

The Authority of Tradition

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WRITTEN history is an important source of knowledge. A genuine document is a scholar's delight and he will credit its statements at the risk even of fame and fortune, because it carries certitude.

Now there is another fountain of knowledge, tradition—older than written history and of wider scope. Since truth is the scholar's goal and written history, if genuine, gives him truth, he accepts it; and since tradition may contain truth unwritten, he accepts that likewise, though with caution. When he wishes to write history, he not only draws from documents, but consults traditions, for these are necessary complements or ornaments of his work.

Over and above these human traditions attesting to the truth of unrecorded past deeds and customs, the Catholic Church claims that there is a Divine Tradition attesting to the existence of eternal truths of Faith revealed by God. This Tradition is revealed doctrine transmitted not by inspired writings but orally communicated to the Church. Some of these oral communications became dogmatic customs or rites in the Church and were thus preserved; the majority were soon put into writing by the early Fathers and these likewise have come down to us intact. The reason why it is called Tradition in the two instances is because the truths to which it attests are not written into that greatest of books, the Bible.

According to the Catholic Church these extra-biblical truths have the same weight and authority as those contained in the Scriptures. She is not content with the Bible alone as the deposit of Faith, but includes Tradition, meaning thereby the truths which Christ revealed to the Apostles or which were received from the Apostles, "Spiritu Sancto dictante." (Council of Trent, Sess. IV). The Church does not include under this head the Apostolic traditions¹ which the Apostles on their own

¹ In this monograph, when speaking of divine-infallible Tradition, a capital letter is employed. A small letter designates human traditions.

authority taught their disciples, or the ecclesiastical traditions representing the unofficial pronouncements of Popes and Councils.² Only the first, divine Tradition, is claimed to be infallible and a source of Faith. The other two are of high authority, but not infallible, and hence, the discussion is not concerning them.

Protestants reject Tradition, because for them the written Word is the only norm of Faith, and consequently they credit no doctrine unless found in the Bible. This explains their disbelief in Purgatory, Indulgences, the Infallibility of the Pope, the Immaculate Conception and other fundamental Catholic doctrines, because these are not explicitly mentioned in the Bible.

Here then are two Churches radically opposed on one point, Tradition, and from this head flows much of the doctrinal differences between them. Indeed so vital and far-reaching is the issue, that could the two Churches be brought to agree on this one point, complete harmony of faith might result. This paper is a little contribution to the cause of harmony. It purposes to treat in a friendly and fair-minded way, the many difficulties which Protestants see in Tradition.

It is hard for Protestants to accept Tradition, for it is regarded as being an innovation of Rome; and Rome albeit mighty and of venerable age, has no right to invent truth. However, in this case, Rome cannot claim such a distinction. Tradition was invented by no one, but it was given by God as a means of enlightening mankind in the way of salvation. The old Jews believed in Tradition. Witness the feud between the Pharisees and Saducees on this very point. The former, representing orthodoxy and the bulk of Jewish people, believed in Tradition. Hence, though there was no explicit mention in the Bible concerning the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body or the inspiration and canon of Scripture, the Pharisees held these truths with just as much Faith as those in the Holy Book.

² Traditions are thus classified with respect to sources:

Divine—Have God for their Author and hence on a par with Holy Writ.

Apostolic—Founded on the human authority of the Apostles.

Ecclesiastical—Founded on the human authority of the Church.

Materially, Traditions are divided into

Dogmatic Traditions—e. g., the Father is unbegotten, there are Seven Sacraments, there are Four Gospels.

Moral or Ritualistic—e. g., Observation of Lenten Fast, celebration of Easter.

We can glean from the Bible itself, a confirmation of the claim of the Church, for we read (2 Thess. II, 14) "Therefore brethren, stand fast and hold the Traditions which you have learned, whether by word or by our Epistle." Also, "... The Tradition which they have received of us," (Ibid. III, 6), and "Hold the form of sound words which thou hast heard of me in Faith" (2 Tim. I, 13).³

It is not only evident that Tradition existed in the primitive Church, but it was accepted "in Faith" as the emphatic dogmatic language of St. Paul implies. Rome could not have foisted such an innovation on Christianity, for before Rome was, the Jews believed in Tradition, and before St. Peter went to Rome, the early Christians believed in Tradition.

The stand of our Protestant brethren would be correct if all the truths of Faith were contained in the Bible. However, such is not the case. The Bible itself declares that it is not a complete deposit, for we read in John xvi, 12, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now"; also, "I had many things to write unto thee, but I would not by pen and ink write to thee" (3 John, 13); and, "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; which if they were written every one, the world itself, I think would not be able to contain the books that should be written" (John xxi, 25).⁴ Then too, I Cor. v, 9; xi, 34 and Acts 1, 3 promise instructions that were certainly given, but are nowhere found in the Bible.

If we recall that the Gospel of Christ is a living message and that the Saviour said, "Preach," not "Write," the validity of Tradition would not be hard to accept. It is a significant fact that Christ Himself never wrote a word,⁵ but it pleased His adorable Wisdom to deliver the glad tidings by word of mouth. Christ did not think little of Tradition, for He used it in the furtherance of His mission. It is not incongruous to say that He is still employing the good offices of Tradition, for His mission continues.

We believe that Protestants place themselves in an untenable position when they say that the Scriptures alone are the

³ See also: 1 Cor. XI, 2; 2 Tim. II, 2; Deut. XXXII, 7; Eccles. VIII, 9-12; Gal. II, 2; 2 Tim. III, 4; Psalm 18, 5. (St. James Bible, Psalm 19).

⁴ See also John XX, 30; 2 John, 12.

⁵ Except when Christ wrote on the ground in the narrative of the woman taken in adultery. St. John, Chapter VIII.

complete deposit of Faith, for there were many believers before the first book of the Bible appeared. It was Tradition alone that was the source of Faith for Seth, Noah, Abraham and their children. Further, if Faith rests on the Scriptures alone, we must censure Jewish women, for they thought themselves freed from original sin, a biblically-unauthorized doctrine: for the Law prescribing circumcision for the male, was silent concerning the other sex. Then too, it is hard to explain the fact that before the first Gospel was written, thousands had already espoused Christ and sealed their Faith with their blood. The Patriarchs, Jewish women and the early Christians lacked the Scriptures as base of their Faith, but it must have been grounded in something else—Tradition. St. John Chrysostom beautifully expresses it when he says: "In place of books they had the Holy Ghost."

If we study the missionary life of the Apostles, we cannot fail to realize the little importance they attached to writing when we recall that several Apostles wrote nothing and yet converted nations. Glorious work had been done before Matthew was inspired to pen the first Gospel. Luke, who wrote the third Gospel, Ignatius, Papias, Polycarp and other supports of the infant Church, were converts by Tradition. Like their Master, the Apostles took more kindly to preaching than to writing. All had abundant material, but few wrote, and then meagerly, for they certainly knew much more than what is contained in four short Gospels and twenty-three letters, with their many repetitions.

A perusal of that regrettably-brief New Testament will convince any one that it cannot be the sole Constitution of a Catholic Church. The Bible is not a code, a lawbook or a scientific manual, not a clearly detailed exposition of the religion of Jesus Christ, but a mere record of some main points. Some books were written to combat heresy; naturally these stressed the doctrine attacked: some were written for the Jews, some for Gentiles, some for this city, some for that—all, then, with a particular aim and hence never covering the entire ground of revealed truth. They were merely occasional. There is not present that purposeful unity of a code; that logical order of a philosophical treatise. They suppose an oral teaching that complements the

written Word, supplies what is missing, gives life and flesh to the skeleton of letters.

This is a weighty argument for Tradition, but its validity depends on whether these complementary Traditions are solid and immutable. Protestants are timid in accepting Tradition because it seems to them that Tradition is variable, ever-changing, whereas the written Word is solid and stable, and consequently, solely fitted to contain divine truths.

And here is the crux of the whole question. Have the Traditions which St. Paul exhorted Timothy to "hold in Faith" come down to us uncorrupted, pure, unchanged? If it can be shown that they have, it will solve a great difficulty confronting sincere Protestants. If they have not, the Catholic stand is false.

To arrive at our decision, we must subpoena history to produce her evidence, and this evidence leads to a verdict in the affirmative. She deposes that these Traditions, representing the sublime discourses of Our Lord and the sermons and teachings of the Apostles, though not written into the Bible, nevertheless were not permitted to perish. Some were immediately incorporated into dogmatic customs or rites of the Church and as such stood in no peril of loss or change. Most of them, however, were placed in writing by disciples while the world was still ringing with the "sound"⁶ of the Apostolic band, while their words were yet fresh in the mind of a Gospel-hungry world. Some of these writers were contemporary with the Gospels, most of them shortly after. Best known among these disciples are Sts. Polycarp († 166), Ignatius († 107), Clement of Rome († 91), Justin († 165), Papias († 150), Irenaeus († 202). Later came Clement of Alexandria († 217), Cyprian († 258), Origen († 253), Athanasius, Basil, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and others. These men wrote commentaries on the Gospels and recorded, as far as they had knowledge, the sacred truths which the Apostles had preached but failed to put in writing.⁷ They

⁶ Psalm 18, 4. (St. James Bible, Psalm 19). Also from Office of an Apostle.

⁷ Tradition then is of two kinds from this standpoint, viz.,

Temporal or Alterable, such as three immersions in Baptism;

Perpetual or Unalterable, as Baptism of infants, indelible character of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders.

Temporal Tradition, founded on human authority, can suffer change, dispensation, abrogation.

Perpetual Tradition, emanating from God, is as immutable as His Written Word.

also affirm in unmistakable terms that Tradition is a rule of Faith, that the purpose of their writing is to preserve the "Traditions which they had received from the Apostles."⁸

These men wrote truthfully. Their character is beyond question, for most are canonized saints and many of them martyrs for the Faith, shedding their blood in testimony for what they wrote. Such do not write lies. So when St. Augustine tells us that "the Church received the Tradition from the Apostles that infants may be validly baptized,"⁹ the Apostles must have so taught, and hence it is a doctrine to be believed, though extra-biblical.

We have today the genuine writings of these men. No scholar questions their authenticity or integrity, for they are established beyond question. Eminent Protestant scholars admit their genuineness and have been at pains to gather them into a collection.¹⁰ These writings have come down unpoluted through the centuries, protected with reverent care, cherished as the Scriptures themselves, a fulfillment of Isaias' prophecy:

"My spirit that is in thee, and My words that I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seeds seed" lix, 21.

This fact should dissolve all suspicion that Tradition is unreliable and that it cannot generate that certitude which one gets from reading a truth in cold print. It shows that Tradition is not "back-fence" gossip between the centuries, but as we have seen, the extra-biblical teachings of Christ and the Apostles, truthfully recorded in authenticated documents; and hence here also is reading from cold print, not listening to hearsay. We may likewise note here that the Scriptures are infallible in authority and a rule of Faith, not because they are written, (in this regard they are mere history), but because they were dictated by God. Since Tradition equally emanates from God, it enjoys the same authority.

The stand of the Catholic Church is theologically sound since it is conformable to the sense of Scripture and the evidence of history. In practical results, the position of the Church is likewise secure: for, the acceptance of Tradition on the part of

⁸ Eusebius, Eccl. History, Book III, Chap. 36; Book IV, Chap. 39.

⁹ Contra Donat.

¹⁰ For instance, Le Clerc, Grabe, Basnage, Archbishop Ussher, Bishops Fell, Pearson and Bull.

the Catholic Church conduces to her unity of doctrine, stability, complete rule, certainty; whereas the denial of Tradition on the part of Protestants because of its alleged superfluity, changeableness and unreliability, is in part responsible for their divisions, changes, incomplete rule and general uneasiness.

It is interesting to note that Protestants accept certain Traditions in practice, such as Sunday as the Lord's day, the baptism of infants, the lawfulness of eating blood and strangulated meats, the indelibility of baptism, the divine inspiration of Scripture, the virginity of the Blessed Mother after bearing, and thereby adduce a strong argument in favor of Tradition. None of the above truths are explicitly contained in Scripture, yet a Christian cannot help but accept them on Faith. Doing so, he is having recourse to Tradition and thus Protestants accept Traditions in practice, while they deny them in theory.

This inconsistency no doubt can be attributed to a misunderstanding. Some are of the opinion that the Church regards as Tradition all those sweet but improbable tales of ancient days, those weird stories of antiquity, sprung from the vivid Oriental imagination—the bending palm, the talking oak, the foolish miracles, the trivial prophecies, the repugnant customs. The Catholic Church holds all this in contempt. It is not Tradition, for Tradition concerns itself with sacred truth. The Church does not accept as Tradition the cloudy legends of antique eras, the fables of nations, or even the sacred beliefs of all nations unattested by the testimony of the Fathers. But by divine Tradition she means a **doctrine, account or custom involving faith or morals, revealed by God, uninterruptedly handed down from generation to generation either by word of mouth or in writing, remaining intact in substance and believed now to the same extent and with the same degree of certitude by the universal Church.**

Note the rigor of the definition. A divine Tradition must fulfil seven stern requirements, namely, (1) its author must be God, (2) it must be universally believed, (3) unchanged in substance, (4) uninterrupted, (5) attested by the testimony of reliable men (Fathers of the Church), (6) involving faith or morals,¹¹ (7) opposite belief is heresy. These essential require-

¹¹ Hence the reverent opinion of the Universal Church that Christ was born on December 25th, cannot be classed as a divine Tradition.

ments neatly lop off all the trash of legends and preposterous fables and leave instead the healthy trunk of sacred truth. Any belief fulfilling these conditions belongs to the deposit of faith. The doctrine of the Infallibility of the Pope, the Immaculate Conception, the Divine Maternity of Mary, Indulgences, Purgatory, the Communion of Saints, and others, fulfil the seven requirements and hence are to be believed in faith as divine truths, even though the Scriptures are completely silent concerning them.

To bring all these points home, we should say that without Tradition, the Gospels are soulless, as much as the American Constitution is, without the Supreme Court. It is the decisions of this high tribunal which give life to the law of the land. The Court when deciding the sense of a clause, invariably consults American traditions,¹² for otherwise it could not give the true meaning intended by the members of the Constitutional Convention. The comparison is just: Of themselves, the Scriptures are hard to understand¹³ and their true depths cannot be fathomed unless Traditions are looked into.

When a dispute brings a case before the Catholic Supreme Court, the true meaning of the verse in question is ascertained by the same process, only in another order, which the American tribunal employs, namely, the consulting of traditions. Thus should a group of men deny the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, which is not related in Holy Writ, the living Magisterium of the Church, comprising either the Pope alone, or the Pope with the Bishops and Priests, might sit as a Supreme Court to decide forever the point in question.

The decisions of the American Supreme Court are eminently worthy of respect; the decisions of the Roman Court are infallible because in the matter of deciding a text of Scripture or proclaiming a Traditional truth, it acts under the guidance of the Holy Ghost,¹⁴ and is thus preserved from every danger of error.

If scholars credit the statements of genuine documents, even at the risk of fame and fortune, with what firm faith ought we to accept the statements of written Tradition—the records

¹² Cf. Monroe Doctrine, Dred Scott Case.

¹³ 2 Peter III, 6. Acts VIII, 30-31.

¹⁴ John XVI, 16-17. Matt. XXVIII, 19-20; XVI, 8; VII, 24-27.

penned by the great Fathers, for over and above their human authenticity, they are stamped with the greatest certitude-bearing seal, God's endorsement.

Works consulted:

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 Newman "Essay on Development of Christian Doctrine."
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GONE!

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"But oh for the touch of a vanish'd hand,
 And the sound of a voice that is still!"

—Tennyson.

Oh! ye lost ones—ye departed—who have passed that Silent
 Shore,

Tho' we call you thro' Life's sunset—ye return to us no more.
 Have ye found that Isle of Longing—where earth's toils and
 sorrows cease?

Are ye cleansed by raging fires? Have ye entered Heaven's
 Peace?

Do you hear us when we call you? Do you heed those tears we
 shed?

Oh! Beloved, Oh! Immortals, Oh! ye Dead, who are not dead!
 Speak to us across the darkness—wave to us a glimm'ring
 hand—

Tell us—but that ye remember—dwellers in that Silent Land!