

Tradition, *Agape*-Love and Life

What does Tradition mean in Catholic theology? A simple working definition runs: Tradition is both the process of "handing on" the Gospel and the contents of the Good News itself that is handed on. It is the life of the Church that gives life. To delve a little deeper into this, perhaps a useful exercise is to imagine yourself in different moments of the Church's two thousand years of existence.

Communicating what we are

Firstly, imagine you are an official of the Roman Empire in the year 80 AD. You've been sent to draw up a report on a new movement that has come to life ever since Jesus of Nazareth was put to death under Pontius Pilate in 30 CE. You've had to book several travel tickets because the investigation has taken you to a number of cities of the Roman Empire – Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Alexandria and Rome.

The first thing you note for your report is how much these "Christians" focus on love and love for one another. Yes, of course, they have their difficulties but yet they really believe in a love that has lit up their lives. It's a new kind of love – they call it *agape*-love. In fact, they say because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, this new love is God's very own love poured into their hearts and lived out among them. They talk of the Holy Spirit as the great protagonist of their new history.

They are so taken up with their new experience that they are very keen to hand in on to all they meet (come to think of it, you have been in love yourself and you know how much you want to share yourself and all about yourself – from the smallest details to the greatest - with the person you love). They communicate it in all kinds of ways - both orally and in writing.

And they are all involved, men and women, in all kinds of ways - apostles, evangelisers, preachers, teachers, prophets, administrators, helpers...The means of handing it on are dynamic. They recall episodes and sayings from Jesus' life as well as the meaning of his death and resurrection. They share experiences of how it impacts on their lives, narrating especially the original *kerigma* (preaching) of the apostles. They write letters, compose songs and summary formulae. They gather together instructions on how to live their new community life. The most important moment for them each week is the Eucharist. It's the culmination as it contains everything.

More recently, gospels have been written. And certain letters are beginning to stand out as key foundational texts for the new community. These gospels and letters are like a mirror reflecting the lively exchange of "handing on" (and in the Latin language this word is *tradere*, hence Tradition in English) among them. Increasingly, there is a sense that the "Tradition" with all its

traditions (all that has been shared and handed on from the apostles who in turn handed on the words, examples and deeds of Jesus) needs to be guarded faithfully (see 2 Thes 2:15; Rom 6:17). In the letters to Timothy and Titus you read that the Gospel (with a capital "G"), the Good News, the preaching of the apostles and the instructions about how to live the communitarian life, are like a sacred "deposit"(1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14).

It's not so easy to get across in a report, but you can see that "Tradition/handing on" is not merely a technical operation for these first Christians. In fact, they use the word "Tradition" (to hand over, to give over) also in recalling how God gave his Son for us (Rom 8:32), and how Jesus gave up his Spirit as he was dying on the Cross (Jn 19:30), and how the apostles and those who founded church communities transmitted what they had received (1 Cor 15:3) especially the rite of the Eucharist. Paul of Tarsus wrote that the narrative about the Eucharist was handed on to him and he in turn has handed it on to others (1 Cor 11:23). In short, it seems the origin of Tradition as the "handing on" process goes right back to God who gave himself to us in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

A definite quote for your report has to be an extract from one of the letters written by John. It's a succinct description of just how important the first Christians view Tradition. It tells us they experienced it as a lively dynamic that introduced them into the new life in God that opened up in Jesus Christ:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father...so that you may have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete" (1 Jn 1:1-4).

Your report has to get the balance. On the one hand, when the Christians are talking about Tradition, they are referring to the gospels, other writings, doctrinal summaries and prayers, instructions in community life and essential institutional aspects of their community, creedal formulae as well as catechetical summaries and hymns. But they also focus on the communion of life, love, joy and sharing in God that is to be communicated. That's the whole point of Tradition. It is the living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit who is Light, of God's Love-Revelation in Jesus that opens up deeper and deeper understandings of life, outreach to your neighbour, and hope for the future.

Faith has a shape to it

Imagine yourself now in another moment of history. You are a recently converted Christian soldier writing around 170. You're stationed in Gaul (modern day France) where Blandina one of the first Christian women martyrs died, and your local bishop of Lyons is the famous Christian leader called

Irenaeus. By now Christianity has spread. Merchants, mercenaries, soldiers moving from one end of the Roman Empire to another (and beyond) have been real "apostles".

It never ceases to amaze you just how the now very extensive Christian family keeps going without falling apart. Christians have had to face persecutions. But what's more (and perhaps a more subtle challenge), they have had to face new cultural mindsets, and in particular, the challenge of *gnosticism*, a mix-mash of religion, philosophy, astrology and bits of Christian vision thrown in to form a "secret knowledge" for only "the enlightened". Some people have started to confuse this with Christianity!

It took Irenaeus to set down benchmarks to clarify things. That's why you are proud of him. He has written a famous work, *Against Heresies*. In this work, Irenaeus gathered all the doctrinal elements settled up until then and showed how in the Christian religion there is a solid and coherent vision in which all the elements refer to and strengthen each other. Above all, Irenaeus emphasised how much Jesus, the Son of God was really human and how, through his death and resurrection, we have been brought to share in the dynamic of God's Trinitarian life, that is, the life of mutual love that exists between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As a recent convert, you know the followers of Jesus Christ aren't confused people with vague ideas or syncretistic notions. No, they are united in what Irenaeus called a "rule of faith." That is, the Christian life is one whose doctrine has a shape to it: it is structured around our faith in God the Father as *Creator* of all, Jesus Christ the Son who is *Redeemer* and the Holy Spirit, the *Sanctifier* who pours love into our heart. That's our real "homeland". The simple summary structure explains our Christian "living space", as it were, and is like a roadmap to help people read, contemplate and make new discoveries in Scriptures.

Irenaeus is also the one who pointed out that the bishops succeeded the apostles in guaranteeing the faithful transmission of the Christian Tradition. If Christians want to make sure they don't miss the mark, they need to stay in communion with the bishops, and these bishops, in turn, view the Church of Rome (where Peter and Paul lived and were martyred) as a touchstone of that Tradition. If you want to know if something fits in to the general Tradition of the Church, the bishop of Rome, the Pope, has a special charism to ensure unity among Christians in being faithful to the Tradition.

The most astounding fact, as Irenaeus put it, is that although the people that make up the Church are scattered throughout the whole world, it's as if they are living in one house, having one soul and heart, and handing on the Gospel Tradition as if they had only one mouth: "For though languages differ throughout the world, the content of the Tradition is one and the same. The Churches established in Germany have no other faith or Tradition, nor do

those of the Iberians, nor those of the Celts, nor those of the East, of Egypt, of Libya..." (*Against Heresies*, I, 1).

We need the Church

This time imagine you're a theologian who has attended a large council of bishops held in Trent, Northern Italy. It lasted from 1545-1563 and one of the thorny issues was the topic of Church and Tradition. Your background research on this council has focused on the Protestant Reformation.

On the one hand, for centuries the Church's teachings, sacraments, rituals, stories of martyrs and saints, creeds, prayers and instructions on community life as well as devotions and practises were taken for granted. There was a sense that to be born into the life of the Church was like being born into a paradise of spiritual life that communicated the Tradition that came from Christ and the apostles. And this in a number of ways – the Gospel proclaimed every week at mass, the Mass itself, the example and company of great Gospel people. Tradition has been channelled through the existence of monasteries, the fraternity and preaching of the Mendicant orders, the stories of the saints, the beautiful cathedrals and churches, church music, the various rituals and customs, the writings of theologians and mystics. Tradition is like a maternal atmosphere you live in; it's the life that forms you in holiness and love, it gives you a sense of belonging, it provides you with a worldview, it is something you experience day to day in all kinds of ways.

But Martin Luther of Germany has pointed out that the picture hasn't always been rosy. From 1517 onwards Luther has been highlighting abuses, saying we need to return to the Gospel and reform our ways. People picked up the impression he was calling on the Church to leave aside much of what for centuries was considered really important. It seemed he was saying there was no need for Church to come between believers and their interpretation of Scripture.

For Luther, doctrines and practices that weren't directly found in Scripture should not be obligatory. What he had in mind were some of the sacraments (confirmation, marriage, holy orders, penance and anointing of the sick), purgatory, praying for the dead, the doctrine of transubstantiation. Instead, Luther said "Scripture alone" is necessary and it has its own hermeneutical (interpreting) principle based on the key biblical concepts such as sin and justification.

All of this has unleashed a big debate. Huge confusion arose on all sides – not to mention a great lack of *agape*-love all round! As a theologian you appreciate why this Council of Trent wants to sort things out and draw a line in the sand so that everyone can move on. Of course, it re-affirms the importance of the Church in how we read Scripture. It is the Church as a community of faith, sacrament and ministry that provides the context for doctrinal and moral interpretation of Scripture. The Church always had the

task of judging the interpretation of Scripture. In fact, when it came to deciding the precise number of gospels and other writings in the New Testament, it was the Church as a community with a living Tradition that clarified the issue. At this Council, it is also said that there are some traditions that were not written down but have come down to us from the apostolic era.

Tradition is something dynamic

Imagine now you are a journalist just as the Second Vatican Council is beginning - the biggest council to date! To report on it well, you're going to have to know something of what happened in the past four hundred years.

You see, following the Council of Trent, some of its teachings weren't presented that well. You know how it is – lecturers try to summarise things too much for students! Well, that's what happened. In their teaching and books, some theologians gave the impression there were two separate sources of revelation - Scripture and traditions that Catholics have whereas Protestants don't. As the centuries went on, the caricature grew up that Protestants believed in Scripture alone (with no Tradition) while Catholics believed in Tradition (which contained Scripture but had much more than what was to be found in the Scripture). A "quantitative" perspective of Tradition began to take hold.

So in the nineteenth century, some theologians such as Roschini from Germany's Tübingen Catholic School of Theology, and Scheeben from the Roman Universities, began to address this issue and present a renewed sense of Tradition as something "living."

In England, Cardinal Newman proposed rediscovering the organic sense of Tradition. He wrote: "I think I am right in saying that the Tradition of the apostles, committed to the whole church in its various constituents and functions...manifests itself variously at various times: sometimes by the mouth of the episcopacy, sometimes by the doctors, sometimes by the people, sometimes by liturgies, rites, ceremonies, and customs, by events, disputes, movements, and all those other phenomena which are comprised under the name of history"¹ Newman distinguished Episcopal Tradition, that is, handed on along the apostolic line of bishops (church teaching, sacraments and community-guidance) from prophetic Tradition, that is, that of the prophets who are interpreters of revelation (founders, mystics, saints). He also emphasised how all the baptised have an "instinct" of faith and they work together in handing on the one Tradition.

Coming closer to the Council, in the twentieth century, biblical scholars opened up many discoveries about Scripture that hadn't always been appreciated before. The Catholic Church underwent a whole renewed study and love of Scripture. In this context too, Tradition was re-discovered as the

¹ *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, ed. John Coulson, London, 1961, p. 63.

living communitarian dynamic that accompanies Scripture as its home. The 1950 definition of the Marian doctrine of the Assumption (Mary assumed body and soul into heaven) also gave rise to discussions between Catholics and Protestants about Tradition.

Maybe you've read the French Dominican theologian, Yves Congar's book called *Tradition and traditions*. You've noticed Congar's distinction between Tradition with a capital "T" and "traditions" with small a "t". His point was that there's a need to distinguish Apostolic Tradition, the steady core of Church life, from smaller traditions that might change. In other words, not every single thing we do in the Church is part of the great Tradition of the Church. No; traditions change. For instance, once mass was said in Latin, now it is said in the languages of the world. The Mass is essential to Tradition, the language it's celebrated in is a "tradition". Likewise, dipping our finger into the water font on the way into a church is a tradition. It points to the heart of Tradition: the fact that we are united through baptism to Jesus Christ who has brought us into a relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life.

Congar pointed to Mary as a good example for understanding what Tradition is in the Church. She pondered on the Word in her heart and her insight into it grew deeper throughout her life. Like Mary, as the Church journeys along history, with new things happening and through believers studying, contemplating and putting the Gospel into practice, the Church guards her Tradition but also gains new windows of insight into its meaning. In this way, the Church engages in a loving dialogue, guided by the Holy Spirit, with God.

You've done your research. Now you can look forward to the Council

Revelation and its Transmission

Finally, imagine now you're at the press conference the day they release the Vatican Council's document on Divine Revelation (18 Nov 1965). You know there was difficulty in drafting it. But you discover it's reasonably easy to read. You'd recommend it!

You notice the title, *Dei Verbum*, Word of God. And chapter two zeroes in on what Tradition is as the transmission of revelation. It's such a short chapter but really full of clarifications that it needs to be read carefully.

You notice, firstly, in *Dei Verbum* 7 how it speaks of the one Gospel of salvation that comes to us from Jesus and the apostles and the bishops who succeeded them. Tradition and Scripture are described as a mirror in which the Church can contemplate God.

Paragraph 8 of *Dei Verbum* is a gem. It lists the ways the Tradition process goes on in the Church: "In this way the Church in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is,

all that she believes...". This is no static dead process. The document states: "The Tradition...makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is growth in insight... This comes about in various ways. It comes through contemplation and study of believers...from spiritual...experience..." Charisms are sent to help us. Of course, those entrusted with the "sure charism of truth" (the bishops) have a specific and essential role to play in this process.

Tradition makes sure that the Word of God continues not as a dead book but as alive opening us up to the continuing dialogue between God and his people.

In *Dei Verbum*, n. 9 you notice how the Council underlines the interrelationship between Scripture and Tradition. It doesn't get into whether or not there are parts of the Good News in Scripture and other parts in Tradition. But it does say that both Scripture and Tradition come from the one source, coming together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal. There's a profound interdependence between Scripture and Tradition.

But there's more. Scripture and Tradition on their own are not the full story. You read in *Dei Verbum*, n. 10 that the "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. It's as if there's a tripod upon which the communication of God's self-revelation is set: "it is clear, therefore, that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others".

Conclusion

So, what is Tradition? It is what the Church community, as a Mother, hands on, all that she is and has (doctrine, sacramental celebration and community life practices and institutions). The more there is mutual love in the Church, the more our Tradition comes alive because its deepest roots are in the life of God who is mutual love.

Catholics view Tradition as very important. It informs the Church's teachings on a wide range of issues. While the relationship of Scripture and Tradition remains a point of tension between the churches, thankfully, there have been good developments such as the 1963 Montreal World Conference on Faith and Order's statement on Scripture, Tradition and Traditions. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that: "Tradition is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical or devotional traditions... These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which the great Tradition is expressed" (n. 83).

Scripture is Tradition written down. Scripture is the "norm" against which to measure Tradition. Tradition, however, is Scripture lived. It is the life that gives life, making us Christians who are fully alive, with a sense of belonging, a worldview, an "atmosphere" where we are at "home" but always outward bound in love.