

CHAPTER THREE

TRADITION

(Catechism nn. 74-100)

Jesus' 'good news' is for everyone

After treating the subject of Revelation in general terms, the Catechism (n. 74-100) goes on to speak about how what is revealed of God by Jesus is handed on.

It opens with a quotation from Paul, which establishes the broad, universal ('catholic') setting: 'God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'(1Timothy 2:4). This text highlights one of the key insights to come out of the Second Vatican Council: Since God desires everyone to be saved God must be revealing God's Self prior to Jesus of Nazareth and outside explicit Christianity, while at the same time revelation finds its fulfilment in Christ. So the Catechism adds: 'Christ must be proclaimed to all nations and individuals, so that this revelation may reach to the ends of the earth' (n. 74). We are reminded of the final words of Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus not only commissions his disciples to herald the good news to the ends of the earth, but also gives them the promise which makes possible the faithful handing on of his revelation: he will be with them for as long as history lasts:

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'(Matthew 28:18-20).

The Good News of salvation is for everyone

Jesus' revelation is meant for everyone. Later in Chapter 14, we will study the teaching of Vatican II and of the official church on this matter. Here it is sufficient to draw attention to the universal call to salvation, and the consequent privilege and obligation of his disciples to share with everyone the insights into God that Jesus shared with his contemporaries. 'Tradition' is the word we use for this sharing. This links with the statements of Pope John-Paul II quoted in the previous chapter in reference to God drawing everyone into divine communion.

Religious experience is a universal phenomenon. God is love. Love does not force; it attracts and makes possible. People are free to reject Jesus' revelation, but if we have welcomed it, surely we would do all we can to offer it to others and to welcome into community those who accept it. Being sensitive to the mysterious ways in which God draws people into communion should not blunt our desire and commitment to share with others the revelation of God given in and by Jesus. He purified and clarified the religious perspectives of his contemporaries by sifting out the essential insights of Judaism from the human accretions that obscured it. He also went beyond the limits of Judaism. Throughout the centuries converts to Christ have had similar experiences. They have found that what was beautiful in their religious inheritance was enhanced by coming to know God as revealed by Jesus.

What is being handed on?

Let us look at what it is that we are handing on. It is not primarily the teachings of the Christian community as they have been formulated over the centuries and summarised in catechisms such as the one we are following. Nor is it primarily the documents that make up the Newer Testament.

These have a special importance, since they give expression to the response of the first generations of Christians to their experience of Jesus and his Spirit. They cannot possibly say everything that is to be said about Jesus, but if later statements are to be true they cannot contradict the Newer Testament. More will be said about this in the following chapter. The point that must be stressed here is that what we are essentially sharing with others is a person, Jesus himself, along with what people have learned by responding to him in an authentic way.

Before the first writings of the Newer Testament came into existence, people were sharing with others their experiences of Jesus. For us, the earliest extant written statements of the faith of Jesus' disciples are found in the Newer Testament. It is precious to us, but we must remember that the Newer Testament is not Jesus. No written words can contain a person, certainly not the person whose insights into God are treasured within the Christian community. What attracted the first converts to the Christian faith was not the Newer Testament (it was not yet in existence), but the love they found in the Christian community, the love that they believed was Jesus' own love for God offered them through the gift of his Spirit.

Paul urged the community at Thessalonica to

'stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter' (2Thessalonians 2:15).

We are fortunate to have Paul's 'letter', but the five brief chapters of Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians can hardly contain all the wonderful things that Paul told them 'by word of mouth' when he, Sylvanus and Timothy, shared what they had learned about Jesus. The Gospel that we have received and are commissioned to hand on to others, is the good news given us by Jesus: what he said and did and what happened in people's lives when they welcomed his message and his offer of love.

Paul frequently stresses the importance of tradition, and that we hand on the authentic Good News about God revealed by Jesus:

'Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed' (Galatians 1:8).

'I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you' (1Corinthians 11:2).

This is a central theme in his pastoral letters:

'The bishop (overseer) must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it' (Titus 1:9).

'Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us' (2Timothy 1:13-14).

Religious Experience

‘Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but, having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths’ (2Timothy 4:2-4).

Jesus promised to guide the community to remain faithful to his revelation. He would do this in a special way through Peter:

‘Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven’ (Matthew 16:18-19).

He would do it through each and every member of the community. The words he addressed to Peter he also addressed to the community of his disciples:

‘Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven’ (Matthew 18:18).

And to the seventy disciples whom he sent on mission:

‘Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me’ (Luke 10:16).

The Magisterium (Authority to teach)

We are not on our own. Our faith supports others, and their faith supports us. We are part of a community of believers, and it is in the give and take of the community’s faith that we clarify our thinking and purify our living. There is a special role here and a special grace for those like Peter, Paul, Timothy and Titus who are called to leadership in the Church. The Catechism quotes the following statement from the Second Vatican Council:

‘The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ’ (*Dei Verbum* n. 10).

The Catechism continues:

‘This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome’ (n. 85).

Obedience to the teaching authority of the Church is based on our faith-conviction that the Spirit of Jesus is inspiring the Christian community to guide us to the truth. As individuals we can be mistaken, but the faith of the universal Church cannot err, and, ultimately, this faith is declared by those whose grace it is to exercise leadership in teaching. We cannot accept as true a teaching that contradicts reason, but neither should we reject a teaching that, while not contradicting reason, takes us beyond what reason and logic can establish. There is an element of mystery in life, and it is not unreasonable to at least be ready to trust those called to exercise leadership in teaching. At the same time we are not called to an obedience that is mindless, but to one that is intelligent and faith-inspired.

Those who are called to leadership are not always faithful. Discernment is needed. But our first response to this teaching authority ('magisterium') should be one of respectful gratitude. Teaching authority in the Christian community is a commission given to those who are called to leadership, to give themselves in love to others in order to provide the context and the resources to give life, to protect and nurture it, and to foster and promote the full growth and development of that life in accordance with the movement of God's Spirit. Those who exercise an office of teaching in the community have a special charism (a special gift given by the Spirit), and so a special authority.

The Catechism states:

'the apostles left bishops as their successors'(n. 77).

It is important, however, not to make the mistake of identifying the role of the apostles with that of the bishops. The number twelve, here and in the numbering of the tribes of Israel, is a symbolic number based on the twelve constellations in the zodiac. It speaks of what is universal from a heavenly (and so divine) perspective. What is said of the twelve is said of the whole Christian community in which the bishops have a special place, as does each and every disciple of Jesus. The catechism acknowledges this:

'The apostles entrusted the sacred deposit of the faith ... to the whole of the Church'(n. 84).

'All the faithful share in understanding and handing on revealed truth. They have received the anointing of the Holy Spirit, who instructs them and guides them into all truth'(n. 91).

In his *What makes us Catholic*, Thomas Groome states:

'Aquinas clarified that the Church has three cooperative sources of teaching/learning: (1) the research of scholars; (2) the lived faith of ordinary people, called the *sensus fidelium* (the faith-awareness of Christians); and (3) the official magisterium (teaching authority) of the papacy with episcopacy. All should work in concert, mutually supporting and correcting one another. The official magisterium draws together and teaches the shared faith of the whole community. In this it must be faithful to Scripture and Tradition, be well informed by the research of scholars, and be listening to the sense of the faithful. Likewise, faithful Christians should trust their own discernment, be guided by the consensus of the magisterium, and appreciate the research of scholars. Similarly scripture scholars and theologians need to place their scholarship in dialogue with the *sensus fidelium* and be guided by the consensus taught by the magisterium. When all three function in partnership, it's a great system of checks and balances, enabling the Church to navigate between relativism and authoritarianism' (page 157).

Dogmas of Faith

It is important to observe that the authoritative teaching of the magisterium is expressed in various ways according to the degree of probability or certainty of the content of the teaching and its connection with the essential insights of the faith. We will return to this in a later chapter. For the present we wish only to note that a special place is reserved for what are customarily called 'dogmas'.

Dogmas

The Catechism (second edition) states:

‘The Church’s magisterium exercises the authority it holds from Christ to the fullest extent when it defines dogmas, that is, when it proposes, in a form obliging the Christian people to an irrevocable adherence of faith, truths contained in divine revelation, or also when it proposes, in a definitive way, truths having a necessary connection with these’ (n. 88).

Francis Sullivan SJ in his *Creative Fidelity* develops at length (pages 28-92) the point that some dogmas have been proclaimed as revealed truths by a solemn judgment of an ecumenical council or of a pope speaking *ex cathedra*. Our faith requires of us that we accept that there is truth in such proclamations, however imperfect and provisional the language in which the truth which is expressed may be.

The Pope defines a dogma *ex cathedra* when he is acting officially in his position as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, and when, by virtue of the supreme apostolic authority given him, and in solidarity with his brother bishops, he defines for the universal church a doctrine concerning faith (what we must believe) or morals (what we must do) as having been revealed by God.

Less clear is what is termed ‘ordinary magisterium’. Sullivan writes:

‘Official documents have proposed three ways of establishing that a doctrine is taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium: consultation of all the bishops, the universal and constant consensus of Catholic theologians, and the common adherence of the faithful’ (page 183).

Sullivan underlines an important insight in regard to Church dogmas:

‘Dogma is an ecclesial proposition that expresses some aspect of divine revelation. Its formulation is always historically and culturally conditioned. It is a true statement, but it never says the whole truth, and it may be mixed with elements that are not part of revealed truth. As a binding ruling on the language of faith, it makes possible a common profession of faith that is vital both to the unity of the church and to its praise and worship of God. A dogma is not identical with the original word of revelation. The truth of a dogmatic statement is guaranteed by the Spirit, but it is not written under the Spirit’s inspiration, as scripture is. While a dogma will always be a provisional expression of the word of God, still it leads beyond itself into the ultimate mystery, since the act of faith terminates not in the proposition but in the reality which it signifies’(page 40).

It is important to recognise the fact that every statement, including those of the Church’s magisterium, when they express truth, do so within an historically conditioned context. If we are going to simply repeat statements from the past we must be aware of the historically conditioned elements, otherwise we risk failing to communicate in a new context the truth contained in past statements. The past statement pointed its contemporaries away from error and towards the Mystery. Our aim must be to do the same for our contemporaries, and this will often require the use of different terms. At the same time we must know that our language, too, is historically conditioned.

Hierarchy of truths

It is not as if the various truths of revelation proposed for our belief are all equally central. One might imagine dogmas as a series of concentric circles. In the inner circle are those truths that are absolutely essential if we are going to grasp Jesus' insights into God. This inner circle is surrounded by another circle that contains truths that are necessary conclusions from the truths of the inner circle and that we are to believe if our faith is to be truly meaningful. Then there is another circle, and another, and another. It is impossible to quantify the circles, but what is essential is to get perspective. The Catechism (n.90) states:

‘The mutual connection between dogmas, and their coherence, can be found in the whole of the Revelation of the mystery of Christ.’

It goes on to quote from Vatican II:

‘In Catholic doctrine there exists an order or “hierarchy” of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith’ (Vatican II, *On Ecumenism, Unitatis Redintegratio* 11).

Infallibility

A difficult area is that of infallibility. We will examine this more closely when we come to examine the teaching office of the Church (n. 888-892). It is claimed that the Church cannot err in certain circumstances when it proposes some truths (dogmas) for our belief. The key insight underlying the claim to infallibility is expressed by the Catechism in the following words:

‘The whole body of the faithful ... cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of faith (*sensus fidei*) on the part of the whole people, when, from the bishops to the last of the faithful, they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals’ (n. 92).

Theology

The Catechism (n. 94) concludes this introductory treatment of Tradition with a statement on theology:

‘Thanks to the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the understanding of both the realities and the words of the heritage of faith is able to grow in the life of the Church:

– through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts’ (*Dei Verbum* n. 8); it is in particular ‘theological research [which] deepens knowledge of revealed truth’ (*Gaudium et Spes* n. 62).

– from ‘the intimate sense of spiritual realities which believers experience’ (*Dei Verbum* n. 8), the sacred Scriptures ‘grow with the one who reads them’ (Gregory the Great).

– from ‘the preaching of those who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth’ (*Dei Verbum* n. 8).

Faith and Theology

Every generation is called on to ‘do theology’, that is to say to seek to discover at ever greater depths the meaning of revealed truth. Theology deals with matters that are beyond the scope of the empirical sciences. At the same time we expect it to be systematic and consistent. It is also an art, for understanding follows on the wonder and mystery of revelation. Doing theology, humbly and honestly is one contribution that each generation makes to the next in handing on the good news of Jesus’ revelation, and drawing out its implications for the present.

A theologian has two complementary tasks. One is to ascertain the data: ‘What does the Newer Testament have to say? How was this understood by the ‘Fathers of the Church’? What have the Councils of the Church had to say on the matter down through the centuries? To answer these questions we must be thorough it following historical method. But more is needed, for the theologian does research in the light of faith.

A second task is to attempt to discover and elucidate the inner intelligibility of the data that is discovered. A theologian is to search for the inner connections between the mysteries of faith. In his *Revelation and Theology* (Sheed and Ward 1957), Edward Schillebeeckx writes: ‘Faith in the God of revelation is the point of departure for and the constantly fertile ground of theology’(page 103).

Pope Francis in his encyclical *Lumen Fidei* (2013. n.36) speaks of the intimate relationship between faith and theology:

‘Since faith is a light, it draws us into itself, inviting us to explore ever more fully the horizon which it illumines, all the better to know the object of our love. Christian theology is born of this desire. Clearly, theology is impossible without faith; it is part of the very process of faith, which seeks an ever deeper understanding of God’s self-disclosure culminating in Christ. It follows that theology is more than simply an effort of human reason to analyze and understand, along the lines of the experimental sciences. God cannot be reduced to an object. He is a subject who makes himself known and perceived in an interpersonal relationship. Right faith orients reason to open itself to the light which comes from God, so that reason, guided by love of the truth, can come to a deeper knowledge of God. The great medieval theologians and teachers rightly held that theology, as a science of faith, is a participation in God’s own knowledge of himself. It is not just our discourse about God, but first and foremost the acceptance and the pursuit of a deeper understanding of the word which God speaks to us, the word which God speaks about himself, for he is an eternal dialogue of communion, and he allows us to enter into this dialogue.[33] Theology thus demands the humility to be “touched” by God, admitting its own limitations before the mystery, while striving to investigate, with the discipline proper to reason, the inexhaustible riches of this mystery.

‘Theology also shares in the ecclesial form of faith; its light is the light of the believing subject which is the Church. This implies, on the one hand, that theology must be at the service of the faith of Christians, that it must work humbly to protect and deepen the faith of everyone, especially ordinary believers.

On the other hand, because it draws its life from faith, theology cannot consider the magisterium of the Pope and the bishops in communion with him as something extrinsic, a limitation of its freedom, but rather as one of its internal, constitutive dimensions, for the magisterium ensures our contact with the primordial source and thus provides the certainty of attaining to the word of Christ in all its integrity.’

The Catechism distinguishes between Tradition and traditions:

‘Tradition is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical, or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time. These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which the great Tradition is expressed. In the light of Tradition, these traditions can be retained, modified or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church’s magisterium’(n. 83).

Tradition and Scripture

By way of preparation for our treatment of Scripture in the following chapter, let us attempt to define the relationship between Tradition and Scripture. The Catechism (n. 82) has this to say:

‘The Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence”(*Dei Verbum* n. 8).’

In his *Jesus: God and Man*, Raymond Brown clarifies the relationship between Scripture and Tradition:

‘Revelation involves God’s action for human salvation and the interpretation of that action by those whom God has raised up and guided for that purpose - in short, it involves both deeds and words motivated by God. Now the truly revelatory action of God bringing about salvation is found in what God has done in Israel and what God has done in Jesus, and this action is described in the books of Scripture. Scripture also offers an interpretation of that action (e.g. the interpretation of the Sinai covenant by the prophets, and the interpretation of Jesus’ mission by himself and by the apostles).

‘This scriptural interpretation of God’s revelatory action is the most important and essential interpretation, so that there is an enduring responsibility to Scripture. But the scriptural interpretation is still a limited interpretation; it reflects the understanding of God’s action in a period that extends approximately from 1000BC to 125AD. God’s action for salvation came to a climax in Jesus Christ who is once and for all, but there is no reason to believe that God has ceased to guide the interpretation of that action. Indeed the subsequent role of the Spirit in the history of the Church and in human history, the writings of the Fathers and theologians, the pronouncements of the Church - all of these enter into what we call Tradition, which is the post-scriptural interpretation of the salvific action of God described in Scripture.

Scripture and Tradition

If one has to propose a formula describing where one can find revelation, instead of saying that all revelation is in Scripture, I would prefer to say: 'The revelation of God to people is found in God's action on behalf of human salvation, as that action is interpreted by the Scriptures themselves and by later authoritative Tradition'. The importance of Scripture is that it contains both the narrative of that action and the fundamental interpretation of that action, but there can be consequent, normative interpretation of God's action that is not found in Scripture'(page 57 note).