

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 ecclesial. Recognizing that other communions are churches or ecclesial 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

Church sees in this idea of delivery the entire economy of salvation. Eternally the Father delivers his whole being to the Son. The Son delivers himself up for the world while he transmits to his followers (the Apostles) a message, the Gospel, to be handed on and preached to every creature. The Gospel is given within the framework of a community, a fellowship of believers. The doctrine is not the only element which is handed on within the community but there are also to be found sacraments, rites, and even ecclesiastical institutions. In time this Gospel came to be written down. Yet, "a written text exists independently of the living act of its transmission;"¹ the meaning of a doctrine or the spirit of the fellowship can be fully obtained only by the act of transmission. This always is something alive and living. It is a way of transmitting the Gospel, different in form and in manner from the written text of the Apostles.

Tradition is thus a means of communication other than writing. In fact, it adds something to the Scriptures that are written. During the first 150 years of the Church's life the "Scriptures" meant the Old Testament in accord with which the Gospel was preached. The apostles then preached that which the Lord had given them. Biblical study and the spirit of the *formgeschichte* have shown the priority of the unwritten testimony and the oral transmission of the Gospels. The Apostles were first witnesses and ministers of the word in the tradition of a disciple among the Jews. This meant imitation of what the master had done as is seen in the Eucharist. At Emmaus, in the Cenacle, they had seen what he had done; they needed no texts or writings to do in like manner. Later, Christians at Rome would watch Peter doing the same thing and thus the continuity of the Tradition was assured. Had there been no writings it still would have been necessary to follow these things. As Irenaeus says: "If the Apostles themselves had left us no Scripture, would it not be necessary to follow 'the order of Tradition' that they have transmitted to those to whom they entrusted the churches?"²

In such transmission of Tradition, more so than in oral transmission, is found the whole substance of the Christian faith. While the

¹ Yves Congar, O.P., *The Meaning of Tradition* (New York, Hawthorn, 1960), p. 18. All subsequent page references are to this work.

² P. 23. Fr. Congar is here quoting Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 4, i and ii (PG, VIII, 856).

Church participates in the Eucharist she meditates on the mystery of the Redemption. For the Church, reading the Scriptures is like holding up a mirror by which she can study her own life. First off, she must live, and not wait upon the exegesis of this or that text. Tradition becomes a mid-way point between something inherited and a form of learning which leads to self-knowledge. By her life and experience of the Gospel, the Church acquires a certain mentality, certain habits of judgment and willing. This amounts to saying that the Church is also a milieu, and a milieu requires a people to pass on the life of the environment. One difference between written and oral tradition emerges from this: the necessity which a living tradition has for people to transmit its beliefs and life.

This community takes its principle of origin to be faith. We live by faith and believe as our fathers have taught us because they have received it from others who received it eventually from the Apostles who received it from the Lord. The act of transmission par excellence was baptism, surrounded as it was by the instruction of the one to be baptized. Every sacrament contains words and there is no liturgical action apart from an instructive element.

The liturgical celebration is the chief influence in shaping the Christian spirit, formed as we have seen, by Tradition. It is unsurpassed for its arrangement of the biblical texts in a way that reveals their consonance which points in turn to the fullness of the salvation which they contain by leading them to the center of the complete Revelation.³

In sum, the believer is formed in the Catholic spirit or the mind of the Church, which, objectively considered, is all that has been believed and taught in the Church throughout the ages. Subjectively considered, it is the spirit in the Church itself.

Tradition is a source of knowledge other than Scripture. To make the Scriptures the sole norm of one's knowledge is to contradict the Bible itself which rejects any such claim. As the Scriptures show, the Lord did not write anything, nor are all of the Apostles' writings extant. St. Paul, on the contrary, speaks often of "traditions" (e.g., II Thess. 2:14, I Cor. 11:2). Finally, the writings of the period after the formulation of the canon speak often of also preserving the apostolic traditions so that the fullness of the faith might be had.⁴

³ P. 35.

⁴ P. 38.

We must not conceive of Tradition as some form of Gnostic whisperings passed on from one bishop to another. Nor are we to suppose that the Apostles gave us the present form of these traditions. Although the contribution of the Apostles is not clear, recent studies show the credibility that liturgical and disciplinary teachings originate from the twelve. The indication is that "there is not a single point of belief that the Church holds by tradition alone, without any reference to Scripture; just as there is not a single dogma that is derived from Scripture alone, without being explained by tradition."⁵ Some have tried to deny this by referring to the Council of Trent. This appears to be a misunderstanding of the point in question there, namely that position of Luther's which said that any addition to the Scripture was from the devil. The Council declared the equal value of apostolic traditions and apostolic writings.

Tradition is the transmission of the reality that is Christianity: this is really *the* Tradition. It is apostolic by origin, then ecclesiastical by its actual transmission . . . There exist, likewise, numerous traditions which are ecclesiastical by origin, having been laid down by the Church during her historical existence: institutions, rites, customs, discipline. Sometimes these are the historical form or modification, perhaps, of a reality which is apostolic or even divine in origin . . . Sometimes ecclesiastical traditions are purely ecclesiastical. Lastly, they can be an historical development of something already begun by the Apostles, but which is now impossible to reconstitute in its apostolic state; such for the most part is the case of sacramental rites.⁶

The subject of Tradition is the living being who carries it and is answerable for it. Within Revelation there are stages and degrees of importance. Jesus alone is the unique witness of the Father. He fulfilled the mission of the prophets and passed on to his disciples the mission of witnessing to him. The Church, consequently, has been entrusted with the mission of witness. In order to realize this, the Lord gave to his body the Church the Spirit of God, Who is the soul and stability of this body. This Spirit works within all the Apostles and witnesses of all time; there is no adding of a new revelation but a deepening of the existing one, the Gospel made once and for all. The message was indeed made once but it must

⁵ Pp. 41-42.

⁶ P. 46.

reach all men in all times and places, and this demands the Spirit to give the grace to transform the message to fit each new situation. In this way the Church becomes a perpetual event. It is vertical in that it is God's immediate action here and now; it is horizontal in that the transmission of the framework of this covenant is by an historical and visibly body. By His sustaining power men are preserved in faith; by His illumination the Church is guided to keep true to the deposit bequeathed to her in the beginning. Throughout time, the Church will ever remain united in faith and in doctrine because she possessed in her soul the transcendent subject of what has been delivered to her, the Holy Spirit.

The Church also has its visible and historical nature, and because it does, it is also a subject of Tradition. Often times when one uses the word "Church" one refers to the hierarchy; this is not the meaning here. Our reference is to the sacramental and communal fellowship; this avoids the error of a purely juridic approach which arose as a reaction to the Reformers' overstress on the importance of the individual. Commenting on their overstress, Fr. Congar notes: "We are united to God personally, not merely by personal links, but by passing through a Church framework that is definitely public comprising an established ministry, sacraments."⁷ All Christians are responsible for Christianity. The spiritual heritage and the gifts bestowed upon men in baptism cannot be avoided. What is handed over to men in baptism is the whole of Christian reality, Tradition, and each man is responsible for making it his own. In spite of this, the hierarchy has received a special mandate as such and therefore certain members of the community must have a special relation to the Tradition of the Church. The hierarchy must not merely transmit the faith and its deposit; its mandate gives them also the responsibility of keeping, judging and defining it with the authority of the *magisterium*. Within the Church, therefore, the chief subject of Tradition is the *magisterium* of the hierarchy. To keep the deposit faithfully sometimes requires a definition of the dogmas of the faith. This is the *ultima ratio* of preserving the deposit, and it is undertaken only with great hesitation notwithstanding the grace of assistance given by the transcendent subject

⁷ P. 61.

of Tradition, the Holy Spirit. This ordinary function of the teaching Church is performed only in extraordinary cases because the mysteries of the faith are greater than our words and concepts. Only for solid pastoral reasons does the hierarchy transform material tradition into formal tradition.⁸

The role of the *magisterium* is easy to understand. The role accorded the faithful is much less clear. By the practice of the faith they witness to the Tradition which is had and preserved in the Church. Their witness consists in their life, in the preaching by word of mouth to those in their circle of friends, by their participation in the liturgy. Their devotions and their experience of the mysteries of the faith have stimulated even the pronouncements of dogmas, as appears to be the case with the proclamation of Mary's Assumption. It is precisely because these truths of the faith are transmitted in a living community and experienced in the lives of the believers that Tradition becomes something living, creating and forming in its members a spirit—a *sensus fidei*, a *sensus Ecclesiae*.

It has been seen that the purpose of Trent in its decree concerning Scripture and Tradition was to preserve the purity and totality of the Gospel. This flows from the fact that the Gospel is more than just the Scriptures. For the Fathers, this was the case because they understood Tradition as the interpretation of the Scriptures, the center from which they take their meaning.⁹ The Scriptures for them were sacramental, a grace-bearing sign effecting union with God. A strange paradox emerges: the Bible can only be read by the People of God who have the interpretation to understand it; but at the same time, the Bible is one of the shaping influences of the People itself. In the beginning the Church begets herself, for the Apostles receive the Word directly and record their experience. The Apostles start and deliver the Tradition. In later ages, God raises up men to be part of this People; they live the faith and transmit it as a foundation for the next generation to live by.

Scripture is a complex reality; it was formed by many men over a period of time extending over a thousand years. It would be a travesty to see it merely as a haphazard grouping of separate texts.

⁸ P. 67.

⁹ P. 80.

Revelation is a whole, and there is a great need for a synthesis and harmony. "It [Tradition] lives by, and teaches others to live by the comprehensive spirit of God's plan, from which unfolds and develops the whole structure of the Economy."¹⁰ Though they have different functions, Scripture and Tradition must be viewed together. Tradition transcends Scripture, being in a way more complete and self-sufficient. Scripture is fixed and is the point of reference for doctrine; yet it verifies and proves Tradition. In the end, it is the Church which interprets the Scriptures in the light of her Tradition.

The preaching of the Gospel by the Apostles became the foundation of the Church. We live the faith today that was formed by the Apostolic action and its synthesis within the community with the preached Gospel. But we hold nothing solely on the grounds of Tradition. Tradition may explicitly add to Scripture to complete it but this is always linked to the written word and does not constitute a new Revelation. Tradition is incorporated in a living subject which moves and is a part of history. The objective content may not change but history does affect the way it is communicated. Thus, Tradition has a life-history which moves forward toward the future. This explains the two-fold function of Tradition: to develop and to conserve.

Tradition is precisely the place where the synthesis is realized between the historical transmission and the present experience which, thus united, produce, in the present and in preparation for the future, a profound knowledge of Christian reality transcending the text of the document with which it started. Tradition is not merely memory, it is actual presence and experience.¹¹

Tradition is therefore the transmission of a living doctrine, in a living channel. All flows from the unique source, Jesus Christ. Yet, it is the Spirit Who makes Tradition a life-source in its very passage. It is richer precisely because it has been lived for nineteen centuries; at any particular time during the passage the People of God may form a synthesis from it. The faithful do this by their life within the fellowship as guided by their pastors. Theologians form their synthesis by scientific investigations of the sources of Revelation. Tradition is both the pure transmission of the deposit

¹⁰ P. 93.

¹¹ P. 113.

and the explanation of the deposit. In this way we see more in the Scriptures themselves. Protestants begin from the sacred text; Catholics start from the reality of Christianity as handed down by the Church from the Apostles. Christian reality is Tradition in this context and though it requires the Scriptures, it is never slavishly bound to them.

Fr. Congar has summed up well his position on Tradition and we conclude by quoting it in full:

The role of Tradition, from a dogmatic point of view, is to communicate its authentic interpretation, the substance of which was transmitted from the beginning and has been rendered progressively explicit by the reflection of the Doctors and the action of the Magisterium, especially in the great ecumenical Councils. If it is considered in its totality, equally as Tradition and traditions, its role is also educative and conservative with regard to the "Catholic spirit". By all these means Tradition gives the whole Gospel, developed by the mind of the Church throughout the ages and illuminated by her experience of the realities it speaks of, ever present within her to nourish her life; similarly Scripture gives the whole Gospel regarding the essentials of the Christian mystery, of which it speaks throughout. Both are complete, but Tradition renders explicit things which Scripture contains merely in principle: such things for example as the scriptural canon, the canon of the sacraments, and many points not only in Marian theology but in "theology" in general, such as the personal divinity of the Holy Spirit or the equality of the divine Persons.¹²

¹² Pp. 154-155.