

Criteria for conceiving change in the Church

Three historical cases

How can we conceive a *legitimate* change in the Church ? What are the criteria for conceiving and accomplishing such a change ? I would like to draw some “teachings” from the history of Christianity.

I will explore, very shortly, three historical examples or case-studies, those case-studies being very different from one another, not only from a chronological point of view, but also from the theological and ecclesial status of the event.

The first example will be taken from the first ecumenical council (Nicea, 325), the second one from the Lutheran Reform (1517), and the third one from the reflection of a theologian, in 1950, on the atmosphere of reformism of his own time in France.

I. NICEA

In opposition to Arius, the Council of Nicea in 325 intends to proclaim that Jesus Christ is really the only Son of God, really begotten of the Father, *that is* (gr. *toutestin*) of the substance (*ousia*) of the Father, true God from true God. In order to define this specific identity of the Father and the Son against those who hold that the Son is of an inferior (or dissimilar) substance to the Father, the council introduces the word *homoousios* into the profession of faith (“consubstantial” to the Father, “of one” substance with the Father).

The insertion of this word into the creed is a huge innovation, a very significant *change* into the official teaching of the Church compared with the pre-Nicene period. Why ?

The Greek word *homoousios* is not biblical : it comes from the Greek pagan philosophy. It is the first time that a non biblical word (it is also true for *ousia*), coming from the philosophy, is used in an official and normative teaching of the Church.

It is a creative change or innovation in the Christian tradition : it gives rise to the dogmatic or speculative language as such of the Church.

This innovation appeared to many to be scandalous, and was the cause of a very acute crisis in the ecclesial life. It was a kind of trauma: the pagan philosophy, the human

wisdom, considered to be enemy of the Wisdom of God, was introduced into the sanctuary of the confession of faith! Was it legitimate to move away from the language of the Revelation in the Holy Scripture? The inspired language of the Bible would it not be betrayed by this foreign and heterogenous language? Would it be useful to express the faith in such a technical, intellectual and abstract language? Finally, such a turn was it indispensable?

The questions asked by this change were considerable: as already said, it was the dogmatic (systematic) language and function in the Church that was at stake. With time, progressively, the insertion of the *homoousios* would appear to be salutary for the expression of Christian faith and unity of the Church. Indeed, according to the law of incarnation, Christian message as expressed by the Scripture needs to be interpreted anew in each new historical and cultural context, and to be expressed anew in the new human words of new times and cultures (it is the meaning of the *toutestin* of Nicea), and this, in order to be significant and meaningful always afresh. But this is not directly my point here. My very point is the following.

The acceptance of this change or innovation was very difficult and controversial. Why? And how did it become acceptable? This is very interesting for discerning criteria for a possible and legitimate change in the Church.

To start, why was the reception of the *homoousios* so conflicting?

First of all, the signature of the Nicene profession of faith, including its theological novelty, was *imposed under duress* by the emperor Constantin. Insofar as the coercion would diminish, many bishops who were opposed to the *homoousios* would retrieve their freedom of public disagreement.

Secondly, the word was ambiguous because of its previous use. On one side, *Homoousios* had a material(istic) or concrete sense in current Greek: “of a same stuff (metal)”. So the Son of God might be considered as a part of the Father. On the other side, the word was suspected of sabellianism or modalism (there is no “personal” distinction between the Father and the Son), because Paul of Samosata (bishop of Antioch on third century, convicted of this heresy by a council) had used the word *homoousios* within this heretical doctrine¹.

¹ Cf. *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, edited by G.W.H. Lampe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961; fourth impression, 1976), pp. 958-960.

Thirdly, and above all, the term was non biblical. For the conservative and traditionalist wing of the Church especially (many monks), the insertion of this Hellenistic philosophical term into the creed was unthinkable and unacceptable.

Fourthly, *homoousios* was a technical, complex term, difficult to interpret correctly.

All those problems were obstacles to a quick and smooth reception of the Nicene concept. *Its use was premature as long as its meaning was not clarified.*

How thus was it elucidated?

It is only in 381 at the first council of Constantinople (later received as the second ecumenical council), that this clarification was officially accomplished. So it took 56 years.

During the meantime, some (like Athanasius of Alexandria) were courageous witnesses of fidelity to the letter of Nicea; others, despite of the conflicting context, worked progressively at the clarification of the meaning of *homoousios*, and so prepared a broader reception of the concept.

It was necessary better to distinguish between *ousia* (*substantia*) and *hypostasis* (*persona*), what did not the council of Nicea (*ousia* and *hypostasis* were there almost synonymous). They were the semi-arians (the homoiousians, who held that the Son of God was of a similar, not identical, substance to the Father, *homoiousios*) that showed the way to a solution. They admitted the sense of the Nicene doctrine, but they had difficulties with its terminology: they used the term *hypostasis* in the sense of *persona* in Latin. After their example, the strict defenders of Nicea (the neo-Nicene party around Meletius of Antioch and Basil of Caesarea, with the other Cappadocians) accepted to say, in the years 362-370, that the Holy Trinity is a unique *ousia* in three *hypostaseis*. Then the semi-arians were able to accept the *homoousios* purified from its modalist ambiguities. Those theologians and bishops were able *to create a semantic space, homogenous enough to be the common space of reference* for the word *homoousios*. Its meaning was free of its congenital ambiguities and heretical suspicions. The word could be received anew in the creed of Constantinople².

Therefore, what were the criteria or the conditions for making this theological change possible?

² For this history and analysis, I follow, sometimes closely, *Histoire des dogmes* sous la direction de Bernard Sesboué s.j., t. 1 : *Le Dieu du salut* (s.l. : Desclée, 1994), pp. 245-252 et 290-304.

First of all, the freedom of discussion, of agreement or disagreement must be guaranteed. As long as the coercion was exerted on the bishops by the political power (later it could be also the Apostolic See of Rome or a Patriarch...), the freedom of debate was not real nor the possibility of a free and serene adherence to the *homoousios*. It was a time of polemics and mutual excommunications.

Secondly, a period of peaceful and qualified clarification of the sense of change or innovation (or reform) appears to be indispensable. It may take a lot of time to create the favourable climate and the appropriate spaces for this common elucidation (in synods, for instance). The elucidation should also show that the change is a legitimate and fruitful (re)interpretation and implementation of the Christian Revelation in the Bible (once again, it is the sense of the *toutestin* in the Nicene creed). *So, it is absolutely necessary, sometimes with a lot of patience, to (re)create a common space of meaning, large and homogenous enough, in order to make an innovation acceptable and "receivable" in-depth and in the communion of the Church, without provoking divisions and schisms.* However, divisions perhaps are not always avoidable, when the sense and the implementation of the Gospel itself are at stake. In addition, a change may be premature, because it still needs clarification and a more homogenous semantic space, *but even premature, this change may be necessary and fruitful, as a prophetic act or gesture, for the rest of the Church.*

II. LUTHER

After the inaugural change of Nicea, founding for the status of dogmatic reflection in the teaching of the Church, we will consider another inaugural change (this inaugural feature was explicit in the mind of its initiator, Martin Luther): the (protestant) Reformation.

Many reform movements were active in the Church at the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th. The reform movement of Luther was one amongst others. Why did this particular reform become the Reform or Reformation? Why could this Lutheran reform or innovation not be integrated into the traditional Catholic Church of that time? Why did the Lutheran turn give rise to new Churches, separated from the Roman Catholic Church and convicted of heresy by her?

Luther underwent “a crucial experience”, “a new understanding of the righteousness of God”³, or of the relationships between faith and justification of human being (Rom 1: 17). If the debate that set him in opposition to Rome was related to this fundamental problem, it seems, however, that the real breach with the traditional Church is much more located in relation to ecclesiology⁴.

“Caught in this tension between the demands of the gospel on the one hand and his concern for the church and its authority on the other”, Luther dedicated his Latin treatise “Freedom of a Christian” to Pope Leo X in October 1520, in fact an appeal to him for urgent ecclesial reform and conversion⁵:

“I cannot tolerate that the Word of God should be subjected to the laws of our interpretations, for what matters is that the word should not be bound — the word which teaches in perfect freedom. ... Beware, therefore, Leo, my Father, of paying heed to the sirens who make you something more than an ordinary man — almost a god..., you are the servant of those who serve and no one in the world is in a more pitiable and dangerous situation. (...) Those who recognize the interpretation of Scripture as being solely your responsibility are in error. They are only seeking to install all their impieties in the church under the guarantee of your name”⁶.

The change proposed here by Luther was really considerable: it called in question the traditional authority of the Church regarding the right interpretation of Scripture. Commanded to renounce all his writings by the pope and the emperor Charles V, he could not explain and clarify his position in a serene and constructive climate, and he was excommunicated by Pope Leo X in 1521.

However, in the Catholic Church also, there was a serious concern for ecclesial reform and conversion *in capite et in membris*. Pope Adrian VI, successor of Leo X, addressed a statement in this sense to the imperial Diet meeting in Nuremberg in 1523:

³ Marc Lienhard, *Martin Luther, un temps, une vie, un message* (Geneva : Labor et Fides/Paris : Centurion, 1983), pp. 383, 388, quoted by Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches* (1991), n° 88, in *For the Communion of the Churches. The Contribution of the Groupe des Dombes*, edited by Catherine E. Clifford (Grand Rapids/Cambridge : Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), p. 175.

⁴ Marc Lienhard, *Martin Luther*, pp. 394, quoted by Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches* (1991), n° 88, in *For the Communion of the Churches*, p. 175.

⁵ Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches* (1991), n° 88, in *For the Communion of the Churches*, p. 176.

⁶ *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, vol. 1 (London : Lutterworth, 1952 ; translation by J. Greig), quoted by Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches* (1991), n° 88, in *For the Communion of the Churches*, p. 176-177.

“Holy Scripture teaches us throughout that the faults of the people have their origin in the faults of the clergy... We know that, even in the Holy See, for years many abominations were committed (...). We need not wonder that sickness has come down from the heads to the members, from the popes to the prelates. (...) each of us must examine how he has fallen (...). Consequently... we shall devote ourselves wholly to making a start by improving the Roman Curia from which all the evil has perhaps come; from it will come the cure, as from it came the sickness. We consider ourselves committed all the more to do so as the whole world is hungry for such a reform”⁷.

This lucid and courageous diagnosis indicated the need both for spiritual conversion and ecclesial reform by receiving the teaching of Holy Scripture. Unfortunately this appeal, echoing the appeal by Luther to the pope in 1520, came a little too late and fell on deaf ears. The dialogue between “Lutherans” and “Romanists” had become almost impossible.

The factors that accelerated this separation were numerous and often non theological: the development of the printing favoured a very quick diffusion of the ideas of Luther; many German princes joined the Lutheran movement and promoted it in a perspective of liberation from the domination of the emperor and of the pope; the coercion exerted by Charles V and Leo X didn’t allow a peaceful and deep debate with Luther on his doctrine; the psychological dispositions of the actors of this drama have also played an important role...

As one wants to promote a change in the Church, one has certainly to take seriously in account all the psychological, sociological and political factors that may have a more or less important influence on the possibility and the process of change itself, including a large space of free debate and the participation of most faithful in the decision-making.

From a more theological point of view, it is essential to take much time (if necessary) for clarifying the proposed change or reform on the doctrinal and biblical level. Otherwise, many doctrinal misunderstandings will remain or arise, and undermine the reception of the implemented change. Unfortunately, this clarification was not possible at the time of Luther.

So, like for the homooousios, it is absolutely necessary, sometimes with a lot of patience, to create a common space of meaning, large and homogenous enough, in order to make an

⁷ Cf. Louis Pastor, *Histoire des papes*, IX (1913), pp. 103f, quoted by Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches* (1991), n° 89, in *For the Communion of the Churches*, p. 177.

innovation acceptable and “receivable” in-depth and in the communion of the Church, without provoking divisions and schisms. It is the same challenge today after the synod on family. In the 16th century, Catholics and Lutherans were henceforth in two semantic, cultural and theological different worlds (it was a mutual estrangement). Then, it was no more possible to hinder a more and more hostile separation. The positive aspects of the Reformation novelty were not accepted nor received by Catholics until the second half of the 20th century, in a totally new (ecumenical) context.

Precisely let us evoke the thought of one of the theologians who contributed to create this new context, especially by his reflection on true reform in the Church and on the protestant Reformation: the French Dominican Yves Congar.

III. CONGAR

For Congar, reform involves a deep spiritual process of conversion to the Gospel which transforms the life of the Roman Catholic Church in a concretely visible and concrete way in close contact with the life of the contemporary world and also the life of the other Churches. The face of the Church must be renewed so that the world may believe. This ecclesial reform requires both renewal of ecclesiology and pastoral renewal in her life. Indeed, there is a permanent interaction between the life of the Church and her theological self-understanding. For Congar, what are the conditions and the criteria of this double recurrent renewal or change? I will just recall them very concisely with reference to his “summa” *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l’Église* of 1950⁸.

1. *What may be reformed in the Church?*

Congar makes a distinction between the structure and the life of the Church.

The Church has a *structure*, which she receives from her constitutive elements. She has an institutional framework; however this structured Church also has *life*; the faithful live in her, in unity and communion. In its human element the life of the Church is constantly open to reform.

⁸ Yves Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l’Église* (Paris : Cerf, 1950 ; 2nd ed., 1969) (hereafter cited *VFR*). The translation into English is mine. I mention that the idiomatic language of the French theologian is not at all easy to translate. There exists an English translation of this significant work, but I was not able to consult it for this paper. See Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*. Translated with an introduction by Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN : Liturgical Press, 2011).

(The structure designates the Church as an *objective* institution and characterizes her in her *immutable essence* or supernatural mystery. The notion of life includes the religious *subject* with his/her Christian dimensions, the assembly of the faithful and the living community resulting from their action; it characterizes the Church as *existing in time* and in historical development.) Congar distinguishes also between the structure (in the singular) and the structures (in the plural). The essential structure (in the singular) includes the faith, the dogma, the sacraments of faith, and the hierarchical constitution, which the Church has received from Christ, whilst the structures (in the plural) are the historical, concrete, and relative forms of expression of ecclesial life. These “ecclesiastical structures” may and must be reformed or replaced by new forms so that the expression of the ecclesial life may be more faithful to the Gospel and more suited to the changing times⁹.

2. *What are the criteria of a true reform?*

The major preoccupation of the French Dominican was to make possible reform without schism, that is authentic reform of the Church within the Church, in true ecclesial communion¹⁰. In this perspective, he discerned four main conditions or criteria: a) primacy of charity (*caritas*) and pastoral concern; b) maintaining the communion of the whole body; c) patience; d) true renewal by return to first principles and to the Tradition (“*ressourcement*”).

a) *Primacy of charity and pastoral concern*

What is necessary is that the perspective of the reformer or the “prophet” should develop in a concrete way, not abstractly, being able to be incorporated into the existing body of the Church, into her concrete life. This Church must both be accepted and, however, not accepted as such: one must not change the Church herself yet, however, change something in her¹¹.

So, what are the behaviour and attitudes which safeguard in-depth fidelity to the Church and communion with her? The first seems to be a certain priority given to charity and pastoral concern. A solely intellectual approach, separated from the charity,

⁹ See *VFR*, pp. 8ff, 42, 45-46, 57-58, 94-98, 101, 149.

¹⁰ See *VFR*, pp. 229-352 ; see also Y. CONGAR, *Esquisses du Mystère de l'Église*, Paris, Cerf, 1941, pp. 149-165 : « L'hérésie, déchirement de l'unité » (regarding the thought of Johann Adam Möhler).

¹¹ *Ecclesia semper ipsa sed numquam eadem*.

easily misreads the concretely “given” reality of the Church (*“le donné”*). On the other hand, the reforms which have been successful in the Church are those which have been made in response to the concrete needs of souls, in a pastoral perspective, by holy people¹². (Such people have accepted the determinations and decisions of the Church; they have sought to perfect themselves and to perfect others in the Christian life, to improve the Church from within. In brief, **a certain *sensus Ecclesiae (concretae)***, and more precisely a certain apostolic or pastoral sense and realism, are absolutely indispensable. This protects the reformer **against his own excessive or unilateral intellectual constructions (*“esprit de système”*)** and keeps him in a common, realistic and balanced perspective¹³. (*“Le ministère des âmes est une grande école de vérité”* (*“The ministry of souls [of pastoral care] is a great school of truth”*)¹⁴. By contrast, **the schismatic reformer** locates truth not in the reality of the Church, but in his own conceptions and judgment. His motto is **individualistic**, modelling everything on his own thought¹⁵.)

The second criterion is another way of expressing the same pastoral perspective.

b) *“Sentire cum Ecclesia” or staying in the communion of the whole*

The idea of communion was already present in the previous paragraph, but the stress here is on the whole (communion *with the whole*): in order not to deviate from the initial aim of reform, it is necessary to be in living and constant contact with the whole body of the Church. The fundamental idea of Möhler, according to Congar, is that the life of faith, even as the life of knowledge, is the work of the Holy Spirit in ourselves, and He is the spirit of love and communion. His work is thus to animate and to fulfil the Body of Christ as a whole, as a community. (There is no right faith apart from a life of fraternal communion. **It is only within the communion of the whole body** (*“by thinking and willing in the spirit and the heart of all”*)¹⁶, **under the guidance of the Magisterium, that everyone is able to keep the entire truth**. So, what we don’t know by ourselves, we know through others. We use the corrections and the complementary elements offered by others. It is only in the complete body that one can find the full truth. **It is also in the communion of the total body of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic**

¹² See *VFR*, pp. 249-252.

¹³ See *VFR*, pp. 253-255 and 258.

¹⁴ *VFR*, p. 256.

¹⁵ See *VFR*, p. 263.

¹⁶ *VFR*, p. 265, quotes the book *Symbolik* of Johann Adam Möhler (1832), § 37.

Church that everyone keeps a truth greater than that which he or she can understand and express.) No particular formula exhausts or even expresses the catholic truth that the Church lives and thinks in an adequate way. Precisely because no formula exhaustively expresses catholic truth, it will be possible, *in the name of the entire communion itself*, to look for new expressions of the life and thought of the Church. Indeed, as long as the prophet or the reformer stays effectively within the communion of the Church, his or her actions or affirmations, in so far as they may be lopsided and onesided, will be constantly corrected and completed *in sinu Ecclesiae*¹⁷.

(What are the means whereby we receive these benefits from ecclesial communion?

First, from a personal, internal point of view, the reformer is called upon to adopt a non-schismatic spiritual attitude, to **avoid the sin of schism**¹⁸. For Cajetan, according to Congar, the essential element of an attitude of communion is a certain way of Christian life: **living *ut pars Ecclesiae***, with the feeling of not being on one's own, but of forming part of a unique body and of carrying out a unique work with all the other faithful; not considering oneself as the whole, but keeping in touch with others and being immersed in the Church as it is¹⁹.

Secondly, from a more external point of view, this deep attitude of communion presupposes **a living relationship with the hierarchy deriving from the apostles**. Indeed, the Church is a body organized and structured by the apostles and their successors. There is no catholic communion apart from communion with the apostles. This relationship with the bishops is **not at all servile or mechanical**, but the grass roots ("*périphérie*") of the Church must obtain the official recognition of the hierarchical centers for their initiatives, even if it is not sufficient. A sense of the Church (*sensus Ecclesiae*) is still necessary.) *Sentire cum Ecclesia*: the expression does not mean simple obedience to the decisions of authority, because the word "Church" does not designate the hierarchy alone, separated from the body of the faithful. A more precise expression would be *sentire vere in Ecclesia militante*: this formula attributed to Ignatius of Loyola restores to every member of the Church his or her own part in the life and activity of the whole body²⁰.

¹⁷ See *VFR*, pp. 264-269.

¹⁸ *Summa theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 39, a. 1 (quoted in *VFR*, p. 271, footnote 64).

¹⁹ See *VFR*, pp. 270-271.

²⁰ See *VFR*, pp. 271-274.

(Let us consider the relationship between a reforming initiative and the hierarchy, when the prophet or the reformer wants to maintain communion with the Whole. In other words, what are the relations between the periphery (the life) and the center (the structure)? The periphery is much more a source of initiative and novelty than the center²¹.

The borders or the margins of the Church are another name of the periphery: they are (more than the center) organs of movement and progress; movements of life do not cease to abound and the initiatives are “the work of simple faithful, of pious laity” (“l’œuvre de simples fidèles, de pieux laïcs”)²². This is the field of the activists (“*militants*”), of the grass roots, of the people, of the ecclesial body.

The hierarchical center constitutes the organ of continuity and unity. The central organs are, in the body, the criteria of life in the one apostolic Church. The hierarchy first makes sure that all the movements of life develop and come back within the structural framework of the Church. “Guardian (...) of continuity with the apostolic origins, the hierarchy is still the guardian of the communion, across the world, with the living Church of today. Therefore, by its function itself, it is oriented, above all, towards the moderation of movements and their harmonization with the whole of the ecclesial life”²³.

So the apostolic central authority ensures that prophetic initiatives from the grass roots (“*périphérie*”) are consistent with the unity of the Church. However, “reforms initiated only from above, without widespread participation of the grass roots and popular elements, are not very effective”²⁴. It is necessary to establish a dialogue in order to form a common will, so that authority could coincide with the living consent of the whole body²⁵. Indeed, it is one and the same Spirit who animates and governs the Church both in the center and at the grass roots, both in her head and in her body, each part according to the role it has to play in the whole. In obedience to the Spirit, there is a kind of tension that is an exchange between two poles that are equally necessary in the Church: the grass roots initiative and the consecration of the center. **But if the center is not open to the requests of the grass roots, this sin of the institution was, for**

²¹ See *VFR*, pp. 274ff.

²² *VFR*, p. 278.

²³ *VFR*, p. 276.

²⁴ *VFR*, p. 279.

²⁵ See *VFR*, p. 280.

Congar in 1950, not as serious as the disobedience of the grass roots because the existence and the structure themselves of the Church are not at stake; rather it is only that the fullness of her life may not be achieved, that her catholicity may be impaired²⁶.)

So, patience is a third criterion of a true reform.

c) *Patience: avoiding the demands ("mises en demeure"), respecting the waiting times ("délais")*

Reformism must be carried out with patience in order to succeed in the Church. By patience, Congar means much more than simply being able to wait; he means a certain spiritual attitude, a sense of the indispensable waiting times of God, of the Church and of life, a certain humility and flexibility, a certain self-critical attitude, an awareness of human imperfection and mistakes, a certain reservation about simplistic all or nothing solutions (*"tout ou rien"*). One idea is pure, not the reality and the life. (So this third condition of a true reform is linked to the first: the intellectual or systematic point of view must be subjected to the pastoral one. The mind is able easily to perceive a logical opposition or consequence. To understand fully, however, time and prolonged vital experience are necessary.) **Only what has been made with the collaboration of time can overcome time²⁷.**

In fact, any reform is a partial anticipation of the eschatological kingdom, of its justice and purity, either by the judgment it implies on the inadequacy of human historical experience or by its positive endeavors to achieve something closer to true perfection. The reformer always has a tendency to rush any development, but the gospel parable of the wheat and tares (Mt 13, 24-30) invites us not to hasten the harvest by an impatient pursuit of purism: ("If you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them" (v. 29; *New American Bible*).) For Yves Congar in 1950, Luther was an impatient reformer²⁸. **One of the tasks of the ecumenical movement is to repair slowly and patiently in the deepest and fullest faithfulness, all that has been broken as a result of impatience and narrowness in believing²⁹.**

²⁶ See *VFR*, pp. 286-287 and 302.

²⁷ See *VFR*, pp. 306-309 and 311.

²⁸ See *VFR*, p. 310.

²⁹ See *VFR*, pp. 316-317.

(However, a “fait accompli” (*via facti*) may be legitimate in the strict sense of the word, that is to say as conforming to the mind of the legislator and of the law. A novelty introduced by a *via facti* (or by the *vox populi*) may become a custom (*consuetudo*; *consuetudo facti*), and than a right (*jus*; *consuetudo juris*). The legitimate *via facti* does not take the place of the authority: it does not affect the (hierarchical) structure of the Church, but it lies within the horizon of her life and opens ways of creation or adaptation which the authorities do not reject. This *via facti* proposes a kind of anticipation which it submits to the control of the hierarchy, whilst purely abstract and critical intellectual research easily leads to innovation and to the substitution of one rule (structure) for another.) Nevertheless, **if reformers should not be too impatient, the guardians of the tradition should not be too slow to react either**: they too should have a sense of the urgency of the needs and the changes, an understanding of the signs of the times³⁰. How precisely do we renew the Church whilst keeping to the Tradition? This is the fourth criterion or condition of a true reform.

d) *True renewal by return to the principle of Tradition*

Two ways are possible to bring about a renewal or an adaptation. One may give the dominant role either to the new element which one wants to promote or to the reality to be adapted or renewed. In both cases, one must make the existing reality and the new element meet in a certain symbiosis. In the first case, one will have a mechanical adaptation, with the risk of a schismatic reform; in the second case, one will achieve authentic renewal or development, reform within the Church, reform of the Church, reform without schism³¹.

The Church of Christ and of the Apostles exists, and it is by developing internally the resources of her catholicity that she must integrate all the legitimate diversities while respecting them. So, the Catholic Church would not become another Church than the Church of Christ, but a Church different from the present Catholic Church³².

Therefore, the great rule of catholic reform is to start by a return to the principles of Catholicism. One must first explore the Tradition. To be sure, the Tradition includes aspects of the past: the treasure of the texts and the realities of the past of the Church; but it is much more than that. It is mainly the continuity of the development since the

³⁰ See *VFR*, pp. 318-332.

³¹ See *VFR*, pp. 333-334.

³² See *VFR*, p. 335.

initial gift and the unifying integration of all the forms which this development has taken and still takes today. It is the presence of the principle present at all the steps of its development: Scripture, primitive Christianity, patristic thought, liturgy, development of piety and doctrine, movement of the concrete Church under the regulation of the Magisterium³³.

(Returning to the Tradition, it is, with absolute respect for the permanently valid forms, with critical and intelligent respect for the temporary forms, learning about the fundamental principles of Catholicism: being imbued with the in-depth mind of the Church and being correspondingly involved (“*engagement*”)³⁴.)

Thus, one must aim at an authentic development of the Tradition: a in-depth return to the sources, discriminating discernment (“*discernement*”), a hearty spirit of communion and reception of complementarity, it must be “the work of the whole people (I mean: of the whole body of the Church, clergy and faithful)”³⁵. This process must consist in an organic assimilation. Because in the Church, according to Saint Irenaeus, “the Spirit of God is always present and active, constantly rejuvenating the depositum which He has entrusted to her and even the framework in which He has lodged this depositum”³⁶.

Whatever the ecclesiological limitations of *Vraie et fausse réforme* in 1950 may be (the precedence of the structure over the life; a too lineal continuity of Tradition; a not yet full theology of the local Church), I think that most of theological reflections and criteria offered by Yves Congar regarding true reform are still valid, relevant, inspiring and wise.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this short and very selective inquiry in the history of Christianity, I would like to stress some particularly relevant criteria for conceiving and implementing change (innovation or reform) in the Church.

First of all, what I would call the *Nicene criterion*. How to introduce an innovation in the Christian tradition, in this case, a new language of faith, which could be received by the Church? For that, it is necessary to create a space of really free debate. Thanks to this

³³ See *VFR*, pp. 335-336.

³⁴ See *VFR*, pp. 337ff.

³⁵ *VFR*, p. 347.

³⁶ *VFR*, pp. 351-352.

space of freedom, it is possible to try to clarify in depth all that needs doctrinal and biblical clarification or justification, and, with time (perhaps a lot of time and patience), to create a semantic space, large and homogenous enough to be the common space of reference and reception for the promoted “change” (today, for instance, the possibility, officially recognised, for divorced remarried persons, under some circumstances, to receive the Holy Communion).

The second principle would be the *Reformation criterion*. An authentic reform implies both spiritual (individual) conversion and ecclesial (collective) reform. At some cultural turns in the history³⁷, like in 1517, however, it is particularly difficult to create a common space of meaning for promoting an ecclesial change, because the members of the Church live in at least two very different cultures or *Denkformen*, with their own coherence or consistency (for instance, the declining medieval culture and the arising modern culture). A big work of intercultural dialogue is then indispensable for making a change acceptable in the universal Church.

The third criterion, I would call it the *Congarian criterion*, because it is the fruit of the pioneer and ample reflection of the French Dominican on true and false reform in the Church: by a true reform, one must not change the Church herself yet, however, change something in her (*Ecclesia semper ipsa sed numquam eadem*). This requires a concrete and pastoral sense of the Church (*sensus Ecclesiae*), the firm will also of staying in the communion of the whole body of Church (*in sinu Ecclesiae*), in a living relationship with the successors of the Apostles and by return to the principle of Tradition, and thus a spiritual attitude of patience, a sense of the indispensable waiting times (“délais”) of God, of the Church and of life: “If you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them” (Matt. 13:29).

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³⁷ It is true also for different geographical parts of the world.