

Function of continuity in Roman Catholic understanding of Tradition

The Second Vatican Council, and especially the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), offers us the last most authoritative exposition of the Catholic doctrine concerning Tradition.¹ This will therefore be our main reference.

In this understanding of Tradition, I will be particularly attentive to the question of continuity, without forgetting the distinction between traditions and Tradition.

I. TRADITION

The living ecclesial Tradition is, together with Sacred Scripture, one of the two modes of transmission of the apostolic preaching of the Gospel, the source of all saving truth and of all moral reference. In fact, sometimes the Apostles transmitted, *in their oral preaching, in their examples and institutions*, either what they had learned firsthand from Christ by living with him and seeing him act, or what they intuited from the suggestions of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes these Apostles and other men around them, through the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, *committed the message of salvation to writing*. These are, therefore, the two original modes of transmission of a single and identical divine source (cf. DV 9), Revelation or the Gospel in Christ: the living Apostolic Tradition (oral preaching, examples of life, institutions) and the New Testament of Holy Scripture as a writing of all that is necessary for salvation in this living Apostolic Tradition.²

At the same time, it is specified that this Tradition or apostolic preaching is expressed in a special way in the inspired books. What is transmitted by the Apostles includes all that contributes to the holy conduct of the life of the People of God and to increasing its faith;

¹ I refer to the Latin text and the French translation of *Concile œcuménique Vatican II. Constitutions, décrets, déclarations, messages*, Paris, Éd. du Centurion, 1967; for an English translation, see *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Gen. Ed. A. FLANNERY, o.p., new revised edition 1992, Dublin (Ireland), Dominican Publications – Newtown (Australia), E.J. Dwyer Pty. Ltd. *Dei Verbum* will now be quoted as DV for short, followed by the paragraph number.

² For this whole paragraph, see DV 7.

thus, the Church, in her doctrine, her life and her worship, perpetuates and transmits to all generations all that she is herself, all that she believes.³

This Tradition that comes from the Apostles (*quae est ab Apostolis*) continues or progresses (*proficit*) in the Church through the assistance of the Holy Spirit.⁴

This formulation of *Dei Verbum* may seem acceptable: since the Apostles, witnesses of the Resurrection of Christ, the Tradition of faith continues faithfully in the Church throughout history. The wording is, however, imprecise, even ambiguous, in the eyes of classical Catholic theology: one can indeed have the impression that there is a neat continuum and that there is no distinction between the Apostolic Church (or Church of the Apostles, witnesses of the Risen One) and the postapostolic Church. Now, in the most traditional Catholic theology, a distinction is made between the Apostolic Tradition (the "oral" and written preaching of the Apostles) and the Ecclesiastical Tradition (or Post-Apostolic Tradition).⁵ The Apostolic Tradition is the constitutive or founding Tradition⁶, to which we must always return, while the post-apostolic or ecclesiastical Tradition (roughly from the second century) is only the continuative, interpretative or explanatory Tradition of the Apostolic Tradition⁷. The ecclesiastical (or postapostolic) Tradition can only continue, explain and interpret the Apostolic Tradition ("oral" and written), it radically refers to and is subordinated to the latter. There is therefore a difference in degree, level and importance between Apostolic Tradition (original) and Ecclesiastical Tradition (postapostolic). This is not sufficiently specified in the sentence of *Dei Verbum* (*Haec... ab Apostolis Traditio... in Ecclesia proficit*).

What, however, is the continuity between the Ecclesiastical Tradition and the Apostolic Tradition, and how is this continuity ensured and actualised?

³ See DV 8A (the capital letter now indicates the section of the paragraph).

⁴ Cf. DV 8B.

⁵ By "oral" preaching, I mean what the Apostles or their communities did not put in writing: it can be words, examples of life, rites, institutions...

⁶ This is how we must understand the Nicene-Constantinople Creed of 381: "I believe in the Church... apostolic", that is, the Church founded on the Apostles, on their faith, on the witness they bear to the Risen One. The essence of this faith is recorded (in writing) in the Apostolic or New Testament Scriptures.

⁷ Cf. Y. CONGAR, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église* (Unam Sanctam, 20), Paris, Éd. du Cerf, 1950, p. 490 ff.

II. CONTINUITY OF TRADITION

One might think that the main "means" of the continuity of the living ecclesiastical transmission of the Gospel originally preached by the Apostles (Apostolic Tradition) is the existence of successors of the Apostles, the bishops who have inherited their function of teaching and discerning the saving truth.⁸ One infers an uninterrupted succession until the end of time⁹. In fact, if one reads the rest of *Dei Verbum*, the situation is much more nuanced and complex.

First, it is evidently through the assistance of the Holy Spirit that the Tradition coming from the Apostles continues, and it is *in* the Church that it continues¹⁰. It is the whole Church, as the People of God, who, in her doctrine, her life and her worship, perpetuates and transmits to all generations all that she is herself, all that she believes¹¹.

More specifically, how does the Church continue to transmit this Tradition that hails from the Apostles? It is, first of all, the faithful (or the People of God) who are bearers and transmitters of the Apostolic faith or Tradition, who fulfill the growth of perception or understanding, either by their contemplation or meditative study, or by their interior spiritual understanding, or, through the preaching of those, amongst the People of God, who, with the episcopal succession, received a certain charism of truth. Thus, the Church, throughout the centuries, constantly tends towards the fullness of truth¹².

Here too we find a good classical theology, which distinguishes between the apostolicity of doctrine and the apostolicity of ministry. The apostolicity of doctrine is primary: it is the fidelity of the faith of the whole People of God, or of the Church, to the faith of the Apostles. This apostolicity of doctrine is first in relation to the apostolicity of ministry, which is at its service, discerns, verifies, authenticates and confirms it. By the apostolicity of ministry, we

⁸ Cf. DV 7B.

⁹ Cf. DV 8A.

¹⁰ Cf. DV 8B.

¹¹ Cf. DV 8A.

¹² Cf. DV 8B; see also SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 12A, which describes the supernatural meaning of the faith of the community of the faithful, which cannot be mistaken when it manifests this *sensus fidei* by a universal consensus: the People of God then adheres unwaveringly to the faith transmitted to the saints once and for all (cf. Jude 3), it penetrates it deeper with a right judgment and puts it more fully into practice in its life.

mean the apostolic ministry, more specifically the apostolic succession, the episcopal (ministerial) succession. The apostolicity of doctrine (faith) takes precedence over the apostolicity of ministry. The Apostolic Tradition (received and carried by the whole Church) takes precedence over the apostolic succession of bishops, who are at its service and authenticate it¹³. In other words, ecclesial (post-apostolic) Tradition is, first and foremost, the matter (responsibility) of the entire People of God, before being the matter (responsibility) of ordained bishops and ministers.

The teaching of the Holy Fathers (also an important historical moment of Tradition¹⁴), another criterion of continuity, attests to the life-giving presence of Tradition.

What, however, are the criteria for distinguishing this (great) common Tradition from the various (secondary) traditions?

III. THE TRADITIONS

The distinction between Tradition and traditions is not addressed as such by the dogmatic constitution on Revelation. In conciliar teaching, however, we identify criteria that make it possible to evaluate the relationship and differences between the common ecclesial Tradition (attested, in particular, by the professions of faith and ecumenical councils) and particular ecclesiastical traditions¹⁵.

We can thus refer to the *ordo seu "hierarchia" veritatum doctrinae catholicae* invoked by the conciliar decree on ecumenism¹⁶. This is a first great criterion, an objective criterion: what are the truths whose link (*nexus*) is the closest or most faithful to the foundation (Christological and salvific) of the Christian faith (*cum fundamento fidei christianae*)? By these "fundamental" truths of Catholic doctrine we can mean Christology, triadology, soteriology and fundamental ecclesiology. We can thus distinguish the great common Christian Tradition, ancient in particular, which has tried precisely to clarify the foundations of the Christian faith, in relation to the particular and even secondary ecclesiastical traditions, these being

¹³ In a similar, but not identical, sense: "Die Nachfolge ist die Gestalt der Überlieferung, die Überlieferung ist der Gehalt der Nachfolge" (J. RATZINGER, *Primat, Episkopat und successio apostolica*, in K. RAHNER – J. RATZINGER, *Episkopat und Primat* [Quaestiones disputatae, 11], Freiburg – Basel – Wien, Herder, 1961, p. 49).

¹⁴ That of the *Consensus Patrum et conciliorum*.

¹⁵ See also Y. CONGAR, *La Tradition et les Traditions*, I. *Essai historique* and II. *Essai théologique*, Paris, Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1960 and 1963.

¹⁶ *Unitatis redintegratio* 11C.

legitimate only to the extent that they are not in contradiction with the great Christian Tradition, and especially with the Apostolic Tradition as recorded in the Apostolic Scriptures, and to the extent that they are always subordinate to it (*hierarchia veritatum*).

These particular traditions, of the order of piety, of local identity... can legitimately encourage popular devotion, the fervor of faith, only to the extent that they do not contradict the most fundamental truths of the Christian faith. They are, however, clearly secondary and optional in relation to the great common ecclesial Tradition.

Two other criteria to discern particular traditions, criteria relating to believing subjects, can also be used: the *sensus fidei*, already mentioned, and the *receptio*.

The *sensus fidei* is a borderline concept involving the universal consensus of the faithful always under the guidance of the magisterium. However, it is never excluded that this sense of faith (and therefore the indefectibility of the People of God in faith) may be expressed through only a part of the faithful, even a minority¹⁷. Hence the importance that the magisterium be attentive to any possible expression of the *sensus fidei fidelium*. Any manifestation of it (even partial) about a particular tradition is a criterion of its legitimacy.

In direct connection with the *sensus fidei* and as one of its forms, the in-depth and lasting *receptio* of a particular tradition is also a criterion for its legitimacy. An authentic reception is in fact ultimately a manifestation of the *sensus fidei* in the Holy Spirit. If, in the long term, one can observe and diagnose such a reception of a particular tradition¹⁸, it can be considered legitimate. This reception can be detected in particular through the extent of the consensus of the faithful on this subject in a local Church in particular and its discernment by the magisterium. None of this (*sensus fidei*, *receptio*) can be discerned by ignoring the objective hierarchy of (objective) truths of Catholic doctrine.

¹⁷ Let us think of the minority of faithful and bishops who remained faithful to the Nicene Faith (325), while most of the Church was momentarily won over to Arianism.

¹⁸ In the methodology of "measuring" the reception of a council developed by G. ROUTHIER, *La réception d'un concile* [(Cogitatio Fidei, 174), Paris, Éd. du Cerf, 1993], the third degree of it, the deepest and most plenary, is precisely the spiritual or pneumatological degree (involving the change of mentalities), after institutional reception and kerygmatic reception.

CONCLUSION

Tradition, traditions (legitimate although secondary), continuity: continuity with the Christological and Apostolic Origin, without forgetting that the ecclesial Tradition is incomplete until eschatological fulfillment¹⁹, is crucial in Catholicism, it indicates and verifies the fidelity (or identity) of the current Catholic Church to the Church of the Apostles, witnesses of the Risen Christ. If the succession of bishops plays a role of discernment and authentication, it is nevertheless the entire People of God who first ensure the continuity (or fidelity) of the ecclesial Tradition with the Apostolic Tradition (especially scriptural), as well as its growing understanding. This growing understanding of Tradition takes place through the grace of the Holy Spirit by deciphering the signs of the times, by allowing oneself to be instructed by the cultures and the world of our time²⁰, thus in a dynamic and living fidelity to the origins, but also in the eschatological openness to the unforeseen led by the Spirit²¹.

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¹⁹ Cf. DV 8B.

²⁰ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 4-10 and 40-45 in particular.

²¹ Cf. DV 8B: the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.