gutenberg's experiment, it would arrive in the New World on the second voyage of Christopher Columbus. What an awesome blessing!

Was this, however, an unmixed blessing? The question can honestly be argued, because the evidence from Church History seems to render the answer ambiguous at best. To begin with, the printing of the Bible produced, as one of its first direct results, a certain purely physical separation of the Scriptures from the parish church. From that point on, the Scriptures would just as easily be found in a person's home. A man did not need to go to church in order to read them. Would anyone deny that this was a good thing?

Nonetheless, an unexpected result of this development was a lowered esteem for the Church with respect to Holy Scripture, because men forgot—as simple points of history—that the Church preceded the Bible, that the Bible was written for and within the Church, and that the Church determined the content of the Bible. Men lost sight of these clear, plain historical facts. At least some men did.

These facts and their implications, however, had been well understood for a millennium of a half. A visit to their parish church had been the common access of most Christians to Holy Scripture. In each parish church that was sufficiently prosperous to afford one, a copy of the Bible, or at least the New Testament and the Psalms, was chained to a lectern--chained so that this very valuable asset could not be stolen--and from this text the pastor preached to the congregation during the regular services. For the rest, anyone else who could read was free to enter the church building at any time and do so. This universal Christian custom left on

everyone's mind the impression that the Bible belonged to--strictly speaking was the property of--the Church.

This ancient impression was altered with the invention of moveable type. As copies of the printed Bible became the physical property of individual believers, the reading of the Scriptures became less and less a "church thing." The Church became secondary, and the context of Bible reading was shifted to the individual home--and the individual conscience.

This separation of the Bible and the Church caused the Church to be taken less seriously as the proper, God-appointed interpreter of the Bible. The Church became subsidiary to each person's individual faith, expressed primarily in his encounter with the Lord in his reading of the Holy Word, a copy of which *belonged to him*. Possessing his own Bible, he felt himself qualified to say what the Bible meant. The individual, thus deciding biblical doctrine for himself, was in a position to judge the Church. In this context it became rather difficult to regard the Church as "the pillar and ground of the truth."

This was the context in which men began to ask a brand new question, which no one had ever thought of before: "Which has higher authority, the Bible or the Church?" However, if it is true--as Christians had believed for fourteen hundred years--that the Church was older than the Bible, that the Bible was written for and within the Church, and that the Church determined the Bible's content, then this question really doesn't seem very useful.

The more useful question, I suggest, the question that really hits closer to the truth, is also the question easier to answer: Whose understanding of the Bible is the more likely to be correct, the Church's understanding or my understanding? In my own case, the answer to this is plenty simple.

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