

## THE MEANING OF TRADITION

When most of us went through the seminary, Tradition was looked upon either (passively) as a source of revelation separate from and complementary to Scripture, or (actively) as the magisterium of the Church. It all seemed rather dull and unsatisfying.

But today a richer and fuller and more dynamic concept of Tradition is emerging—one tied in with the whole life of the Church. If revelation is the message of God as *given* to us fully and once-for-all in and through Christ, then Tradition is this same message as *continued* in and through the very life of the Church, a life which involves every member of the Church.

### REVELATION

The notion of revelation itself is all important, and it has been much enriched in recent times. Far from being a mere body of facts communicated to us by God, it is seen as the very self-giving of God to us. It is given its final form in Christ—the whole Christ-event, everything Christ was, and spoke and did, every gesture, attitude and response. Christ is both the perfect sacrament of God's self-gift and in his human intellect and will, the perfect response to God's communication. Hence Christ, the Word of God Incarnate, *is* the gospel message of the infant Church. The total Christ-event is the one ultimate source of revelation. This is what the Apostles received then, not just as facts, but as a living and experienced reality.

### TRADITION

Now, in somewhat parallel fashion, modern theology is coming to see Tradition precisely as the *continuation* of this living gospel message in and through the total life of the Church. This continuation involves preservation, presentation and development as well as content; in other words, active and passive elements.

## ACTIVE TRADITION

Just as God's revelation to us is both revealing activity and what is communicated, i.e., *actus revelandi* and *revelata*, so Tradition is both *actus tradendi* and *tradita*.

Now the activity whereby the gospel message is passed on is not just the action of the magisterium but the whole life of the Church itself. Christ's message is not being passed along as a ball would be from player to player, merely exteriorly. It is passed on precisely by being lived, by a lived and living transmission. This, then, involves the whole life of the Mystical Body—hence each and every member. Indeed, if we can say (as is being freely admitted today) that all baptized people are somehow members of the Church, we should be willing to acknowledge the role of all Christians in the "traditioning" of the gospel. The *traditum*, then, is not just a body of facts, a treasure to be guarded, but an experience to be lived and communicated and expressed more fully precisely by the love and dynamism involved in living Christ.

In this way, it is possible to explain how some of the content of the *traditum* can be possessed and handed on for centuries only as a "lived implicit," as contained in the experience of the gospel message. This underlines the importance of such things as the liturgy and "attitudes" of the early Church. Cannot the Christian live a doctrine long before he knows it explicitly just as a child can live the virtues and convictions of parents long before understanding them?

It would be absurd, naturally, to think that mere humans could preserve and transmit anything intact for very long. But Christians are more than a grouping of individuals: they are "the People of God," the Mystical Body of Christ animated by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. The whole Church as a community lives this Christ-event, and it lives it in the world *today*.

What is the role of the magisterium then? The pope and bishops concentrate in themselves the living Tradition which is the inalienable possession of the whole Church. The magisterium is the divinely appointed official mouthpiece of this "traditioning" process. Only it can recognize infallibly and declare unerringly that such or such an

expression of the message is valid and authentic. So we must neither exaggerate nor minimize the decisive role of the magisterium in the Church.

#### PASSIVE TRADITION

Passive Tradition refers to the content of the message, the *traditum*, the deposit of faith. But to think of it in terms of mere facts is inadequate. God's self-giving can never be captured in this way alone. The Apostles certainly experienced this difficulty in passing the Christ-event on to men—men subject to all the limitations of a particular time and culture. Even for themselves, revelation was a person, it was events and truths experienced and lived rather than formulated in neat phrases. Yet it *was* communicated, and there *was* content. However, the *traditum* was not communicated so much in formulas as by an "experience" of Christ and his teaching: a way of thinking, living and acting. This gospel message communicated by the Apostles to the Church is the *depositum fidei*. The Apostles first, and then the whole Church, received it partly as a "known explicit" and partly as a "lived implicit."

In the Church of the Apostles, this gospel message was objectified, concretized, externalized and (most importantly) *lived* in what we might call "tangible" ways—and always within the context of the Church. Kerygma, catechesis, liturgical worship, ways of Christian living were all involved. But, in general, we can speak of the Tradition or gospel message as being passed on in the bible, and in apostolic traditions (with small "t," and in the plural), namely, ways of Christian life and worship.

#### TRADITION AND THE BIBLE

The Old Testament is the divinely willed type of the new covenant (and how many Christian truths the Fathers could find there!); while the New Testament represents the written and inspired self-expression of the primitive Christian community's experience of the Christ-event.

Now, the inevitable question. Is the total message contained in the Bible? A growing number of theologians—I would say a rapidly

growing number, among whom are the most prominent of the Europeans—answer yes. What they mean is that, at least by the end of the apostolic era, the substance of the Christian message would have found its way into the inspired accounts of the kerygma and catechesis. Karl Rahner explains that holding to a two-source theory—especially to explain development of dogmas—would imply that a book composed by God himself is still not sufficient, not even in regard to the function of this book, namely, the communication of that which God has revealed (*Inspiration in the Bible*, Herder & Herder, New York 1961 p. 73).

No Catholic, however, will hold to *scriptura sola*, to scripture alone as sufficient. For even if it contains basically or *in radice* all revealed truths, it can only be fully and authentically appreciated when used and read in and by the Church. But this would mean, then, that as far as content is concerned Tradition would not contain more than the Scriptures; the plus-value would only be in terms of interpretation, atmosphere, milieu. Tradition would then be the living context in which Scripture must be read. From the time of Irenaeus onward, Tradition has been seen as the indispensable key to Scripture. (This point holds, even if one maintains that not all revelation is contained in the Bible. But then, of course, the plus-value of Tradition is *more* than interpretation.)

Supporting this general view of Scripture-Tradition is an incident at Vatican II. When the schema on the "Sources of Revelation" was thrown out (partly because it implied dual sources), one new name rather widely mentioned was "*Scriptura in ore Ecclesiae*." This stresses the extreme importance of the Bible, but preserves the necessary role of Tradition—seen as a function of the whole Church.

To conclude this section on Tradition, let us give a tentative definition: Tradition is a living message, the continuation within the Church of the message of Christ, a message in which the original word of God is permanently preserved and presented anew, and developed, by the whole Church, by means of her whole life. Recognition of Tradition in this light is leading the more ecumenical Protestants to a reevaluation of their whole position. At the Montreal Conference of the Faith and Order section of the World Council of

Churches (July, 1963), there was an excellent treatment of Scripture and Tradition. Professor Leuba (founder of *Verbum Caro*) went so far at one point as to propose that Luther's "*sola Scriptura*" be replaced by "*sola Traditione*."

Some added facets of the notion of Tradition are brought out by various theologians:

- (a) Tradition is the divinely-assisted consciousness of the Church regarding the revealed message (consciousness has the advantage of embracing both activity *by* which one is aware, and the content of the awareness). There should be no difficulty about admitting a collective consciousness of the People of God, especially when seen as the Mystical Body.
- (b) Tradition is a living force, continually activating and re-actualizing the one-for-all revelation of Christ. This vital and dynamic life impels each new Christian generation to a new awareness of the message in terms of its own times. Reflection of theologians, agitation from certain quarters (even daring movements sometimes), Christian impatience, suffering—all can be part of the untiring dynamism of Tradition. In this context, Blondel remarked, "Tradition is, in the Church, what the perpetual generation of the Word is in the bosom of the Trinity."
- (c) Just as the sacraments are the embodiment of the unique act of salvation, so Tradition is the embodiment of the unique act of revelation; e.g., Calvary was the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ; yet the eucharistic celebration is a daily re-actualizing of the one same numerical sacrifice for our own times. Likewise, the revelation of Christ was a once-for-all event; yet Tradition is the re-actualizing of this gospel message in its entirety, and for each succeeding generation (cf. J. Daniélou, *God and the Ways of Knowing*, Meridian Books, New York 1957 p. 185). Tradition then becomes the continued re-actualization of the whole Christ-event.

Whatever the areas of further study—and they are many—Catholic theologians today can agree on the following points with

regard to Tradition. (1) It is the continuation of the Christ-event communicated to the Church by the Apostles. (2) It is the exercise by and in the Church of the gospel message. (3) It contains the totality of Christ's truth. (4) It is a vital and living and continuing thing, not distinct from the very life of the Church itself.

Protestants are sometimes scandalized by our "development of dogma." But this notion of Tradition can help immensely. For, seen in this light, not only is development reasonable and to be expected. It is even necessary.

#### TRADITION AND TRADITIONS

I have deliberately avoided talking about traditions (plural, and small "t"), until the more basic understanding of *the* Tradition was established. For the two concepts are quite different.

If the Bible is the most important "tangible" expression of the gospel of Christ, then apostolic traditions are the other "tangible" expression. The experience of Christ lived by the early Church found expression in prayers, ways of worship, liturgical and other institutions, customary practices, oral and written (but non-scriptural) formulae and summaries of faith.

In general—and not limiting ourselves to *apostolic* traditions—we can say that traditions include all the particular (and sometimes peculiar) ways and customs, usages and observances, in which and through which Christians have ever given expression to their way of Christian living. When Protestants discuss traditions (as distinct from *the* Tradition), they think first of "confessional traditions": whole ways of life in which individual sects express *the* Tradition—often thereby distorting it and leading to disunity. Only after that do they discuss the individual customs and usages within a sect. But we will have enough to do to concentrate on the usages and observances within the Catholic Church.

Of all these usages and expressions, some are both scriptural and apostolic (e.g., headdress for women in Church, regulations regarding the celebration of the eucharistic meal); some may be apostolic and non-scriptural (e.g., perhaps, infant baptism); some merely ecclesiastical (e.g., rubrics of the Mass), and still others downright human

(outmoded religious habits, two collections on Sunday). Again, some pertain (or could pertain) to revealed truth (e.g., traditions involved with the sacraments and the Pauline privilege); others seem purely disciplinary (Latin as liturgical language). Finally, some have permanence (mixing water with wine at Mass), while others seem to be children of their particular time or culture (the initial regulation for Christians not to eat things strangled [Acts 15], receiving the host in one's hand at communion).

#### TRADITIONS AT TRENT

The problem about what Trent meant by *traditiones* is surely a sticky one. The Reformers were attacking the Church (1) for neglecting Scripture and (2) for the proliferation of so many observances for which they could see no basis in Scripture—e.g., Lenten fast, the ceremonies of Mass, clerical celibacy, indulgences (and the manifest abuses surrounding them), the doctrine of seven sacraments, and innumerable canonical regulations. Since not attested to by the New Testament—and exasperated by the exaggerations, abuses and distortions—Luther lumped all such practices together as “human traditions” and rejected them all. “*Scriptura sola*” became the reformers’ cry.

When the Council convened in 1545, we find the Fathers (only about 50 were there!) truly concerned to assert the Church’s reverence for Scripture, and also to correct the abuses of the Church and to re-assert the authority of the Church in regard to its practices. After a good deal of confusion as to where to start (abuses, traditions, authority, or Scripture) they worked out a statement on Scripture and traditions (April 8, 1546).

This truth and teaching (i.e., of the gospel message) are contained in Scripture and in extra-scriptural traditions (*in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus*) that the Apostles received from Christ himself, or that were handed on—as it were from hand to hand—from the Apostles, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and so have come down to us. . . .

With the same sense of loyalty (*pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia*) with which it accepts and venerates all Scrip-

ture . . . the Council accepts and venerates traditions concerned with faith and morals (*traditiones . . . tum ad fidem, tum ad mores pertinentes*) as having been received from the lips of Christ or inspired by the Holy Spirit and continuously preserved in the Catholic Church (D. 783).

Our main concern here is not why the famous last minute change of *partim . . . partim* to *et*, but with the meaning of *traditiones*.

1. The Council seemed to be taking up the viewpoint and terminology of the reformers, and set out to fight them on their own ground: namely these usages and observances. The Fathers of the Council were perfectly aware that some customs and devotions were all too human, some even needing reform. So not all were to be defended, nor were all defensible ones vehicles of divine revelation. The Council declared that only those could embody or reflect divine revelation which (a) were of apostolic origin, (b) were continuously preserved in the Church, and (c) were concerned with faith and morals (*mores*).

2. Thus, the Council was not talking about our modern notion of Tradition—the total message as being continued in the total life of the Church. It was *not* talking about the *paradosis* of St. Irenaeus. What it was talking about were practices and observances of apostolic origin (or thought to be so): both those which have a bearing on revealed truth (*ad fidem pertinentes*) and those which affect the conduct of the Christian life (*ad mores pertinentes*).

3. Whatever the Fathers meant by *traditiones*, it is not tied in with non-existence in Scripture. This is supported by one of the patristic texts circulating among the bishops—a somewhat inexact text of Basil, wrongly attributed by them to Augustine:

Of ecclesiastical observances, some we have received from the Scriptures, but others from apostolic tradition as maintained by their successors in office; others again, having the force of custom, having been sanctioned by usage. To all these is due like respect, and to both the same devotion (*de Spiritu Sancto*, n.27).

4. In the minds of the bishops, the apostolic traditions were specific things that could be listed. Fortunately, no formal list was

ever made at Trent, because we are somewhat appalled at what they considered "apostolic": e.g., clerical celibacy, to pray standing from Easter to Pentecost, to pray facing the East, the observance of Lent, the Canon of the Mass. Even at the end, the Fathers saw things like the ceremonies at Mass—blessings, lights, incense—as "deriving from apostolic discipline and traditions" (D. 942, 943).

We must remember, however, that the Fathers of the Church, e.g., Tertullian, Origen, Basil, Augustine, listed many things as "apostolic" which were not, based on the somewhat dubious principle that they could not be so universally practiced and so immemorial if they were not apostolic.

Trent held that apostolic traditions which have come down to us (not, therefore, obsolete ones) could be carriers of the gospel message. Are there, in fact, any which might be embodiments of a part of revelation not vouched for in Scripture? One might mention the use of exactly seven sacraments, infant baptism, non-ordination of women, the very tradition that the Christian community is the interpreter of Scripture. Yet all of these are open to discussion.

5. Why the distinction at Trent between traditions pertaining to faith and those pertaining to "*mores*"? Claude Lejay, S.J., (Proctor for Card. Truchsess of Augsburg) pointed out that even among apostolic traditions as found in Scripture, some were more ceremonial and open to alteration, e.g., eating things not properly killed, while others pertained to faith and were permanently binding. Thus the distinction between immutable and mutable traditions as noted by the phrase *traditiones tam de fide quam de moribus* introduced on April 1. A suggestion to call attention to the real difference in the authority of these two kinds of traditions was voted on. But due to poor wording, the vote was indecisive and nothing further was done or added.

Father Bénénot comments: "Because they were linked together in the decree, they [the two types of traditions] came to be taken by theologians as of equal weight, and because *traditiones* themselves came to be taken no longer as practical observances but as part of the revealed truths, they were understood to stand for revealed dogmas and moral principles" ("*Traditiones* in the Council of

Trent," *Heythrop Journal*, Oct. 1963, p. 340). Bévénat goes so far as to say that in the discussions at Trent *traditiones* referred always primarily to the various rites, observances and practices of the Church and only indirectly to the fact that some of them, e.g., the sacraments, involved the faith too" (*ibid.*, 341-2).

6. Why, if all this is true, did Trent say that the same acceptance and veneration is due all these apostolic traditions as is due Scripture itself? Cervini put his finger on it when he pointed out that "there is no essential difference between the scriptures and the apostolic traditions, since both have come equally from the Holy Spirit" (*Conc. Trid.*, I, 485, 6-16). Lejay indicated that since we revere Scripture, which contains some ceremonial regulations that are changeable, there is no ground for a difference between our attitudes to the Bible and to the traditions as a whole (Cf. I, 491). The Bishop of Chioggia had been maintaining that there was a very real difference between the reverence due inspired Scripture and that due even apostolic but non-scriptural institutions. But when asked if he had less reverence for the Canon of the Mass (considered apostolic) than for Scripture, he capitulated.

These remarks about traditions (in plural) have been rather negative. But I wanted to offset the tendency to be too overawed by what Trent said in this area. Too often our appreciation of *the* Tradition has been narrowed and confined by trying to confine it to the context of the Tridentine and post-Tridentine discussions. The parallel with revelation seems to me to be much more fruitful.

#### AREAS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is the new understanding of Tradition really getting back to a more ancient view? If so, where did churchmen get sidetracked in their appreciation of it? And have Catholics really *changed* their notion of Tradition as, e.g., Obermann thinks?

2. Is *any* definition of Tradition possible at this stage? Continuation of the gospel message in and through the total life of the Church? The consciousness of the Church? The re-actualization of the Christ-event? Or must the new Scripture-Tradition appreciation mature more first?

3. What did pre-Tridentine theologians think about all revelation being in Scripture? Was it mere lip-service they were paying to the idea (de Vooght, Obermann)? Was the real difficulty not the lack of any understanding of a "lived implicit," a true notion of the development of doctrine?

4. Can we say Scripture and Tradition are mutually inclusive, so that the only plus-value of Tradition is as interpreter, milieu, atmosphere? If so, how explain where we get the revelation of the inspiration and canon of Scripture? (Cf. Rahner's suggestion, *op. cit.*, p. 70-72.)

5. What of the ecumenical agreement slowly emerging regarding Tradition? Need we insist that Tradition is the judge of Scripture? (See another suggestion of Rahner, *ibid.*)

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