

THE CRESSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

Easter 2006

Faithfulness to Tradition

A Roman Catholic Perspective

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For moderns, the question of what it means to be faithful to a religious tradition is a good example of question-begging. Answering the question of faithfulness presupposes that one knows what the tradition is to which one might be faithful. But in modernity, in the West at least and perhaps even globally by now, religious traditions have become precarious things, contested spaces where the issue of faithfulness has been subsumed by the ambiguity of traditions themselves. The traditional notion of tradition itself has become questionable in light of our heightened awareness of the historicity of traditions and their often surprising pluralism. Historical investigation of religious traditions through time and culture reveals the remarkable changes they have undergone in belief, doctrine, and practice, the living constituents of a tradition. This same historical sensibility grasps easily the synchronic implications of this diachronic fact. Any religious tradition broadly construed by a singular name is, in any present moment, actually a remarkable variety of smaller communities that possess clearly distinguishable beliefs and practices, however much they might share a family resemblance. For those intellectually aware of the problem that historicity poses for tradition, and for many more who emotionally feel its effects, being faithful to a religious tradition has become as difficult as saying what that same religious tradition is.

My own Roman Catholic Christian tradition is a very good example of this twin problem of identifying and being faithful to tradition. One could argue for several reasons that it is the very best example of this problem. The Catholic tradition faced a powerful assault from the great Protestant Reformers in the early modern period. That attack, promulgated in the name of Christian truth, produced a rich history of Catholic reflection on what tradition is and how its authority functions in the life of the religious community. Furthermore, the Roman Catholic tradition has adjudicated the modern

THE CRESSET

problem of traditional identity by managing to hold together many styles of Roman Catholic belief and practice. These styles of faith and practice have not formally splintered into separate congregations, each with its own understanding of traditional identity, as has modern Judaism. Because Catholic Christianity has had to defend its claims for tradition against these vibrant criticisms and places such a high premium on unity, it is a confession in which the problem of tradition and traditional faithfulness is especially highlighted.

This essay will begin by considering the classical understanding of Catholic tradition and proceed by presenting the development of a modern Catholic theology of tradition. It will conclude by considering how central the issue of faithfulness is to the identity of tradition itself.

A Classical Understanding of Catholic Tradition

The word “tradition” derives from the Latin “*traditio*,” which, in verbal form, means “to hand on.” The New Testament Greek word “*paradosis*” conveys this event of handing on the faith, written testimony of which we find as early as Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians in the middle of the first century: “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Corinthians 15:3–5). In this first mention of tradition in Christian writing, Paul understands the handing on of the faith to be an interpretation of Jewish scriptures, an interpretation that had been passed on to him orally by the earliest believers and that he, in turn, was now shaping into scriptural form in his epistle. From the time of Paul until the present moment, tradition has been imagined both as a content, the “good news” of salvation, and as a process by which that content is transmitted to the next generation of believers. The content of tradition materialized slowly in sacred persons, sacraments, relics, and places, but especially in the writings accorded a place in the New Testament canon as the inspired word of God. The process of tradition unfolded in the events of believing, practicing, and witnessing.

Both of these notions of tradition—as content and as process—took more determinate shape in the early Christian practice of clarifying the faith in doctrine. Fundamental disagreements among early Christians about the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ were settled by ecumenical councils, meetings of bishops in which a majority vote defined the Church’s orthodox faith. These councils expressed their orthodoxy in creeds, and later councils expressed their orthodoxy in teachings or condemnations of positions judged to be contrary to the belief of the Church. Thus, conciliar doctrine presented the content of tradition in normative sentences that had powerful implications for belief and practice as

THE CRESSET

well. While Christianity closed its biblical canon rather early in its history, by the turn of the third century, conciliar teachings contracted canonical closure even more, functioning as a “canon within a canon” that set tighter limits for the faithful interpretation of God’s revelation in scripture. Paradoxically though, the process of creating tradition through interpreting the canon supplemented the biblical narrative with language, concepts, and, eventually in later Catholic history, with substantive beliefs that did not appear explicitly in the New Testament (see Tavard 1959). Emerging Catholic sensibilities ascribed authority to this process by claiming that the Holy Spirit inspired the work and teaching of ecumenical councils (Congar 1960, 157–59).

The clarity of the conciliar definition enabled later generations to accord traditional authority to Christian writers whom they judged to represent the orthodoxy of the settled doctrinal tradition. These Christian writers, like Augustine, John Damascene, and Thomas Aquinas, were viewed as possessing a corporate authority, as though they spoke with a single voice on all matters of traditional faith. God was the author of divine revelation in scripture and tradition, and the authorities of the tradition mimicked God’s inspired voice in their collective authorship. The Platonic cast of Christian theology assumed that all these authorial voices were unchanging and one, for so was God’s truth. Thus, diversity and novelty were seen as the marks of heresy. The rising authority of the bishop of Rome beginning in the late fourth century led to the increasing addition of papal writings to the harmonious chorus of authorities, and the development of the Catholic belief in papal infallibility from the thirteenth century on increased the register of the papal voice in this chorus, even when it spoke in a fallible way, *sotto voce*.

It was this homogeneous understanding of tradition that the great Reformers of the sixteenth century challenged as human invention, and so as sinful corruption. Whereas medieval Catholic sensibilities saw an inspired unity in a single Holy Writ that comprised both biblical scriptures and ecclesial scriptures whose sacred truth informed every belief and practice, the Reformers distinguished disjunctively between biblical writings and church writings, understanding the former as the inspired gospel and the latter as its betrayal. Expressing this judgment succinctly, Luther’s slogan “*Sola scriptura*” not only advocates the singular authority of the Bible but also decries Catholic claims for the authority of tradition. In the polemical rhetoric of the sixteenth-century debates, both sides identified Catholic claims for the authority of tradition with the authority of the Pope, and for that very reason, the Catholics embraced these claims as true and the Protestants rejected them as false.

In the wake of the Reformation, Catholic belief in the authority of tradition has been shaped by the force of this Protestant attack. In its decree on divine revelation, the Council of Trent (1545–1563) took pains to rebut the Protestant scripture principle. According to the Council Fathers, the “truth and rule” of Christ “are contained in writ-

THE CRESSET

ten books and in unwritten traditions which were received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or else have come down to us, handed on as it were from the apostles themselves at the inspiration of the holy Spirit..." The decree goes on to equate the authority of tradition with the authority of the Old and New Testaments, insisting that the same "feeling of piety and reverence" accorded to the biblical writings be shown toward "traditions concerning both faith and conduct, as either directly spoken by Christ or dictated by the holy Spirit, which have been preserved in unbroken sequence in the catholic Church" (Tanner 1990, 663).

After Trent, Catholic theologians typically articulated the conciliar heritage by speaking of God's revelation in "Scripture and Tradition," a conjunctive formulation that at once reflected the medieval conception of a homogeneous *Scriptura sacra*, while yet placing in relief the distinctiveness of the authority of tradition. This classical conception of Catholic tradition was re-affirmed and clarified at the Second Vatican Council (1963–1965) in its "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" (*Dei verbum*). The Council Fathers rejected an earlier draft of this document that portrayed scripture and tradition as two sources of revelation. This "two sources" conceptualization had appeared in different forms since the time of Trent as an effective way of asserting the power of the magisterium, the collective teaching authority of the Catholic bishops, most visibly expressed in the authority of the Pope. Instead, Vatican II taught that "[s]acred Tradition and sacred Scripture" flow "from the same divine well-spring, [and] come together in some fashion to form one thing..." As much as Vatican II insisted on the mutual co-inherence of scripture and tradition as divine revelation, it refused to acknowledge that tradition is circumscribed by the content of scripture. Tradition, *Dei verbum* taught, "transmits in its entirety the Word of God." And yet, the document continues, "the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone" (*Dei verbum*, 755, no. 9). The Council affirmed the long-standing Catholic belief in the charismatic power of the magisterium as the sole authentic interpreter of the Word of God, itself testimony to how the process of tradition most visibly and authoritatively unfolds in the life of the Church.

Developing Tradition

In telling the story of the classical Catholic understanding of tradition, this essay has stressed the consistency in teaching from Trent to Vatican II and has suggested that, understood historically, that consistency derives from a Catholic desire to defend and define its belief in tradition in the setting of post-Reformation polemics. A more complete version of the story, however, would need to consider another dimension of conflict that has brought us to our present historical moment: the Enlightenment attack on the authority of tradition itself.

THE CRESSET

Modernity broke decisively onto the world stage in the eighteenth century in the intellectual, political, and cultural movement of the Enlightenment. The main goal of the Enlightenment's attack on tradition was to undermine the authority of feudal culture. But to the degree that the authority of feudal culture was bound up with the authority of the Christian churches, Enlightenment thinkers launched a devastating assault on the Christian belief in divine revelation, whether by scripture alone or by scripture and tradition. The rise of a Newtonian worldview did much to discredit the miracles that filled the pages of the Bible and that were, lest we forget, the surest proof of Christianity's truth. Historical-critical investigation of the biblical text and church history demonstrated that the sacred page and sacred time could be parsed in utterly secular ways that fractured the unified resonance of God's inspired voice. Incisive Enlightenment critics of traditional Christianity—whether Locke, Hume, Jefferson, or Kant—all assumed that the truths of human existence were naturally inscribed in reason, and that the traditional Christian modes of revelation were, at best, obsolete metaphors for the timeless truth of reason that humanity gradually would outgrow. Since reason alone could discover and, in some explanations, construct truth autonomously, history was judged to be superfluous and so dispensable as a realm in which God revealed the meaning of life.

In the early nineteenth century, Catholic theologians like Johann Sebastian Drey and Johann Adam Möhler responded to the challenge of the Enlightenment critique by rethinking the nature of tradition. They found a valuable resource in the burgeoning intellectual and artistic movement of Romanticism. Disenchanted with the Enlightenment's glorification of critical reason and its banishment of providence from history, Romantic thinkers instead turned to the faculty of imagination to fathom the temporal unfolding of supernatural truth within the dynamism of natural events. Catholic theologians embraced this worldview and its rhetoric by portraying the act of faith as the imaginative discernment of the Holy Spirit's unfolding presence to time and circumstance. Countering the Enlightenment understanding of a history devoid of sacred meaning, Catholic theologians now reclaimed history as the realm of a developing tradition. This is not to say, of course, that Catholic thinkers gave up the age-old Christian belief that God's revelation was given once and for all in the apostolic age. Very much like a classical understanding of tradition, the new idea assumed the essential timelessness of divine truth. Unlike the classical understanding of tradition, though, the new idea did not see time as a mirror dimly reflecting the timelessness of God and revelation's truth, and did not see tradition as the sequential repetition of the unchanging deposit of faith. Instead, the new understanding of tradition saw time as the realm of new occasions for appreciating the meaning of God's revelation, and tradition as the developing encounter between God's Spirit and the community of faith in history.

THE CRESSET

Thus was born the very modern notion of the development of doctrine, a principle that has become an axiom of modern theology. Catholic theologians have explained the notion of developing tradition in any number of ways. Drey proposed a dialectical model that imagined tradition not simply as the orthodox past but as an ongoing, fruitful exchange between the fixed authority of the past and the relevance of the Church's present moment. Möhler offered a decidedly organic model that conceived tradition as a life form animated by the Holy Spirit and growing in time. John Henry Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (1845) chose a noetic metaphor that compared the movement of tradition to the clarification of an idea over time. (For a detailed presentation of these models of tradition, see Thiel 2000, 57–76.) Catholic theology in the late twentieth century has favored a reception model that understands tradition as a process in which the entire Church gradually believes and practices new understandings of divine revelation in history. This reception model has been encouraged by the teaching of Vatican II that the “whole body of the faithful” possesses a supernatural sense of the faith “aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth” that guarantees that all the faithful “cannot err in matters of belief.” This teaching on the corporate infallibility of the faithful is an interesting complement to Vatican I's definition of papal infallibility, and clearly reflects the Romantic assumptions that attend the modern conception of tradition.

Ambiguous Authority

Change is the great problem that all traditions have had to face in modernity. This observation is especially true of a traditional religion like Christianity, which bore the brunt of Enlightenment criticism and which, following its Platonic assumptions, regards change as inimical to truth. Any tradition purports to be a meaningful continuity that resists the corrosive effects of change. Roman Catholic Christianity understands its tradition to be a sacred continuity imbued with the authority of divine revelation and assured in its truth by the changeless God. Those beliefs make change a threat that any Catholic understanding of tradition will need to negotiate in some way.

Christianity did not have to face the problem of change prior to the Enlightenment. In Medieval Catholic understanding, tradition eclipsed any notion of change or difference, or defined it as the heretical other. The chorus of traditional authorities in all times sang in perfect harmony with God's inspired voice, even though, as the twelfth-century maverick Peter Abelard had the audacity to demonstrate, they did not. As much as the Reformation shook the previous hegemony of Catholic culture, the Tridentine response to the Protestant clamor for change and to the fact of Christian difference was excommunication. This point is made to emphasize again that the Enlightenment changed all this. The compelling results of historical criticism applied to scripture and tradition, the rise of new and quickly canonical forms of knowledge in the natural and social sciences, the irre-

THE CRESSET

sistibility of democratic revolutions, and the growing power of market capitalism all worked together to make modern change undeniably threatening to traditional religions, and perhaps especially to Roman Catholic Christianity. Capitulation aside, there are two responses that traditional religions have made to the modern problem of change: fundamentalism and rapprochement. Fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon that responds to the Enlightenment valorization of profane time by simply denying the integrity of modern standards of knowledge. Much in the post-Enlightenment history of Roman Catholicism can be identified with this fundamentalist response, such as Catholicism's early, ultramontanistic regard for liberal political philosophy; its conduct in the Modernist controversy; the narrowness of its Neo-Scholastic philosophy, taught as a template for all forms of knowledge in Catholic colleges and universities throughout the first half of the twentieth century; and the attraction of many kinds of reactionary Catholicism today whose deep suspicion of the modern world does not preclude their extensive use of the internet and media to communicate their message (witness Cardinal Schönborn's recent enlisting of a conservative public relations firm to place his article on evolution on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*!). Fundamentalism is on the rise in all traditional religions because its nostalgia for a premodern understanding of fixed, unchanging authority is comforting to many in a quickly-changing, ambiguous world. Rapprochement, on the other hand, moves in the opposite direction. It tries to think the thoughts of traditional authority and change together, affirming the truth of each in their mutual relationship. An excellent example of the way of rapprochement is the modern notion that doctrine undergoes "development." The very use of the word "development" draws the threat of anomalous change under the purposeful auspices of divine providence. From a fundamentalist perspective, "development" cannot rescue "change" from its irreligious and capricious wanderings through history. But even those inclined toward the way of rapprochement must admit that the adoption of "change" as "development" involves the acceptance of new ideas about the workings of tradition that are as unnerving as they are exciting. Three such new ideas attend a modern Catholic theology of tradition. All disturb traditional sensibilities since they suggest that authority of the highest order is ambiguous. All three point us toward the issue of faithfulness to tradition in our closing reflections.

The first idea is the authority accorded to the supernatural sense of the faith shared by all believers in the teaching of Vatican II, mentioned earlier. The sense of the faith apprehends infallible truth when it is attuned to God's presence in history. But as an experience, and a corporate experience at that, the sense of the faith is thoroughly temporal and often rather amorphous, qualities that make the discernment of tradition on the part of the whole Church a most debatable practice. Even though the Council teaches that the sense of the faith is properly guided by the magisterium, such guidance is far from assurance when there is significant disagreement in the Church about the Spirit's truth.

THE CRESSET

That there may be such disagreement brings me to the second idea. The very notion of a developing truth in the experience of the faithful valorizes newness in tradition, a very untraditional idea. When Catholic communities throughout the world recite the Nicene Creed at Sunday mass, they together affirm the past about which there is a settled consensus of belief. Once one concedes the development of tradition, the door is open to the ambiguous authority of the present in which believers, in good faith, sometimes make new claims for the Spirit's infallible truth. Historical-critical investigation supports the value of traditional novelty, since the history of doctrine clearly shows that nearly every claim of tradition appeared *de novo* at a certain moment in time, and then, as a minority view, developed authority and consensus over time. The third and final idea is the way that a developing tradition makes room for creativity in the experience of faith as an act of discerning traditional truth. Kierkegaard was right, of course, when he described the life of faith as repetition. But modern assumptions also ascribe to faith an ability to see new manifestations of the Spirit that are more than just occasions of grace but burgeoning moments in the unfolding of a truly sacred time that one day will be remembered as the time-honored past. We could describe this endowment of faith as a kind of creativity, a talent on the part of believers to apprehend God's truth in history, in the "signs of the times." We would do well to see this creative dimension of faith as a supernatural gift, as a communal power at work in the sense of the faith that all believers share. We would also do well, though, to understand the sense of the faith as a capacity for discernment at work in individual believers, effective whenever they authentically apprehend the Spirit in history, whether in the past or the present. This is not to say that the authority of the present moment can ever be recognized as fully as the authority of the past. Novel claims by definition have never before appeared and yet, as claims for tradition, they clamor for recognition as the age-old faith of the Church. Their witness seems anomalous and their authority profoundly ambiguous.

It should be no surprise, then, that the exercise of traditional creativity stirs debate and even conflict in the Church. Whether the novel claim for tradition is that women should be ordained to priestly ministry or that the Church's continuous practice of restricting priestly ordination to males is divine revelation and for that reason unchangeable, the newness of the claim likely will engender disagreement that seems to threaten the unity of the Church. Deep disagreement exposes the fact that many in the Church have not discerned the Spirit truthfully, and it is upsetting to the self-critical among us to think that we could be wrong about matters of such importance. Much worse is the more common view of the arrogant among us who think that the ambiguous authority of the present moment evaporates before our utter certainty about what counts as tradition.

The ambiguous authority of creative faith can be seen very clearly in the modern struggles between the magisterium and Catholic theologians. The creative ability of faith

THE CRESSET

to discern and express the presence of the Spirit might be conceived as a kind of individual authorship of tradition, which any believer might exercise but which theologians exercise as a matter of vocation. This authorship, of course, possesses only authority when its discernment is truthful. And yet, as we have seen, claims for such truthfulness are ambiguous whenever they make claims for the novel. Innovating authorship stands at odds with the ancient understanding of collective, staid authorship that continues to be practiced on most occasions by the magisterium. That the magisterium has come to function in the modern period as a living authorial voice of tradition in its ordinary teaching increases the prospect for conflict with theological authors, as has proved to be the case (see Thiel 1991).

As these three examples of ambiguous authority show, the very idea of a developing tradition accounts for much of the anxiety in the Church today. The church and our church-related institutions struggle to keep our traditions alive, knowing that so many other church-related institutions of higher education have gone the way of secularity. On the one hand, development is the only realistic way for a tradition to remain vibrant. On the other hand, development can lead to tradition's loss. Faithfulness is a task that must negotiate the Scylla of fundamentalism and the Charybdis of secular capitulation.

Faithful to Tradition

What does it mean, then, for a Roman Catholic to be faithful to tradition? And what implications might our answer have for the broader issue of being faithful to any of our traditions?

Fundamentalist yearnings may be understandable in uncertain times, but they hope for something unreal. A tradition is not an unchanging continuity, in time but not of it in some magical way. Time is one of the most wonderful dimensions of God's creation, and to regard it with Platonist eyes is unworthy of any religion in the tradition of Abraham. Traditions, like all things created, are thoroughly temporal and therein lies their created goodness. If we remember that the issue of faithfulness is bound up with the reality of tradition, then faithfulness too must be temporal through and through. It is in faith's temporality that we can begin to answer our concluding questions.

One might think that the matter of faithfulness to tradition would be adjudicated by first determining the content of tradition and then professing its truth, but in reality the relationship between faithfulness and tradition is exactly the other way around. A tradition is an act of faith that a community of believers affirms together. That communal act of faith, however, is enmeshed in time. It is always made in a present moment that passes quickly into another and that into another again. Each of these acts of faith makes tradition by affirming a particular pattern of sacred continuity. Even though a tradition can be conceived chronologically, from past to present, its sacred continuity is actually

THE CRESSET

affirmed in faith retrospectively, looking backward into the past. Believers in every present moment profess tradition from where they stand, claiming a Spirit-filled continuity aligned from their own standpoint back to the earliest Christian faith. In other words, traditional continuity is a belief about the present's relationship to the past, and only indirectly then about the past's relationship to the present.

This image of retrospection contrasts sharply with the typical way that both the classical and developing conceptions of tradition imagine sacred continuity. As different as they are in other respects, both the classical and developing conceptions view tradition prospectively. They imagine an idealized observer standing in the apostolic age and gazing forward into the future, seeing the same content of divine truth defining traditional continuity in all times. In the classical conception, this continuity is complete from the beginning and faithfully handed on to each next generation. In the developing conception, this continuity is latent in every moment and gradually appears historically. But in both instances, continuity is visible or latent in all moments running from the past into the future. As we look more closely at this prospective optics, we realize that human beings cannot "see" in this way. No human gaze can penetrate the future. The idealized observer in this prospective optics is God. And while the eternal God may be able to see traditional continuity in this way, believers cannot.

A retrospective understanding of tradition offers a realistic account of how believers actually shape lines of meaningful continuity. The continuity of tradition is an act of faith in which believers together affirm their meaningful relationship to the faith of past believers. Past believers, of course, did exactly the same. They affirmed tradition in their own day by retrospectively configuring lines of continuity to the faith of previous generations, who did the same again. Most of these retrospective acts of faith in any present moment repeat the claims of the previous present moment, which accounts for the continuous stability that we expect a tradition to be. Even this repetition, though, develops in ever-renewed acts of faith in passing time. Through repeated acts of faith of claiming the continuity of tradition, the tradition grows or develops in time. This means that what we call the "continuity" of tradition and what we call the "development" of tradition are exactly the same thing. The continuity of tradition is not alien to development, as was thought under classical assumptions. Nor is the continuity of tradition an essential content manifesting itself in historical developments but from which it remains distinguishable, as has been thought under modern, Romantic assumptions. Rather, the continuity of tradition is claimed in a communal act of faith that is utterly temporal and so develops in every passing moment as the tradition-shaping act of faith is made again and again. Tradition, we might say, continuously develops (see Thiel 1999 ; 2000, 84-85).

Now at first glance, this might seem to be the assertion of the worst kind of relativism. How could traditional continuity be real or trusted or truthful if it were indistinguish-

THE CRESSET

able from development? This question and these concerns evince how easily we can forget that a tradition is an act of faith and that all the practices attending that act are being made and remade in time. The traditional continuity that faith ever affirms is as real as a tradition can be, and anyone who troubles about the staying power of such acts of faith need only consider the history of any culture. Once we think of continuity as being remade in every moment as believers realign their relationship to the past, we begin to appreciate the openness of tradition to novelty. Retrospective claims for traditional continuity reaffirm nearly all of the sacred past. But any present act of faith may also discern the presence of the Spirit in new ways that lay claim to tradition. And if such a discernment is perceived as truthful by growing numbers of the faithful, then, sooner or later, the faith of the whole Church may weave the once novel claim into the lines of age-old continuity where, now as the deposit of faith, it may be professed as tradition.

Let us consider a couple of examples. Historical studies show that Christologies of the early Christian centuries were typically subordinationist, holding that the Son of God was inferior in divinity to God the Father. In the middle of the third century, literary evidence appears of a new belief that the Christ is fully divine. By the early fourth century, the novel belief in the undiminished divinity of the Son of God had grown considerably and to the point that this novel retrospective claim for the continuity of tradition clashed with the chronologically older claim for subordinationism. The Arian controversy was adjudicated over time by the Church's common affirmation of the new claim as the age-old faith of the Church.

A second example is more recent. The Second Vatican Council taught in its "Declaration on Religious Freedom" (*Dignitatis humanae*) that freedom of religious belief is a sacred right revealed by God, and so a truth entrenched in the apostolic deposit of faith, even though this teaching was neither believed nor practiced in the Church until shortly before it was retrospectively claimed as tradition by the Council fathers.

These examples of novel claims also demonstrate how retrospection can undo the belief of the past by making new claims for continuity. Occasionally, a present-day generation practices development by refusing to believe in long-standing claims for tradition which previous generations regarded as central to the faith. Arius was genuinely surprised that he taught heresy and, in the midst of the Arian controversy, it was he who had chronological history on his side. Nevertheless, affirming the high Christology of Nicea entailed the rejection of subordinationism, the typical belief of the early centuries. The teaching on religious freedom repudiated continuous beliefs and practices laden with the violence of inquisition. Other Catholic examples of lapsed continuity are the Church's teaching that lending money at interest is sinful, that slavery is permissible (see Noonan 1993), and the post-Tridentine doctrine that Protestant believers are outside the true Church of Christ, a teaching reaffirmed by Pius XII and reversed just a few years later by Vatican II.

THE CRESSET

Amidst all this talk about the shifting vagaries of development, it might seem as if this essay amounts to a deconstruction of traditional continuity, rather than an argument for its defense. The argument did try to deconstruct a fundamentalist understanding of tradition. The challenge for any adequate conception of tradition lies in showing how continuity can abide in development in a way that is intellectually defensible and in a way that can be justified by the facts of history. This essay has proposed that the continuity and the development of tradition are the same thing and that their common identity derives from the ongoing acts of faith in which they are professed. Perhaps an analogy can demonstrate this developing notion of continuity more clearly. We might think of traditional continuity as the kind of sense that any reader of a novel makes of its plot at any particular point along the way. In this analogy we will presume a skillful and trustworthy author, who, of course, represents God, the divine author of tradition. The author will not betray the integrity of the plot at any point in its unfolding. The reader will encounter new insights and real surprises as the plot of the novel unfolds, for without these features there would be no story. Yet these insights, surprises, and developments will be aligned in a meaningful way with what has already preceded in the plot. The reader's understanding of the continuity of the plot will be made and remade in each passing present moment. Like all analogies, though, this one reaches its limit. A novel's continuity eventually reaches closure in time as the reader turns the last page. The tradition's narrative continuity never ends in time, for the book of tradition cannot be closed on this side of the eschaton.

Catholic belief understands all the acts of faith in which tradition continuously develops to be discernments of the presence of God to time and place. Baptism endows all believers with a charism for tradition-affirming and tradition-seeking faith, and in Catholic belief the Holy Spirit has endowed the magisterium, all the bishops teaching together under the primacy of the Pope, with an extraordinary charism in guiding the Church in the course of tradition. As all believers exercise these charisms, they must face the temptation of thinking that their discernment of the Spirit is true in principle, as though real authority transcends ambiguity. Authority remains ambiguous precisely because tradition makes claims about the immanent mystery of God. The false desire for unambiguous authority is stirred by our natural impatience. All in the Church can easily forget that closure to tradition happens only as this world passes away and, for that reason, the faith that makes tradition is properly humble and as open to the new as it is loyal to the old.

Faithfulness is exciting because through it traditions are continuously made. Tradition is a function of faithfulness. The act of faith both affirms what a tradition has been and imagines what a tradition might be in order to fulfill what it already is. Faithfulness is not simply passive reception. It is also a constructive activity. Teaching this lesson to our students is important, for it shows them their own responsibility to the

THE CRESSET

past and to the present in making their tradition truly their own. A valuable dimension of that lesson is that discussion, disagreement, and argument are always legitimately present at the cusp of the tradition, in the unfolding present moment (Tanner 1997, 151–55). Even though Western Christian history is rife with discussion, disagreement, and argument about the faith, something in the Christian mentality is scandalized by such practices, thinking perhaps that the Church most resembles the heavenly kingdom when it is peacefully silent. In this regard, we Christians have much to learn from our Jewish brothers and sisters who have valued argument, even at times with God, in the search for truthful tradition. For all we know, silence may be the most appropriate disposition before the Beatific Vision. But for the Church in history, believing, discerning, and even arguing are the activities of faithfulness that bring tradition to life and nurture it into the future. †

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THE CRESSET

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