

Toward a Theology of Tradition

Tradition

Pioneering Steps

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Saturday morning, July 16, 1054. The Liturgy is about to begin when three Roman Legates enter the Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople and lay the bull excommunicating Patriarch Michael Cerularius on the main altar; as they leave the church, they shake the dust from their heels. Nearly five centuries pass. It is now Halloween, 1517. A hammering comes from the front of Wittenberg's church; Martin Luther is posting ninety-five theses on the church door.

Nearly five more centuries pass. The breaches in Christian unity associated with these events continue to this day; only today men are seeking earnestly to restore the unity. Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism and Protestantism stand separated. The barriers to a restoration of unity are imposing, surely; but they are not insurmountable. One such barrier is the notion of Tradition, and it is a crucial notion because doctrinal belief—the essential matter where restoration of unity must be centered—is so closely connected with it. If agreement could ever be reached by Christians

on the notion and role of Tradition, a major step toward unity would have been made.

A theology of tradition is difficult to set down. How Tradition and Scripture fit together, for example, was left unresolved by Vatican II. Every approach to a theology of Tradition seems to raise as many questions as it purports to resolve. The following few pages are certainly not going to solve the problem; but they will indicate the first attempts of the Christian Church to formulate a theology of Tradition. Irenaeus and Tertullian made the attempt. What they had to say has had important applications for the coming-to-be and incorporation of a church into the one Church.

As the Church entered the second century, she encountered a force of lethal proportions—the Gnostic crisis. The *gnosis* arose in ancient Persia and was spread around the known world by Persia's Hellenic conquerors. This dualistic philosophy envisioned conflicting powers of good and evil; matter had overtones of evil while spirit was good. An incarnate God was an absurdity, the resurrection of the body a reverie, and everything dealing with the flesh inherently corrupt. Gnosticism adopted elements as it spread, and it absorbed enough rudimentary Christian notions to catch the ill-informed unawares.

The conflict flared by the mid-second century as the Gospel infiltrated centers of philosophic speculation such as Alexandria. Pagan and Christian men of letters clashed, but even more devastating to the integrity of the faith were the Gnostic tendencies that came to pass for true Christian belief. Gnostic Christians tempered the Scriptures to their own pleasure. Gnosticism, beginning as an external threat to Christianity, now threatened from within the Church structure.

The Church reacted. Links between the different churches were drawn tighter. Formularies appeared, touching on liturgy, initiation into the Christian mysteries, and doctrine; but the most significant reaction was the expressed consciousness of the apostolic ties which threaded the churches back through the Apostles to Christ, the source of truth.

The Apostles were the witnesses of Christ's message, and the integrity of that witness was seen as entrusted to the churches they founded. And so in the face of the Gnostic peril, the strongest argu-

ment in support of orthodoxy was appeal to that witness and apostolic tradition by the second century churchmen. "It was then that the theology of tradition, elaborated by Irenaeus, was set forth by Tertullian in striking formulas."¹

Tradition did not start with Irenaeus as though it had been absent from the first generations of Christian churches; but he was the first to consider the problem at any great length. He saw the necessity of falling back on the belief of the churches to isolate the genuine Gospel message of the Apostles, especially when the Gnostics twisted Scripture texts or outrightly denied them. Tertullian played up this necessity in vigorous language. Irenaeus and Tertullian represent the first sources for a theology of tradition.

Irenaeus

We have it on the testimony of Eusebius that as a young man Irenaeus personally knew Polycarp and learned from him all about John and the others who had seen the Lord. Eusebius quotes Irenaeus: "Polycarp received them from eyewitnesses of 'the word of life,' and proclaimed them in all harmony with the Scriptures. These things even then I listened to through the mercy of God that was granted me, making notes of them not on paper but in my heart."² This is an early indication of Irenaeus' zeal in continuing a tradition and being a witness to the Lord's life and miracles. Irenaeus knew Polycarp from Smyrna; later he came to live in Rome. It was here that Irenaeus in all likelihood became acquainted with Gnosticism. The year 177 found him at Lyons when that church was being persecuted,³ and the confessors of the Lyons Church, interested in healing a minor breach between some of the churches, sent Irenaeus back to Rome, this time as an ambassador of peace to Pope Eleutherius. The mission spared Irenaeus martyrdom, and he later returned to the now peaceful Lyons to become its bishop.

¹ Lebreton and Zeiller, *Heresy and Orthodoxy* (Vol. III of the 24-volume series covering the whole history of the Church, ed. Augustin Fliche and Victor Martin, trans. Ernest Messenger), New York, Collier Books, 1962, p. 25.

² Eusebius, *Hist. eccles.*, V, xx. *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (New York, Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1950), Vol. XIX.

³ Lebreton and Zeiller, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

Lyons was a mission church, and the writings of Irenaeus that have come down to us reflect the spirit of a missionary bishop zealous for his immediate flock; we should not look for the collected thoughts of a speculative theologian. His most important work, *Adversus Haereses*, is an exposition and refutation of Gnosticism. His only other extant work, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, deals with the Last Things.

In the first two books of *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus sets forth the Gnostic heresy and then the fundamental beliefs of Christians. In the third book he launches into a more detailed analysis of the sources of revelation, "thus giving us the first outline of Fundamental Theology known in the history of the Church."⁴ In the opening of Book III, he exhorts the faithful to resist the heresy:

and faithfully and strenuously shalt thou resist them in defense of the only true and life-giving faith, which the Church has received from the apostles and imparted to her sons. For the Lord of all gave to His apostles the power of the Gospel, through whom also we have known the truth, that is, the doctrine of the Son of God. (III, Preface)⁵

We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith. (III, I, i)

By temporally separating the proclaimed Gospel from the Scriptures, Irenaeus is showing that the apostolic preaching is basic to our faith, its "ground and pillar." The Scriptures are the written concretization of this. It was the Scriptures that the Gnostics attacked directly. They said Scripture was ambiguous and difficult to precise, unless one knew the secret truth, the *gnosis*, which were transmitted in traditions among the elite.

But, again, when we refer them to that tradition which originates from the apostles, (and) which is preserved by means of the successions of presbyters [*presbyterorum*] in the Churches, they object to tradition, saying that they themselves are wiser not merely than the presbyters, but even than the apostles, because they have discovered the unadulterated truth. (III, 2, ii)

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), vol. I.

Apostolic succession. This is what Irenaeus' argument will pivot on. Valid tradition originated with the Apostles who faithfully handed over the teachings of Christ. This tradition is preserved intact by the succession of presbyters of the churches, which is to say, the bishops. About this Irenaeus is clear:

It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and (to demonstrate) the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these (heretics) rave about. (III, 3, i)

Everything else will flow from this consideration of apostolic succession. So sure is he that the Apostles faithfully preached the message of Christ, and so sure is he that where there is a succession of bishops in a church stretching back to the Apostle who founded that church there is a faithful preserving of Christ's message, that Irenaeus unhesitatingly affirms the truth of that tradition.

In this order [he has just used Rome as an example], and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us. And this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth. (III, 3, iii)

The true Christian churches can claim this apostolic succession. Tertullian will have something to say about churches recently established such as Lyons itself was, but let it suffice for now that true tradition is found in the apostolic successions. Need one validate the episcopal succession of every apostolic church and examine its teachings? Irenaeus says that it is sufficient to look to Rome. This is the famous and controverted text about the uniqueness of the See of Rome. Irenaeus introduces it as an alternative to tracing the apostolic succession of every single church. He says that it suffices to indicate

that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome, by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also (by pointing out) the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on

account of its pre-eminent authority [*propter potentiorē principalitatem*], that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolic tradition has been preserved continuously by those (faithful men) who exist everywhere. (III, 3, ii)

Leaving aside the question of the primacy of Rome, we can at least say this: Irenaeus in patently clear terms is linking up a valid tradition, a source of the revelation of Christ, with episcopal succession. Clement, Irenaeus says, "might be said to have the preaching of the apostles stilll echoing (in his ears), and their traditions before his eyes." (III, 3, iii)

In addition to apostolic succession, one other significant feature characterizes Irenaeus' understanding of tradition: the vivifying power of the Holy Spirit which is couched in tradition. Tradition is the Christian faith. But just reckoning tables of apostolic successions could easily become a dry juridical affair. Irenaeus wants none of this, and he wants no one to lose sight of the fact that tradition reveals our faith to us, and that with this faith comes the Holy Spirit.

The preaching of the Church is everywhere the same and continues unchanging, and has as witnesses the prophets, the apostles, and all their disciples. . . . It is the usual way of conveying our faith and is meant for the salvation of mankind. It is received from the Church and we guard it and it is continually being rejuvenated by the Holy Spirit, like the precious contents of an excellent vase, and in fact rejuvenates the very vase in which it is. (III, 24, i)⁶

The constant preaching of the churches, the *tradition* in other words, is permeated by the Holy Spirit. He guards it; he gives it force. He is the "Gift of God entrusted to the Church," just like the breath given to the first man. The Spirit is our "Communion with Christ," the "ascending ladder to God," and "the confirmation of our Faith"; all these images are Irenaeus', and there can be no doubt that for him, tradition is not merely the possession of the apostolic succession; it is the vivifying force of the Holy Spirit bringing us, the hearers of that tradition, to salvation.

For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but

⁶ The translation here is by the present author. The translation of Roberts and Donaldson is obscure; so is the text of Irenaeus for that matter. The Latin text may be found in Migne, PG, vol. VII, p. 966.

the Spirit is truth. Those, therefore, who do not partake of him, are neither nourished into life from the mother's breasts, nor do they enjoy that most limpid fountain which issues from the body of Christ. (*Ibid.*)

Tertullian

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus was born in the mid-second century in Carthage. He received a well rounded education and there are strong hints that he eventually went into law. While at Rome, where he saw the heroic sufferings of the martyrs, he was converted to Christianity. "Crucify us—torture us—condemn us—destroy us! . . . We become more numerous every time we are hewn down by you: the blood of Christians is seed."⁷ Tertullian returned to Carthage, was ordained priest there, and put his polemical pen to work attacking heresies.

His mind was acute, his rhetoric superb, but he had a highly irascible temper. He could not tolerate an opponent. In spite of the fact that he was a philosophical savant, he extolled the supremacy of the Christian faith over autonomous reason, so much so that "to him the 'philosophers' are the 'patriarchs of the heretics,' and philosophy is the work of demons."⁸ He eventually became a Montanist, but his *De Praescriptione*, the chief source for his thoughts on tradition, was written before his defection.

Tertullian's attack was basically the same as Irenaeus'. Pressed by the Gnostics and Marcionites who twisted the texts of Scripture to their own use, Tertullian saw it as futile to argue with them from the texts alone. "You will lose nothing but your breath, and gain nothing but vexation from their blasphemy." (*De Praescr.*, 17)⁹ Where then lies the truth? With those who have retained the *rule of faith*. For wherever the true rule of faith lies, "there will likewise be the true Scriptures and exposition thereof, and all the Christian traditions." (*Ibid.*, 19) The rule of faith was the message Christ had preached. He sent his Apostles out to the world to preach this message. After bearing witness in Judea and founding churches there,

⁷ Tertullian, *Apologia*, 50, #12. *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. X.

⁸ *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. X, p. x.

⁹ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III.

they next went forth into the world and preached the same doctrine of the same faith to the nations. They then in like manner founded churches in every city, from which all the other churches one after another derive the tradition of the faith, and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day deriving [*mutuantur*] them, that they may become churches. (*Ibid.*, 20)

Tertullian and Irenaeus are one in considering the preached message, the rule of faith, and the tradition of the faith as identical things. In the face of a denial of Scripture—or of at least parts of it—they both fall back on this unwritten tradition to determine genuine doctrine. The signpost for possessing the true rule of faith is, for both of them, *apostolicity*. “In other words, what it was which Christ revealed to them [the Apostles]—can, as I must here likewise prescribe, properly be proved in no other way than by those very churches which the apostles founded in person, by declaring the gospel to them directly themselves . . .” (*Ibid.*, 21)

What if the Apostles distorted the message of Christ, or what if they did not entrust the whole of the Gospel message to the churches they founded? Tertullian says that this is incredible; he goes through the Scriptures and shows that this is simply incompatible with the themes of the Gospels. Next the possibility arises that even the apostolic churches have defected in their effort to preserve the Christian witness integrally, that none remained immune from error. “When, however, that which is deposited among many is found to be one and the same, it is not the result of error, but of tradition.” (*Ibid.*, 28) His argument is that if the churches were able to fall into error, it is highly unlikely that they would fall into the same exact errors.

The flat statement of Tertullian’s that all the churches are one in doctrine would have to be carefully explained. This Tertullian does not do, nor shall we attempt it, since we are concerned only with conveying Tertullian’s own thought. The problem in Newman’s words is this:

Here then I concede to the opponents of historical Christianity that there are to be found, during the eighteen hundred years through which it has lasted, certain apparent inconsistencies and alterations in its doctrine and its worship such as irresistibly attract the attention of all who inquire into it. They are not sufficient to interfere with the general character and course of the religion, but they raise the

question how they came about, and what they mean, and have in consequence supplied matter for several hypotheses.¹⁰

Yet for Tertullian, if any teaching departs from the rule of faith, it is false. "All doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches—those moulds and original sources of the faith must be reckoned for the truth, as undoubtedly containing that which the churches received from the apostles, and the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God." (*De Praescr.*, 21) Should the heretics claim apostolic origin for their tenets, Tertullian vigorously expounds the principle of Irenaeus about apostolic succession: "... let them unfold the roll of their bishops... [such that the first one] be able to show for his ordainer and predecessor some one of the apostles or of apostolic men—a man moreover who continued steadfast with the apostles." (*Ibid.*, 32)

One final note on the role of apostolic succession for tradition—and this is where Tertullian goes beyond Irenaeus. Besides the churches founded by the Apostles, there are many newly founded churches having for founders neither an Apostle nor any companion of the Apostles. What of their apostolicity and witness to the tradition? Tertullian has provided the answer in a passage already quoted. These newer churches *derive* "the seeds of doctrine" from the apostolic churches, and thereby come to participate in that apostolicity. He significantly adds that the newly founded churches are every day deriving (*mutuantur*) the tradition of the faith from the churches of the Apostles, such that they are becoming churches.

A church comes into being to the extent that it shares in the apostolic tradition. Obviously this is not an all-at-once process; it unfolds as the particular missionary church becomes more akin to its apostolic source. But once it is established in its apostolicity, it too is a faithful witness to the Word of God and a standing reproof to heresy.

To this test, therefore, will they [heretics] be submitted for proof by those churches, who, although they derive not their founder from apostles or apostolic men (as being of much later date . . .), yet, since they agree in the same faith, they are accounted as not less apostolic because they are akin in doctrine [*pro consanguinitate doctrinae*]. (*Ibid.*)

¹⁰ Newman, *Essay on the Development of Dogma*, Intro., #7.

This is a rather interesting idea Tertullian has here, especially for our ecumenical age. The newly founded churches received their life-blood from the first apostolic churches, and this blood which flowed into them was the teaching of the Apostles—the *tradition* in other words. Having the full tradition, one has the integral Christian message, and this, in the possession of a church, is what gives it its being. Sharing in the same faith, these churches are “not less apostolic.”

Of late, papal documents have referred to the Reformation communions as “Churches and ecclesial Communities,” something until now carefully avoided. Is this merely ecumenical politeness, a harmless substitution for the harsh-sounding “sect”? Is it not rather reflecting a recognition that Protestant and Anglican churches possess a portion of the apostolic tradition, that the Holy Spirit is *somehow* operative among separated Christians not only in their personal lives but in their collective assemblies? As the *Decree on Ecumenism* is eager to point out:

The daily Christian life of these brethren is nourished by their faith in Christ and strengthened by the grace of Baptism and by hearing the word of God. This shows itself in their private prayer, their meditation on the Bible, in their Christian family life, and in the worship of a community gathered together to praise God. Moreover, their form of worship sometimes displays notable features of the liturgy which they shared with us of old. (no. 23)

Full unity among Christian churches will rest on a unity in essential doctrine. As Protestant churches come to “derive the seeds of doctrine” in their completeness, to apply Tertullian’s phrase, they will come fully into being as churches. Ecumenical dialogue will force the Catholic Church, for its part, to precise its essential beliefs and to weed from them what, at times, has been popularly but mistakenly taken for the rule of faith. Unity, then, does not mean down-the-line conformity. Just as the church of Lyons or Carthage did not do things “just like they do them in Rome,” although they shared the same rule of faith, an ecumenical awareness must not expect Protestantism to Romanize right down to thurible-swinging rubrics.

The ecclesial structure of Orthodox churches has always been recognized, and we can see Tertullian’s principle realized in them. The Orthodox zealously preserve the apostolic teachings. We can

also see in them many illustrations of differences in customs and even in explanations of essential truth yet unity in belief.

Progress towards unity is a progress towards becoming eclesial. Recognizing that other communions are churches or eclesial communities—to varying degrees no doubt—is only saying that the seeds of unity are already present. But so much of further progress hinges on a meeting of minds over the role of Tradition. Let all work toward making Tradition the factor in bringing Churches into full being and, hence, unity, not a stumbling block to it.

Perhaps there will be another date, not far off, when Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant for the first time will communicate in oneness of belief and oneness of bread. That date will make July 16, 1054 and October 31, 1517 appear even more remote.

Tradition

Yves Congar Speaks

Benedict Joseph Duffy, O.P.

This article does not purport to be an original investigation. Rather, it is a study of the thought of Fr. Congar without critical evaluation and it merely attempts to preserve his logic and order. Hopefully, there is more here than just a succession of quotations which might give the literary style of the author but miss the mark of his elaborate theological argument. The problem of Tradition has come to the fore of theological discussion because of its importance in the schema on the sources of Revelation. Since Trent much has been written which made Tradition a separate source from the Scriptures. This independence is being called into question because of new and more detailed notions of Tradition.

Our word "tradition" comes from the Latin word *traditio* which means the process of handing something over to another in the context of a legal process. The verb form, *tradere*, describes the action of delivering the object in question over to another. The