TRADITION AND TRADITIONS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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IT WOULD BE more than slightly impertinent of me to propose a change in the name of this journal, but if it should be adjusted to read *The Way and the Ways* it would succinctly pose the problem with which this number is concerned. Indeed, it would pose perhaps the central problem in Catholic theology and spirituality today: how do we deal with our rich past so that we remain faithful to it, yet do so in a fashion that renders it engaging and life-giving? It would pose, in other words, the problem of tradition and traditions—a perennial question in Christian history, but one that Vatican Council II forced onto our awareness more urgently and dramatically than had ever been done before. In the two decades that have elapsed since the Council, the question has become probably even more pressing, as we search for 'the authentic' interpretation of what the Council intended, or even for that *sensus plenior*—bigger meaning—that might transcend the sum of the Council's documents.

Before the Council most Roman Catholics had a deep, if unreflective, belief that they belonged to a Church that 'did not change'. With the implementation simply of the decree on the liturgy, that belief was challenged in a way that no practising Catholic could ignore. Some felt betrayed, some felt liberated. All had to face the problem. With hindsight it is easy to say that a more effective catechesis was needed to prepare the faithful to understand their religion in a more sophisticated and dynamic way; a gentler style of implementation of the Council surely might have been employed. Nonetheless, the problem is so immense, so complex, so recurrent that it is difficult to imagine any catechesis fully adequate to it, especially in the climate of the 1960s.[1]

To address the issue properly one would have to adduce the skills of a number of disciplines—obviously philosophy and theology, but sociology, anthropology, psychology and others as well. For any number of reasons, there can be no question of my attempting that in these few pages. I can perhaps offer, however, a few reflections about how I see the issue from the viewpoint of an historian, for it touches the most crucial question with which every historian must struggle: continuity and discontinuity, duration and change. The French Revolution, all admit, was a great turning-point and marked a dramatic shift in structures and mentality, but did not France after all remain French? Historians make their living on the reality of change, and the worst message they can receive is 'No news, boss'. Yet they often must reckon with the possibility that in the history of any civilization, religion or institution the continuities run deeper than almost any change.

The problem intensifies when we begin to deal with Christianity and examine it from either a theological or historical perspective. At the core of Christianity lies the belief in a message—'the Gospel', 'the Good News'. That belief postulates that the message has a validity that transcends the ages and transcends the limitations of any culture in which it finds itself, even the culture in which it first took expression. It is meant for every man and woman who ever lived or will live, and it satisfies the deepest desires of their being.

The charge of the Church was to 'hand on' that message, not adulterate or change it. But the very transcendence of the message implies that it perforce will be variously articulated and that every articulation will but imperfectly realize it. A deep continuity is postulated, yet certain discontinuities and shifts in emphasis and perspective seem equally postulated. Since they are inevitable, these discontinuities and shifts should be neither ignored nor judged negatively. They are facets of the splendour of a message meant for all, and therefore adaptable to all—while at the same time remaining true to itself. That is simply a different way of expressing the problem of the relationship of the tradition to an almost infinite variety of traditions.

As an historian of Christian culture, it has been my privilege to spend most of my adult life contemplating this fascinating phenomenon. At some moments I am struck by how continuous it is, at others by how variegated and how characterized by great shifts and revolutions. At every moment I remain impressed by

the importance of studying it. That study is rewarding for many reasons, but two stand out as especially important for the situation in which we currently find ourselves.

When I speak with my students about the study of the history of Christianity, the first benefit I emphasize is that it is a liberating enterprise.[2] That study should liberate them from the 'dead hand' of the past. It can be compared to a psychological review of one's personal history that results in a series of insights as to how I came to be what I am. I am the product of a number of contingent circumstances and decisions, over many of which I had little or no control. The very insights have, however, power to enable me to stand back and assess with new eyes my present situation. I am thus liberated, at least to some extent, from forces that I previously little recognized or understood. I find myself in a new situation of freedom, and I experience at the same time a greater sense of security amid conflicting signals that come to me in the present from every side.

So much for the analogy. When we move from personal history to the broad canvas of Christianity, two rather distinct styles of reading the process of history that has culminated in the present emerge. We thus return to the problem of continuity and discontinuity. The first style emphasizes the former, often operating on the assumption that certain developments or 'trajectories' were not only appropriate under given circumstances but preordained and now irreversible. Underlying this approach sometimes seems to be almost an organic model of the historical process, as from the acorn grew the mighty oak. A review of the process of history obviously yields a better understanding of where one stands at present, but leaves little room for significant change in the future, except in the direction of more and better of the same. This style of reading history heavily accounts for the shock that the reforms of Vatican II dealt to many Roman Catholics.

The second style places more emphasis on the discontinuities. It would underscore that the long history of Christianity is characterized by certain shifts in theological style, ecclesiastical culture, liturgical forms, Church order, and the practice of ministry and spirituality that, while of course not entirely discontinuous with one another, merit the name revolution—or at least minor revolution. Moreover, these changes do not in themselves argue to an inevitable and irreversible course in one direction but express the tradition in a fashion uniquely appropriate for the culture of the

day. Implied of course is that similar shifts may be possible in the future.

Let me illustrate how these two styles of interpretation work in a specific instance in the history of Christian theology and piety. It is possible to move easily from the teaching of Saint Bernard on grace to that of Saint Thomas on the same matter, to show the differences and similarities of their ideas. This is a legitimate and just enterprise. It is equally important, however, to underscore the immense cultural shift that had taken place between the time of the monastic spirituality of Bernard in the twelfth century and the academic theology of Aquinas in the thirteenth. When the two saints spoke about grace, the tune might be the same but the music was different, as different as Gregorian Chant and Beethoven's Ninth. They spoke about the same matter, but they were engaged in two quite different enterprises and conceived of theology in almost irreconcilable ways. A fully adequate historical interpretation of them must take both elements into account.

Just as important as accounting for both those elements is being on guard against the prejudice that even the history of Christianity reads like a history of progress. Despite the battering that prejudice has taken as a result of the World Wars, it is still subtly influential even in religious circles and finds a congenial colleague in a view of history that favours continuities. Was Aquinas's theology really better than Bernard's, or was it a case of gain and loss? To become more contemporary: were the reforms of Vatican Council II a definitive culmination of historical development, now frozen in their perfection, or do they not of themselves invite us to further reflection and action in a reality that, by definition, can never achieve perfect expression and requires constant readjustment?

This is not the place to enter into the complex question of how to interpret the Council, but surely it can be asserted that its *leit-motif* was the adjustment of theology, piety and ministry to 'the needs of the times'. This was only another way of putting the issue of tradition and traditions, for the transcendence of the message is all too transcendent if it precludes entrance into the lives of those for whom it was intended.

Much has been written about the ecclesiological redefinitions proposed in *Lumen gentium,* the Council's dogmatic constitution on the Church, but a more fundamental ecclesiological statement pervades all the documents of the Council. That statement is a reiteration of the basic truth that the Church is an institution of

ministry, and ministry by definition adapts itself to the condition of those to whom it ministers. An ancient truth this, but the Council shifted from the more customary emphasis on the saving power of the tradition itself to the necessity of so living and expressing it that it meet 'the needs of the times'. The principle expressed in that shift allows a more open-ended interpretation of the meaning of the Council, obviously, than does an adherence to the specific stipulations of its decrees. In my opinion, it thus justifies a reading of the history of Christianity that makes more generous allowance for the discontinuities in that history than has often been verified, especially in Catholic circles.

The result of such a reading liberates us, therefore, in a two-fold sense. It tells us who we are and where we are. Just as important, it suggests to us that the future is more open than we had thought, for the past is more variegated, less homogeneous, less unidirectional than we had thought. Within certain limits, reversal of course is possible. As we bring all our powers to bear on discovering and living a more perfect expression of the gospel, we simultaneously realize that these expressions will remain manifold, for they can only be articulated by human beings who are the products of manifold cultures and individual circumstances. There can be no tradition without traditions, but the latter, no matter how sincere, appropriate and well argued, possess no absolute claims. For them to be authentic, in fact, they must reduce the tradition to contingent expressions.

This brings me to my second point. If the first benefit of a study of the history of Christianity is that it liberates us by giving us a new understanding of the forces that brought us to the present moment and made us what we are, the second is complementary to it. The second is an enrichment of our imaginations. While the first liberates us, in a sense, from the past, the second liberates us from the present. It is a trip to a foreign land, during which we look back to our ordinary habitation with new eyes. In the late twentieth century we are not so much victims of 'future-shock' as of 'present-shock', for the media daily bombard us with the reality of the moment and thereby deprive us of the stimulus to examine alternatives to the way things are. The drive of the contemporary world is towards a kind of world-wide uniformity, which ranges from styles of clothing to styles of thought to styles of organization in multi-national businesses and other institutions. This is as true for religion as it is for everything else.

One of the periods of Christian history that I know best is the Counter-Reformation, that is, the story of Catholicism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—the Jesuits, the Council of Trent, the Spanish Inquisition and all that. The popular stereotype of this period is that it was characterized by repression, codifications, orthodoxies and rigid conformism. Anybody who knows the period recognizes that the stereotype is not without basis in fact.[3] Yet, the more the period is studied, the more its variety and vitality manifest themselves—as once again the tradition refused to be confined within the limits that some would prescribe for it. The Counter-Reformation was rich in traditions, some of which it inherited almost unchanged, others that it inherited and modified, still others that it created almost from new. To that extent it is a bracing experience to immerse oneself in it and thus allow one's imagination to be enriched by the wonderful variety it manifests.

In no other area, perhaps, did the Counter-Reformation evince greater creativity than in ministry—and in that correlate of good ministry, spirituality. The so-called disciplinary (or 'reform') decrees of the Council of Trent can be viewed from a number of different perspectives. Taken singly they strike one today with their juridical vocabulary and their distance from our own mentality. The underlying impulse that pervades them, however, is a reform of ministry. The ecclesiological statement that they in effect make is that the Church is an institution of pastoral care—not a startling statement, but one that perfectly corresponded to what the sixteenth century needed to hear, one that constantly has to be made, and one that was reiterated, though in quite different terms, in Vatican II.

In recent years those decrees of Trent have been criticized for obstructing precisely what they hoped to obtain. According to critics, they imposed a network of 'parochial conformity' that blocked the 'natural kinships' that made medieval Christianity such a vital religion.[4] The criticism does not lack merit, especially when the truly long-range effects of what the Council set in motion are weighed. Those effects show that any remedy for abuse can itself become an abuse as times and conditions change; the tradition constantly needs to be articulated again into new traditions. Moreover, the negative effects attributed to the Council derived perhaps more from how the Council came to be interpreted over the course of the centuries than from what the Council intended, and, in any case, generally took as many centuries to be felt in a large number

of areas. It can hardly be denied, however, that the Council's desire to move bishops and other ministers from 'feudatories to pastors' was urgently needed at the time.[5]

At a distance of four hundred years, nonetheless, what is most noteworthy about both the doctrinal and the disciplinary decrees of Trent is how they seem to miss the point of what was most creative and new in Catholicism at the time. The doctrinal decrees deal largely with the sacraments, in answer to Protestant attacks on them. We could easily infer that the most and best energies in Catholicism would be devoted to sacramental ministry, but this is not quite the case. It was other ministries that burgeoned, especially different forms of ministry of the Word. Although the disciplinary decrees touch on ministry of the Word in a few crucial passages, they never treat it in much detail.[6]

Neither the doctrinal nor the disciplinary decrees have anything directly to say about spirituality, yet the revitalization of older spiritualities and the creation of new ones was one of the greatest achievements of the age. With these spiritualities came new ministries, as spiritual direction and the practice of retreats assumed a role and physiognomy they had never had before. For all practical purposes, Trent has not a word to say about schools as an instrument of ministry, but the conviction was already widespread that that instrument was needed for all classes of society. Schools had never been so conceived before the sixteenth century.[7]

Even the sacraments seem to have been undergoing somewhat of a redefinition in practice, as in some circles Penance came to be envisioned less as the tribunal Trent described and more as a locus for encouragement and direction, or even for a kind of 'personalized sermon', as an early Jesuit put it.[8] These as well as many other developments were surely not contrary to the Council, but they went beyond it and did not look to it for warrant. 'From below', one might say, new traditions were being forged. The poor communications of the era did not allow for too close supervision, so these traditions were able to come into being and make their way on a trial-and-error, success-and-failure basis.

Contrary to what one might expect, therefore, a reflective but nonetheless hard-headed pragmatism marked the ministry of the Counter-Reformation. Even its great codifications were the result of experimentation and extensive consultation with those 'in the field'. Abstract principles were surely operative, but they were tested against practice, so that they might be made operative in

an effective way. The two great codifications by the Jesuits published in 1599 illustrate this reality. The *Directory to the Spiritual Exercises* was the fruit of forty years of discussion and experience, and the same could be said for the *Plan of studies* (*Ratio studiorum*) intended for Jesuit schools. Especially the former is even today, moreover, remarkable for its balance and its keen perception that the same regimen is not equally helpful to all. Both documents set new traditions into place. They thus promoted them and gave them firmer form, but of course also opened the way to rigidification, literalism and even species of fundamentalism for persons with less agile minds.

Of all the initiatives of the era, few better reveal than the so-called 'missions' to rural populations the creativity of the period and the concern to adapt ministry to the specific situations—psychological and physical—of the persons for whose sake the ministry was being performed.[9] The 'missions' were not fly-by-night excursions of mindless zealots into the countryside, but carefully organized pastoral strategies. The Jesuits, Oratorians, Capuchins and Vincentians took the lead. These missions were a first experiment in 'collaborative ministry'; the missioners worked together in groups of four to eight. They generally stayed in a locality for at least a month, with a full programme in hand. The schedule of instruction, the sermons, the catechesis and the processions were adapted to the rhythm of peasant life, with the first exercises offered well before sunrise. Hymns were composed in the vernacular and set to the melodies of popular songs. The missioners did not abandon the locality once they had been there, but made sure to return after a few years.

As you can see, these 'missions' were composed of some traditional elements, but nothing like them was known in the Middle Ages on an organized and systematic basis. They eventually turned their attention to urban centres as well, and this Catholic 'revivalism' established itself as an important tradition in the Church well into the twentieth century.[10] It persists in some parts of the world even today.

The little Trent had to say about devotions and pious practices tended to be cautious and was as intent upon excising and reforming as in promoting them. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries created, however, a vast and impressive new array of them. During this period novenas of all sorts, accompanied by processions, prayers and series of sermons, became for the first time a standard

feature of Roman Catholic life. Along with them developed Forty Hours and similar phenomena like the *Tre Ore* on Good Friday. The Stations of the Cross emerged with a force and clearer form than they had in the late Middle Ages, and the same was true for the rosary.

Deplorable of course is how these phenomena distracted the faithful from a more properly liturgical and more directly biblical spirituality, but we should not underestimate two of their great accomplishments. First, they met people where they were and recognized that one style should not be imposed on all—they recognized the value of a variety of traditions. Secondly, they provided in most cases ample opportunity for instruction and spiritual encouragement by means of the sermons that accompanied them, in a context that gave greater latitude to preachers than did the Eucharistic liturgy.

Contemporaneous with these and many other developments within Catholicism were similar ones in the Protestant Churches. Although the proliferation of those Churches had some obviously negative effects, it also allowed for the formulation of other traditions of piety and Church order that rightly claimed a base in the tradition and surely nourished the spiritual needs of those who espoused them. If ecumenism means anything, it means that the development of these traditions within the great tradition must be examined and utilized for further enrichment of our imaginations.

But perhaps it is time we returned to the situation today. For Catholics the Second Vatican Council strove to place the bible and the official liturgy of the Church at the centre of people's lives. For all mainline Churches the ecumenical movement has made it possible to reduce differences and to create an atmosphere in which it is possible to learn from one another. The gains in these regards, particularly in the past twenty years, have been astounding, and we should be profoundly grateful to God for them.

At the same time a certain impoverishment has ensued. What happened within Catholicism? Although it is by no means clear that the Council intended it, its decrees meant in many parts of the world such an emphasis on the Eucharistic liturgy that practically everything else disappeared, including Vespers and sermon series. Moreover, the persuasion soon seemed to be abroad that the mere translation of the liturgy into the vernacular solved all problems and that without further elaboration it would nourish all spiritual needs. Faithful adherence to the liturgical texts is important, of

course, but when separated from creativity in the non-verbal aspects of liturgy it has produced in all too many churches a routinized rite that does little to engage the affect. The rubricism lamented in the preconciliar Church seems to have gone underground momentarily only to return in vernacular guise.

More broadly, the Council is sometimes seen not as providing general guidelines and opening the Church to the 'new era', as Pope John XXIII indicated, but as confining the Spirit within what it specifically prescribed or encouraged. Is this not asking too much and expecting the Council to do what no such body can? Does it not belie the fact that in the articulation of the tradition the 'normative' and the 'more authentic' are always relative to the actual needs of those for whom the tradition is intended and for whom it must find expression in a number of traditions? The abstract ideal can deliver death as well as life.

In many parts of the world Christianity remains a vital and operative reality in people's lives, but the greatest vitality and growth lies in sects, cults and in the so-called 'electronic churches'. In the mainline Churches—Protestant and Catholic—ennui, respectability and 'normative' but dull services often hold sway. Bible-thumping, glitz, ignorance and an often nasty fundamentalism mark the alternatives. It is easy to sneer at them, but we must at least concede that they have manufactured traditions that reach large numbers of people where they are. As the Vatican recently indicated, perhaps we have something to learn from this phenomenon, as we examine the problem of tradition and traditions and the liberation they both should bring.[11] Rightly understood, creativity and imagination do not militate against tradition and traditions, but are at the very heart of them.

NOTES

[1] I have dealt with this problem in two articles: 'Reform, historical consciousness, and Vatican II's *aggiornamento*', *Theological studies*, 32 (1971), pp 573–601, and 'Developments, reforms, and two great reformations: towards a historical assessment of Vatican II', *ibid*, 44 (1983), pp 373–406.

[2] See my 'Church historians in the service of the Church', *Römische Quartalschrift*, 80 (1985), pp 223–34, and the three articles by John Tracy Ellis, James Hennesey and myself in *America*, 147 (1982), pp 185–93.

[3] See my 'Catholic reform' in *Reformation Europe: a guide to research*, ed Steven Ozment (St Louis, 1982), pp 297–319, and especially the volume under my editorship, *The Counter-Reformation: a guide to research* (St Louis, to be published in 1987).

[4] John Bossy has particularly espoused this interpretation. See, e.g., his 'The Counter-Reformation and the people of Catholic Europe', *Past and present,* 47 (1970), pp 51–70, and his recent *Christianity in the West 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1985).

[5] See Hubert Jedin, *Crisis and closure of the Council of Trent* (London, 1967).

[6] The most important passages occur in Session V, 1546, 'Super lectione et praedicatione', and in Session XXIV, canon IV, 1563, 'De reformatione', in *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta,* ed Giuseppe Alberigo et al., 3rd ed. (Bologna, 1973), pp 667–70, 763. See also Peter Bayley, 'Preaching', in *The Counter-Reformation.*

[7] See Paul Grendler, 'Schools, seminaries, catechetics', in *The Counter Reformation.*

[8] See my 'Unterwegs in alle Länder der Welt: Die Berufung des Jesuiten nach Jerónimo Nadal', *Geist und Leben* (1986), pp 247–60, especially 258.

[9] The best, all too brief, discussion in English is still by Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: a new view of the Counter-Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp 189–94.

[10] See, e.g., Jay P. Dolan, *Catholic revivalism in the United States, 1830–1900* (Notre Dame, 1977).

[11] 'Vatican report on sects, cults and new religious movements', *Origins,* 16 (1986), pp 1–10. An entire number of *America* is devoted to the question, 155 (Sept. 27, 1986); see especially William D. Dinges, 'The Vatican report on sects, cults and new religious movements', pp 145–47, 154.