



NATIONAL Eucharistic Revival

Step-by-Step Walk Through the Mass Do This in Remembrance of Me, Part 22: The Harmony of the Gospels By FR. LUKE SPANNAGEL



Is anyone else still thinking about having four different Gospels? This question was discussed and pondered by some of the earliest Christians. Some tried to develop a harmonious account of the life, death, and teachings of Jesus, and the result was a kind of one-volume gospel. Although we don't have any historical manuscripts of it, a one-volume harmonization called "The Gospel" is referred to by some early Christian writers, including St. Ignatius of Antioch (writing around 115 AD). There is a manuscript dated 170 AD by a man named Tatian, who was a student of St. Justin Martyr. This manuscript is called the *Diatessaron* and is subtitled "The Gospel Harmony." Others tried this as well through the ages, including St. Augustine (writing in 405 AD) who wrote a work titled "On the Harmony of the Evangelists."

Uniquely Harmonious

Remarkably, what each person found was that the four Gospels could not be squeezed into one without losing something important. As we have reviewed previously, every detail of each of the Gospels is written for a specific purpose. To miss one of these details is to miss an important part of the life of Jesus and his message of salvation to the world. Each of the four Gospel writers gives us a special understanding of Jesus, something we would miss if we forced them into just one Gospel. As the early Church moved forward toward the finalizing of the Canon of Scripture (the official list of the books included in the Bible), we see that the four Gospels are consistently included and honored.

The Canon of Scripture

The Canon of the Bible is the official list of texts discerned and compiled by the Roman Catholic Church over time and confirmed by Church Councils, first completed around the time of the Council of Hippo in 390 AD. This list was reiterated by the Council of Trent in the 1500s and again at the First Vatican Council in the 1800s. We believe that certain books are inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore are included in the canon. No known inspired book is outside the canon and no non-inspired book is inside it. Since the Church is entrusted with Sacred Scripture, the Church declares what is included in the canon. A couple of other definitions are helpful here:

Inspiration: The Holy Spirit was present and inspired the human writers of the Bible so what God intended—and only those things—were not only understood correctly, but following from this understanding, the Gospel writers wrote them down, expressed in appropriate and meaningful language. (See *Providentissimus Deus*, 1, 4, and 14).

Inerrancy: The Bible is free from errors, not just in faith and morals, but in all parts that pertain to and which God wished to teach for our salvation. (See *Dei Verbum*, 6 and 11).

These definitions help us know with confidence that what we are reading is God's Word to us, and they can also help us understand what we read. We come to see the unity of all of Scripture and that all the books are important. We read through the lens of our lived faith and tradition. We value how Scripture has been understood and prayed with over the last 2000 years. We recognize that the Church Fathers and saints have much to tell us about Scripture and how it helps us live life in Christ today.

A Synopsis of the Gospels

An interesting alternative to the idea of a Gospel harmony is called a Synopsis of the Gospels. A synopsis keeps all four Gospels intact as they were written and arranges the passages in four columns so that all four Gospels are side-by-side. The passages are arranged and spaced out so that one can compare the details of each Gospel account. Doing this really helps one see how each of the four writers gives a special flavor to the life and ministry of Jesus. A synopsis is like having each of the Gospel writers with us, sitting in his own armchair, telling us about Jesus.