

FROM FLESH TO FLESH: ON THE SACRAMENTAL MEANING OF TRADITION

JOSÉ GRANADOS

“[T]he sacraments (with their source in the Eucharist) are the form of tradition; and that tradition is the content of the sacraments.”



“Without having seen [Jesus Christ] you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him” (1 Pt 1:8). The Letter of Peter testifies that most Christians are not able to have a direct encounter with Jesus in the flesh. There is someone who transmits the message, who heard the voice which was in turn transmitted from heaven, saying: “This is my beloved Son” (2 Pt 1:17), and who was an eyewitness of the majesty of Jesus (2 Pt 1:16). Thus arises the dynamism of tradition: what happened has been handed on to us (in Latin *tradere*), reaching us from witness to witness down through history. And what is it that has been handed on? How was it transmitted? How are we sure about the fidelity of this process?

These questions became acute in those ages which saw a clash of opposing ways of understanding the figure and work

of Jesus and his influence on Christian life. The first to develop theologically the concept of “tradition” was St. Irenaeus of Lyons, in his fight with the Gnostics, who were speaking about a secret *traditio* that had come down to them from the Apostles. Irenaeus counters their claim with a visible tradition bound up with the apostolic succession. The debate about tradition was taken up again with the arrival of the Protestant Reformation, when the Council of Trent opposed the principle of *sola Scriptura*. While Luther planned his reform as an abandonment of tradition, the Catholic reform consisted of recovering tradition. The first was an attempt to return to an original and static form of revelation that allegedly had been corrupted over the course of history; the second was about returning to a dynamic form of revelation, which is received only through its single [*unitario*] narrative in time.¹ The question of tradition returned to prominence at the First Vatican Council (Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor aeternus*), which posits it as a basis for understanding the authority of the pope. The Second Vatican Council, for its part, offered a synthesis that highlights both the connection between Scripture, tradition, and the Magisterium, and also the ability of tradition to renew itself continually.²

Since the discussions surrounding the two Synods on the Family in 2014 and 2015 and the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, there has been renewed interest in understanding better what tradition is and how it allows for a development of Christian doctrine. This debate has several novel elements:

1) First of all, this touches on topics related to the family, and the family is the primary subject for understanding tradition in its human content that is typical of all peoples: the family is the place where life and culture are transmitted. Note that, since marriage is a sacrament, the experience of familial tradition has been taken up into the perspective of faith. Therefore, without the tradition that is handed on from generation to generation by

1. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, “Revelation and Tradition,” in Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 26–49.

2. Cf. *Dei verbum*, 8; René Latourelle, “La Révélation et sa transmission selon la Const. DV,” *Gregorianum* 47 (1966): 5–40.

all the sons of Adam, it is not possible to understand the tradition that begins in Christ, the Second Adam. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council described the occurrence of tradition in familial terms, having recourse to Jesus' dialogue with his Bride, the Church.³ In short, it is normal for the crisis of the family to have repercussions on the way in which Christian tradition is understood and lived out. Anyone who denies the indissolubility of marriage, for example, denies in turn the unity of tradition down through the ages.

2) Secondly, contemporary discussions raise the question about the relation between the Magisterium and tradition, especially in matters concerning the teaching of the Roman pontiff. This is so because many commentators are (mis)interpreting the papal Magisterium of Pope Francis in a way that is opposed, at least *prima facie*, to the constant interpretation of tradition. In this interpretative debate it is crucial to remember the connection between tradition and Magisterium in order to see which reading of *Amoris laetitia* is theologically rigorous. It will be essential to take into account the fact that the Pope is *servus servorum Dei*, which can also be interpreted: the servant of Scripture and tradition, which themselves are precisely those servants of God which the Second Vatican Council calls "a mirror in which the Church, during its pilgrim journey here on earth, contemplates God" ("*speculum in quo Ecclesia in terris peregrinans contemplantur Deum*").⁴

3) A third novelty is that the debate concerns the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Penance. The sacraments, as I wish to show in the following pages, are supporting elements of the concept of tradition. This means that not only does tradition say something about the sacraments, but also the sacraments are the channel or vehicle of the same tradition that the Gospel transmits to us. They are not only what is transmitted, but also an integral part of the transmitting subject herself, which is the Church. Therefore, if central elements of the sacraments were called into question, this would damage the very channel through which tradition flows.

3. Cf. *Dei verbum*, 8.

4. Cf. *Dei verbum*, 7, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, new rev. ed. (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1992), 754.

In order to illuminate these questions, I will start by 1) studying the testimony of St. Irenaeus, the pioneer in thinking about tradition. This testimony shows 2) the importance of linking tradition and sacraments, which will enable us to 3) deduce some central features of tradition that are necessary in order to clarify the current debate.

1. IRENAEUS OF LYONS: THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION, FROM FLESH INTO FLESH

Irenaeus is situated in the context of the struggle against the Gnostics.⁵ They proposed there were secret traditions that were transmitted orally, by which they justified their way of reading Scripture (the Old and the New Testament).⁶ Irenaeus too thinks about tradition in terms of the question about the correct interpretation of revelation. And he argues that the tradition of the Catholic Church is older than that of the Gnostics, since it goes back to the Apostles themselves.

In terms of this contrast between the oral teaching of the Gnostics and the tradition invoked by Irenaeus, Joseph Ratzinger describes two opposite ways of discerning the true Christ: either based on secret oral traditions (Gnostics) or based on lists of witnesses who preached the word (Catholic Church).⁷ What is oral

5. For the following discussion, cf. Andrés Sáez Gutiérrez, *Canon y autoridad en los dos primeros siglos: Estudio histórico-teológico acerca de la relación entre la Tradición y los escritos apostólicos*, 2 vols. (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2014); Antonio Orbe, *Teología de San Ireneo*, vol. 1 (Madrid: BAC, 1985), 32–51; Henri Holstein, “La Tradition des apôtres chez S. Irénée,” in *RevScRel* 36 (1949): 229–70.

6. Cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* III, 2, 1: “Cum enim ex Scripturis arguuntur, in accusationem conuertuntur ipsarum Scripturarum, quasi non recte habeant neque sint ex auctoritate, et quia varie sint dictae, et quia non possit ex his inueniri veritas ab his qui nesciant *traditionem*. Non enim per litteras traditam illam sed per vivam vocem” (SCh 211, 24–26). “When, however, they are confuted from the Scriptures, they turn round and accuse these same Scriptures, as if they were not correct, nor of authority, and [assert] that they are ambiguous, and that the truth cannot be extracted from them by those who are ignorant of *tradition*. For [they allege] that the truth was not delivered by means of written documents, but *viva voce*” (ANF 1:415a).

7. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, “Primacy, Episcopate, and Apostolic Succession,” in *The Episcopate and the Primacy* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1962), 37–63, at 47.

and unwritten in the one instance would be in contrast to what is personal in the other. This description by Ratzinger, nevertheless, would have to be completed, since the Gnostics too relied on a personal succession which, according to them, went back to the Apostles themselves. This does not mean that the contrast did not exist, but rather that it appeared to exist instead between a hidden (Gnostic) transmission and a (Catholic) transmission in full view. In other words, it is not so much that oral contents (Gnostics) are opposed to a personal approach (Irenaeus), but rather that what is hidden is opposed to what is public and visible.

Indeed, the Gnostics traced the distinction between private and public to the Apostles themselves, who allegedly spoke in two different registers, depending on whether they were transmitting a teaching that was valid for everyone or whether they already knew the deeper revelation, addressed to a few, which the Lord supposedly had also transmitted to them privately.⁸ Irenaeus, on the contrary, refers to the tradition “which originates from the apostles, [and] which is preserved by means of the successions of presbyters in the Churches.”⁹ It is necessary to understand from this perspective the use of the list of bishops of Rome, going far enough back to connect with the Twelve.¹⁰ The fact that it is possible to follow the line of the successors is testimony, for Irenaeus, to a public rite which transmitted to honest men a way of life that was manifestly in keeping with Jesus’ way of life. Irenaeus uses an interesting image here in comparing tradition to the sun, which shines equally on all men, without being hidden from anyone.¹¹ Therefore he says that tradition is presented to everyone who has eyes and is open to the truth.¹²

8. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adv. haer.*, III, 2, 2 (SCh 211, 26–28; ANF 1:415a).

9. Cf. *ibid.*, III, 2, 2 (SCh 211, 26; ANF 1:415a).

10. Cf. *ibid.*, III, 3, 3 (SCh 211, 32–38; ANF 1:416a).

11. Cf. *ibid.*, I, 10, 2: “Sed sicut sol, creatura Dei, in universo mundo unus et idem est, sic et lumen, praedicatio veritatis, ubique lucet et illuminat omnes homines qui uolunt ad cognitionem veritatis venire” (SCh 264, 160). “But just as the sun, God’s creation, is one and the same throughout the world, so too the light, the preaching of the Truth, shines everywhere and enlightens all men who wish to come to the knowledge of the Truth” (*Against the Heresies*, bk. 1, *Ancient Christian Writers* 55 (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 49).

12. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adv. haer.*, III, 3, 1 (SCh 211, 30; ANF 1:415b).

This personal, visible way of transmitting is connected with what is transmitted (the contents of tradition), which is the Gospel itself. For Irenaeus, as it was already for Paul, this is not so much a written account, but rather Christ himself in the mysteries of his life in the flesh. The four gospels reflect in writing the essential message of this bodily Gospel which, in order to recapitulate in itself the whole world, is fourfold. In order to transmit the encounter with and the life of Jesus in the flesh, then, it takes the encounter with and the life of the Church in the flesh. Therefore the transmission of the Gospel occurs through the visible life of the Church, which comes into contact with Christ through apostolic succession with the imposition of hands. We can apply here the famous phrase of Marshall McLuhan: “The medium is the message.”¹³

Tradition, from this perspective, is everything transmitted or handed down by Jesus to the Apostles, who were witnesses of his Resurrection. Tradition is not reduced, therefore, to a set of truths, oral information that fills in what is missing in Scripture, but rather tradition is the totality of the life of Christ (the Gospel) inasmuch as it was transmitted to the Apostles. From this perspective, the scriptures arise within this tradition in order to stabilize and fix it, thus becoming a normative text for the post-apostolic Church and a foundation of the faith. Therefore, we can say that if, in an absurd hypothesis, there were no scriptures, we could come to know the Gospel from tradition.¹⁴ Recall the remark by Papias of Hierapolis, whom Irenaeus held in such high esteem: “I did not think that the things that come from books were as useful to me as those that come from a living, enduring voice.”¹⁵

Let us focus now on what is transmitted in this tradition. The Gospel consists of the concrete life of the Incarnate Word,

13. Cf. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994 [1964]).

14. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adv. haer.*, III, 4, 1 (SCh 100, 46; ANF 1:417a); see also the remark by Augustine: “Ego vero Evangelium non crederem, nisi me catholicae Ecclesiae commoveret auctoritas” (*Contra ep. man.* V, 6: CSEL 25, 197); “But I would not believe in the Gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me.”

15. This statement was preserved for us by Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, 39, 4 (SCh 31, 154).

in each one of his mysteries, where salvation history is recapitulated. Irenaeus refers to this narrative when he seeks to state more concretely the one living faith that the whole Church professes as though with one mouth.¹⁶ This explains why Irenaeus, when he wishes to refer to the rule of faith, speaks also about the “body of the truth.”¹⁷ Here he is not talking merely about a “body” in the metaphorical sense, as an articulated set of truths, but rather is referring to the corporeal shape that the life of Christ assumed, in which each of his mysteries is a member, and among whose members Christians too are numbered.¹⁸ The heretics, for their part, while believing that they are superior to the Apostles, transmit only fragments, as happened to Marcion, who “gave them not the Gospel, but only a portion of the Gospel.”¹⁹

What is handed on, then, to Christians is incorporation in Jesus’ life. Now this incorporation is accomplished precisely in the sacraments, beginning with Baptism. In fact, Irenaeus, when he speaks about the tradition that the Apostles received from Jesus, mentions in the first place the power that they have to bring souls back to life. In another passage he points to the eucharistic offering as something that the Church receives from the Apostles so as to offer it to God throughout the world.²⁰ It is interesting that Irenaeus uses the verb *eucharistein* to refer to the profession of faith in the Gospel that is received in tradition: the language in which tradition is expressed comes from the Eucharist.²¹

16. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adv. haer.*, I, 10, 3 (SCh 264, 160–62; ACW 55:51); I, 10, 2 (SCh 264, 158; ACW 55:49).

17. Cf. *ibid.*, II, 27, 1 (SCh 294, 264; ANF 1:398a); IV, 33, 10 (SCh 100, 824; ANF 1:509a); I, 8, 1 (SCh 264, 112; ACW 55:41); *Epidexis* 1 (ed. E. Romero Pose [Madrid: Ciudad Nueva, 1992], 52).

18. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adv. haer.*, IV, 33, 10 (SCh 100, 824; ANF 1:509a); Irenaeus refers to the prophetic prefiguration of the life of Christ, since the prophets were members of Christ.

19. Cf. *ibid.*, I, 27, 2 (SCh 264, 350; ACW 55:91).

20. Cf. *ibid.*, IV, 17, 5 (SCh 100, 592; ANF 1:484a–b).

21. Cf. *ibid.*, I, 10, 3: “Plus autem aut minus secundum prudentiam nosse quosdam [intelligentiam] non in eo quo argumentum immutetur efficitur . . . sed in eo quod . . . quare Verbum Dei caro factum est et passus est, gratias agere” (SCh 264, 160–64). “The fact that some know more by virtue of their intelligence, and some less, does not come about by their changing the doctrine itself. . . . It does come about, however, . . . by acknowledging

Irenaeus thinks, moreover, that this tradition is full of the Holy Spirit, and therefore he speaks about the “force [*dynamis*] of tradition,” which is one, although there are many different languages in the world in which Christians profess their faith.²² This means that the word that is preached and believed has in itself the power of Christ, about which Justin Martyr had already said that his words were the strength [*dynamis*] of God, because they were uttered in the Holy Spirit.²³ Tradition communicates not only words but also a life configured to Christ through the Spirit, who as it were makes the Church into one person capable of one preaching, in other words, of one and the same narrative united to the narrative of Jesus.²⁴

Summing up, we have seen that Irenaeus associates tradition with the handing over of the life of Christ, and that this delivery is given to us precisely in the sacraments. The saint is thinking about apostolic succession, from bishop to bishop, which is placed at the service of Baptism and the Eucharist. The sacraments are, therefore, the place where tradition is realized, that is, the communication of the Gospel; and they are this place inasmuch as they contain this same corporeal Gospel, since they incorporate us in different ways into the Body of Christ.

We should add that Irenaeus clearly distinguishes between the Apostles and their successors.²⁵ The former give shape to tradition because they were witnesses of the Risen Lord; the latter preserve this tradition they have received. This means that the Apostles were present with the living flesh of Jesus: they touched him, they ate and drank with him after his Resurrection, and in this sense they turned into depositories of tradition

gratefully [*eucharistein*] why the Word of God became flesh and suffered” (ACW 55:50).

22. Cf. *ibid.*, I, 10, 2: “etsi in mundo loquelae dissimiles sunt, sed tamen virtus traditionis una et eadem est” (SCh 264, 158). “For though the languages throughout the world are dissimilar, nevertheless the meaning [*dynamis*] of the tradition is one and the same” (ACW 55:49). On the unity of the Apostles, who “depend” on Christ, see also Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 42.

23. Cf. Justin, *Apologia* I, 14, 4; Cf. José Granados, *Los misterios de la vida de Cristo en Justino Mártir* (Gregorian University Press, Rome 2005), 297–302.

24. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adv. haer.*, V, 20, 1 (SCh 153, 252–56; ANF 1:548a).

25. Cf. Holstein, “La Tradition,” 268–69.

in the full sense, precisely because tradition implies the transmission of a new way of living in the flesh. In this respect, the Scholastics were correct in distinguishing between *constitutive tradition* (which the Apostles form) and *continuing tradition* (which the other bishops receive, so as then to continue transmitting it).²⁶ Thus Scripture, which reflects the constitutive tradition and is at its service, in turn is converted into a norm by the conservative tradition of the other eras of the Church.

This certainly does not mean that for Irenaeus tradition is something fixed and static. On the contrary, precisely because it is linked with the life of Jesus, tradition has sufficient drive to make its way through history until the end of time. The Church is, rather, a receptacle that contains the faith that has been transmitted, in other words, the tradition that comes from Jesus. And this transmitted faith is a precious liquid which, through the action of the Spirit, is renewed and, at the same time, renews the very vessel in which it is contained, in other words, the Church herself.²⁷

Note moreover that, according to Irenaeus, tradition embraces all of history, from creation on. What is handed down is not only the word of Jesus, but also Old Testament prophecy, which already announced Christ. This is why tradition offers the key with which to read the scriptures of Israel in the light of Jesus. Indeed, Irenaeus, following Justin, uses the term *kerygma*, not only to speak about the apostolic preaching, as was the custom in the New Testament, but also to apply it to the preaching of the prophets, who were already in a certain way evangelists.²⁸ And he even goes so far as to say that there is a tradition even from Adam the first-formed man himself (*a primoplasti traditione*), a tradition about God the Creator of the world, which coincides with what the Church received from the Apostles.²⁹ This is an im-

26. Cf. Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), 406.

27. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adv. haer.*, III, 24, 1 (Sch 211, 472; ANF 1:458b).

28. On using the verb *keryssein*, for them, see Holstein, "La Tradition," 240–59.

29. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adv. haer.*, II, 9, 1: "a primoplasti traditione hanc suadelam custodientibus et unum Deum Fabricatorem caeli et terrae hymnizantibus. . . . Ecclesia autem omnis per universum orbem hanc accepti ab

portant point, as we will see, because it roots tradition in man's original experience and, specifically, in the familial transmission through the generations.

2. TRADITION AND SACRAMENTS

This study of the concept of "tradition" in Irenaeus has put us on the trail of the link between tradition and sacraments. For him, in his anti-Gnostic struggle, it is essential that tradition transmits a way of life and that it does so from person to person, in a visible way, in the flesh. So it happens in history from Adam on, passing through all the prophets, insofar as their lives anticipate the Incarnation and life of Jesus. In the Church this life reaches us through the sacraments, transmitted by the Apostles and their successors. How will later theology understand this connection between tradition and sacraments?³⁰

The connection of tradition-sacraments can be glimpsed precisely in critical moments of the history of dogma. Already in the writings of Augustine, the concept of tradition is bound up with debates involving the sacraments, like the one that takes place with the Donatists about repeating Baptism or with the Pelagians about infant Baptism.³¹ Is this a coincidence, or is there something in these two sacramental topics that proves

apostolis traditionem" (SCh 294, 84). "The ancients preserving with special care, from the tradition of the first-formed man, this persuasion, while they celebrate the praises of one God, the Maker of heaven and earth. . . . The Universal Church, moreover, through the whole world, has received this tradition from the apostles" (ANF 1:369a).

30. About the concept of tradition in the Fathers of the Church, cf. Pierre Smulders, "Le mot et le concept de tradition chez les Pères grecs," *RST* 40 (1952): 41-62; Robert M. Grant, "Scripture and Tradition in St. Ignatius of Antioch," *CBQ* 25 (1963): 322-35; Ursicino Domínguez del Val, "Escritura y tradición en los Padres occidentales y en los teólogos pretridentinos," *RET* 24 (1964): 61-105; A. P. Maestre, "Traditio chez Tertullien," *RevScPhilTheol* 51 (1967): 617-43; Everett Ferguson, "Paradosis and Tradition: A Word Study," in *Tradition and the Rule of Faith in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph T. Lienhard, SJ*, ed. R. J. Romb and A. Y. Hwang (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 3-29.

31. On Augustine, cf. Roland J. Teske, "Augustine's Appeal to Tradition," in *Tradition and the Rule of Faith*, 153-72.

to be essential in understanding tradition itself? Later on, when Luther called into question the principle of tradition, he implicitly questioned the sacramental organism of the Church. Indeed, the Council of Trent responded to Luther with a large number of sessions on the sacraments, which proved to be decisive for the Catholic Reformation. The union of these two theological topics was confirmed in the nineteenth century: in the writings of thinkers like Möhler and Scheeben the idea of tradition was considered in union with the idea of Church as sacrament which, over time, transmits this tradition. These lines extend down to the Second Vatican Council which, when it discusses tradition and its development, at the same time defines the Church-sacrament as the subject of tradition.

How has this connection between tradition and sacraments been presented in recent theology? One example is the very influential book *Tradition and Traditions* by Yves Congar. When this author explains the dynamism of tradition schematically, liturgy appears as merely a deposit of tradition, something like a sediment of tradition in history. It is not clear that the sacraments function also as a vehicle of tradition. It is true that Congar values the liturgical celebration as an existential place that serves as a means of transmitting the deposit of the faith. However, on the other hand, neither liturgy nor the sacraments are mentioned when he speaks about the *subject* of tradition, which is the Church. The sacraments are seen as one of the elements transmitted, but not as a vehicle that structures tradition.

Joseph Ratzinger's approach seems to be more successful in this respect; following Irenaeus, he does notice the connection between tradition and apostolic succession. Ratzinger formulates this principle: "*The succession is the external form of the tradition, and tradition is the content of the succession.*"³² And he notes the need to unite tradition with the visible rite of the imposition of hands, which the successors of the Apostles receive in order to be able to preach the Gospel.³³ This ensures that the preaching is carried out by someone who is personally responsible for his faith, by

32. Cf. Ratzinger, "Primacy, Episcopate, and Apostolic Succession," 51.

33. Cf. *ibid.*, 53–54.

virtue of a specific call of the incarnate Lord, who lives and acts in the flesh of the Church.³⁴

This reflection by Ratzinger can be extended to embrace, not only apostolic succession, but also the other sacraments. Of all people, Irenaeus, as we saw, teaches that tradition is given primarily by Baptism and the Eucharist. How is tradition related to these sacraments?

2.1. *Tradition, Eucharist, Baptism*

The New Testament already attests to the link between sacraments and tradition. A passage by Paul associates tradition with the Eucharist: “I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you” (1 Cor 11:23), which is the tradition about the Last Supper.³⁵ This tradition is the one in which the Lord himself is given or *handed over* (Greek: *paredídeto*; Latin: *tradebatur*) (1 Cor 11:23). Here what is *handed over* to Paul refers directly to the Lord Himself, who is *handed over* and speaks about a body “for you” (1 Cor 11:24). Next Jesus orders the disciples to do the same in memory of him, which already indicates a transmission of this handing over in time. The Eucharist conveys, therefore, the handing over of Jesus’ life in the Church.

A little further on, in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul describes the Church as the body of Christ. This confirms that her origin is in the Eucharist, as 1 Corinthians 10:17 already noted: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” Evident at the same time is the necessary harmony between ecclesial communion and eucharistic communion that we read about in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34. This body, which is the Church herself, is precisely what is handed down over the course of history. Hence Irenaeus could say that the Apostles “handed on *the Church* to their successors,” whereas,

34. Cf. *ibid.*, 58: “Here all anonymity ceases. The concrete name inexorably challenges men to take up a position. This name is the most acute form of that extreme concreteness into which God came when he assumed not merely a human name, but the flesh of man—the flesh of the Church.”

35. On this aspect, cf. Bernard Sesboüé, “Tradition et traditions,” *NRT* 112 (1990): 570–85.

according to Augustine, the Church herself is offered in what she offers on the altar.³⁶

At the Last Supper Jesus tells his disciples that they cannot understand him completely (Jn 16:12–15), because he is leaving things unsaid. How can this silence of Jesus be explained, and his confidence that the disciples, with time, will come to know even what he has not said? The immediate context gives us part of the answer, referring to the Holy Spirit whom Jesus will send to them, so that they will receive a perfect understanding of the Gospel (Jn 16:13–15). Does this alone explain the fact that Jesus leaves things without communicating them?

We have to answer no, since Jesus adds that the Spirit “will not speak on his own authority” (Jn 16:13) but “will take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn 16:14). Therefore there must be something that Jesus calls “his,” from which the Spirit takes. What can this be? It has to be the ritual context itself of the Last Supper, the context in which Jesus pronounces these words. For celebrating a rite is entering into a sphere that surpasses the explicit knowledge of the one who celebrates. In other words, the rite allows Jesus to hand over to his disciples more than what they are capable of understanding, because it is hidden and implicit in the rite. They, by working sacramentally under the power of the Spirit, will come to understand little by little what the rite already contained, which surpasses them at the moment. Precisely by having handed over to them this rite, which gives shape to the Christian life, the Spirit will be able, in turn, to tell them something new (Jn 16:13: “the things that are to come”) and to remind them of what they already know. He will remind them, because he will return to the rite of Jesus; and what he reminds them about will be new, because the rite contains unexplored novelties, until the Lord returns.

We find a similar approach in what Paul says with respect to Baptism. A *traditio* is carried out there, too: the handing on of the death and Resurrection of Christ, who incorporates the Christian into himself (Rom 6:3–4; Col 2:12). What is handed on and received is, as in the Eucharist, a new body for good works, along with the stripping off of the old body that served injustice (Rom 6:13, 19). Notice that Romans 6:17 says that

36. Cf. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, X.6 (CCL 47, 279; NPNF-1 2:184b).

Christians “have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching [*typos didaches*] to which you were committed [Greek: *paredothete*; Latin: *traditi estis*].” This means that not only is something handed on to us in Baptism, but the Christian himself is handed on or entrusted to a standard of teaching. What does this standard consist of? Pope Francis in *Lumen fidei* interprets this “standard of teaching” as “a specific way of life” (41), which is an imitation of the life of Jesus.³⁷ In other words, here the *traditio* goes beyond the transmission of a message, turning instead into the handing on of a way of life, which is a way of acting in common with Jesus, so as to belong to his very body.

2.2. Tradition and marriage

In order to complete this perspective, it is helpful to consider another sacrament, marriage. As we saw, the *traditio* of Christ consists in his way of life in the flesh, in other words, of living situated in the world, open to relation with God and human beings. If Christ can hand this life of his on to us, it is because he assumed flesh that came to him, from generation to generation, through the People of Israel. Jesus himself received a *traditio* that was communicated to him through his family, a *traditio* which begins in creation and which Irenaeus called, as we saw earlier, *traditio primoplasti*, the tradition that proceeds from Adam, the first man.

All this invites us to consider the family as the necessary basis for understanding what tradition is. In other words, the family is the first space in which tradition is experienced as the handing on of a life. There, children receive themselves from their parents. What they receive is, before anything else, a body, in other words: a place in the world, a network of relations that welcomes them, a memory that reaches them through the generations. At their birth they will receive a language too, with which they will think about themselves and begin to decipher their identity and their vocation.

This *traditio* (handing on) of life has as its root another *traditio*, the mutual handing over of themselves by the man and the

37. Cf. Leonhard Goppelt, in *ThWNT* 8:246–59.

woman in marriage, starting with the first gift of God. This is a *traditio* that constitutes a new being, in other words, the union of the two in one flesh in which children will be born. By handing over their bodies, in other words, their own way of being in the world and of writing a story, the spouses constitute “one flesh” (Gn 2:24), a common way of being situated in the cosmos and in society. By uniting with one another, they constitute henceforth a new time that is inaugurated by the conjugal promise, which is a time of fidelity and fruitfulness. This united time is the channel in which the *traditio* of life to children can be carried out.

The New Testament uses precisely this spousal language to describe the extension of the Church in time starting from the handing over (*traditio*) of Jesus (Eph 1:22–23). From this perspective, marriage is a key sacrament for understanding the concept of *traditio*, inasmuch as it assures the unity of all ages of history, from creation itself until the definitive coming of Christ, who is invoked by the Spirit and the Bride (cf. Rv 22:17).

Recall the remark by Ratzinger cited earlier: “The succession is the external form of the tradition, and tradition is the content of the succession.” If we consider, as we saw, not only the sacrament of Holy Orders, but also the whole sacramental economy, we can say that *the sacraments (with their source in the Eucharist) are the form of tradition; and that tradition is the content of the sacraments, since through them we can participate in the Gospel, which is the life of Jesus in the flesh.* What is handed on in the Eucharist, in fact, is the life of Jesus, which he received from the Father (cf. Jn 13:3). And the Church, in receiving the body of Christ in the sacraments, receives herself from the Lord, inasmuch as she receives the concrete form of the life of Christ. To the Christian who receives Communion we can say with Augustine: “Receive what you are, turn into what you receive.”³⁸ Thus we grasp the profoundest meaning of tradition: the Father hands everything over to Jesus, and he hands his life over to the Apostles and, through them, to his whole Church. This is why Tertullian declares: “The faith must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that

38. Cf. Augustine, *Sermo* 227, 1: “Si bene accepistis, vos estis quod accepistis” (SCh 116, 234) [“If you have received well, you are what you have received”]; see also *Sermo* 272, 1 (PL 38, 1247).

which the Church received from the Apostles, the Apostles from Christ, Christ from God.”³⁹

In summary, we can say that the sacraments, based on the three that we have analyzed, constitute the necessary channel of tradition. It is usually emphasized that we received Scripture within tradition, since the list of books in the biblical canon was developed within the life of the Church. Not until the Council of Trent was there a definitive magisterial declaration that contains all the inspired books.⁴⁰ Well, now, to this we must add that a similar process occurs with the sacraments: it was up to the early Church to determine which rites came from the Lord, and only at the Council of Trent did she arrive at the definitive list of seven.⁴¹ These two facts (the determination of the canon and the determination of the seven sacraments) are related, since the sacraments contain within themselves the Word, and are the suitable environment in which to interpret them. Let us see now how the concept of tradition is elucidated, if we understand it as sacramental tradition.

3. THE SACRAMENTAL STRUCTURE OF TRADITION

The connection between sacraments and tradition will reveal to us the essential features of the latter. In the following paragraphs we will refer to tradition in the full sense, as transmission of the mysteries of Jesus to the Church, starting with the Apostles. What is transmitted is a life conformed to the life of Christ and, therefore, according to his teaching.

3.1.

In the first place, we ask about the unity of tradition in time, or alternatively, about the way in which tradition combines past,

39. Cf. Tertullian, *De praescriptione haer.* XXI, 4 (CCL I, 202–03; English: *The Prescription against Heretics*, XXI, 4 [ANF 3:252b, lightly emended]).

40. Cf. Council of Trent, session 3 (DH 1501–1503).

41. Cf. Council of Trent, session 7, canon 1 on the sacraments in general (DH 1601).

present, and future. For the tradition which, on the one hand, is the deposit that the Church keeps and preserves faithfully, undergoes, on the other hand, a development in time and so displays a newness. This newness is typical of the continual gift of the Father, who always bestows on us more than what we ask; it is typical also of the power of the Spirit, who opens unforeseen prospects so as to lead us beyond our horizons.

The Eucharist, the center of the sacraments, contains the key of this development in time. Indeed, in the Eucharist we have in the first place a memory, which is the memory of Christ, and, in him, of the Old Testament going back to creation, represented in the bread and wine. This is a filial memory, full of gratitude to the Father for his gifts. Well, now, given that these gifts are always superabundant, since they always contain promises, this memory turns into the source of newness for the future. We are, according to Pope Francis (*Lumen fidei*, 9), confronted with the “memory of a promise” which is, therefore, the memory of something new that is coming. Recall that the eucharistic body is the body of the Risen Lord, who anticipates the end of time and invites the Church to say: “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!” (1 Cor 16:22).

Thus we have the suitable rhythm that tradition follows in time. Tradition is a memory in which we delve ever deeper so as to generate ceaselessly something new. Therefore all newness was already somehow contained and anticipated before in the memory, which is the memory of the risen Christ, the fullness of time. And, in turn, all deeper reflection on the remembrance brings with it an advance of vision and of life, inasmuch as the Church continually draws near to the Risen Lord. John Henry Newman expresses this dynamic by identifying two notes of the development of doctrine. All authentic development has, on the one hand, conservative effects on the past, which is never left behind;⁴² and, on the other hand, for every new doctrine we must find past traces that anticipate it and already somehow contain it.⁴³

Is there some type of human experience in which, by delving deeper into the past of memory, this type of generative

42. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1989), 419–36.

43. *Ibid.*, 400–18.

newness occurs? This experience exists, and it is the experience of the family. There, on the one hand, spousal love, founded on the nuptial promise and on the original love of the Creator (in other words, founded on a memory), brings to light the newness of the child. And, on the other hand, the newness of the child confirms and seals the original love, reminding the spouses of their relation to the Creator of life, who formed man and woman and united them in “one flesh” (Gn 2:24).

In order to understand the importance of this familial substratum of tradition, recall that, according to Irenaeus, tradition starts not only from Jesus and flows toward the Church, but also, in a certain way, begins in Adam himself (who reminds us of the action of the Creator and was formed in the image of Christ) and continues throughout the Old Testament (inasmuch as it prefigures the Savior, from family to family, and prepares for him). It is true, on the one hand, that this whole path is interpreted in the light of Christ; but, on the other hand, what Justin Martyr said is also certain: that he would not have listened to his Lord, Jesus Christ himself, if Jesus had preached a God different from the Creator.⁴⁴ Indeed, all strata of tradition are collected in the Eucharist, where they find their harmony and their full meaning.

3.2.

A second feature that the sacramental perspective discovers in tradition is that the latter is always transmitted in a visible way, by means of matter and the body. Recall the insistence of Irenaeus on this point: tradition occurs in view of all, just as the sun shines openly and for everyone. Hence he understands that tradition always contains concrete communal practices, public professions of faith, visible ways of working; there is no tradition without traditions. Therefore, I think that it is better not to write “Tradition” (with a capital “T”), as opposed to “traditions” (with a lowercase “t”). For this distinction encourages thinking about traditions as merely the clothing of a fleshless “Tradition,” a pure, lofty idea

44. Irenaeus is the one who recorded for us this remark by Justin: *Adv. haer.* IV, 6, 2 (SCh 100, 440; ANF 1:468a).

that takes on different forms over the course of history. What really happens, instead, is that tradition lives in the traditions, that it is embodied in them and meets its fate in them: the identity of tradition is a narrative identity. Only from this perspective can we understand a genuine reform of tradition that can cope with the dead branches.

This concrete form of tradition is precisely what ensures that the Gospel is universal. For the universal here is not obtained by abstraction from the flesh, like the universality of ideas or of reason. On the contrary, the universal is rooted in the corporeal relations that unite human beings with one another, thus coming to be a concrete, familial universality. This is precisely the way in which the concept of “humanity” is universal, in other words, not just because we share the same definition of human being, but because we are connected by bonds of kinship in the body, which allows us to speak about the “human family.” It is remarkable that, in order to reach an ancestor common to all the human beings alive today, it takes only a few thousand years.⁴⁵

The foundation of this sacramental form in which the Gospel is transmitted is the Incarnation of the Word. The Spirit, who continually renews the deposit that has been transmitted, always acts within the framework inaugurated by the life of Jesus in the flesh. Something analogous happens in marriage, where the loving relation of the spouses with the flesh does not limit their love, but rather, on the contrary, makes possible its fruit in the child. To eliminate the reference to the flesh, in seeking to liberate tradition from formulas, commandments, and practices, is in reality to sterilize its capacity, as pure platonic love is sterile. Only the flesh is fertile, because it alone puts us in contact with the primordial source, God’s creative love, and because it alone generates from the perspective that unites human beings, and not from the perspective of the isolated decision of the sterile “ego.”

In this regard, it helps to understand the difference between the traditions of the Old and the New Testaments. Typical of the Old Covenant was a tradition centered on the letter, whereas the New Covenant follows in the Spirit. This does not

45. Douglas L. T. Rohde, Steve Olson, and Joseph T. Chang, “Modelling the Recent Common Ancestry of All Living Humans,” *Nature* 431 (2004): 562–66.

mean that the new tradition runs without a channel, proceeding from a limitless Spirit. If the New Testament has surpassed the letter, this is not because it has gone beyond all that is material, but rather because the letter has become flesh and blood, with an unprecedented realism. In other words, the passage is not from the letter to what is purely spiritual, but rather to hearts of flesh in which the Spirit writes his letter (2 Cor 3:3).

Tradition, therefore, is transmitted from flesh to flesh. The head of the priest who consecrates the Eucharist was touched by hands which, going back in time from successor to successor, and in a chain that is not very long, reach the hands of Jesus. This is the only way to preserve the unique character of the Incarnation, of the concrete presence among us of the Son of God, a visible, tangible presence. Moreover, only because tradition is bound up with a contact that affects the flesh, does its catholicity depend on personal testimony and personal encounter.

Something similar happens in the aesthetic experience of a work of art. Seeing an original is not the same as seeing a copy, even if the copy seems identical to the original. The original preserves what has been called an “aura,” because it goes back to the hands of the artist and contains a definite history or tradition.⁴⁶ In our era, because a work of art can be reproduced technologically, it can now reach the masses, but at the cost of losing its “aura” and its history. In the sacrament we have the clear presence of the “aura,” because we are in contact, through apostolic succession, from hand to hand, with the hands of Christ. Yet, at the same time, this body, the body of the Risen Lord that is lived out in the Church, has spread throughout the world and is capable of reaching everyone.

3.3.

Thirdly, given that tradition is sacramental, what is handed over in it is not only a word, but the space in which this word can resound and be understood. This means that what is handed on here is not a bare word, but rather a word united to the flesh

46. See Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1963 [1935]).

and therefore to the corporeal relations in which a human being dwells. This becomes clear if we look at the eucharistic origin of tradition. For here the words “this is my body [given] for you” in sacrifice to the Father, which summarize the mystery of Jesus, are united to the body that is handed over for those who are his own. Therefore, in order to tell whether Jesus’ teaching has been maintained over the course of time, it is not enough to look only at the content; we need to consider also the channel, which is defined in terms of the basic form of the sacraments. This is what has been called the “substance” of the sacraments, which comes from Jesus. In fact, the continuity of doctrine can be grasped only by someone who is situated within the sacraments, as though they were an auditorium conducive to hearing the harmony of all the notes. Consequently, outside the environment opened up by the Eucharist and the other sacraments it is impossible for the tradition to be handed on and received.

This sacramental environment is a communal environment, the environment of the Church. The Church, in fact, is born of the Eucharist, since “*sacramenta faciunt Ecclesiam*” (“the sacraments make the Church”).⁴⁷ In this sense we can say that what is handed on in the sacraments is the Church herself. Hence, although it is certain that the Church gives us the sacraments as the content of tradition, is it also certain that the sacraments hand the Church on to us. In fact, the primary subject of the *traditio* is Christ himself, present in the sacraments, from which the Church is born. *The sacraments hand the Church on to us, and the Church hands the sacraments on to us, in that order.* If the Church can be the subject of the tradition which transmits it whole and entire, this is because she is constituted as Church from the sacraments. She has the eucharistic form to which her children are configured with the indelible character of Baptism and Confirmation, and to which they return in Penance; in her is experienced configuration to Christ the Head in the priesthood and the taking up of conjugal love in marriage, so as to represent

47. Cf. Pseudo-Haimon, *In Psalmos* (PL 116, 248D), cited in Henri de Lubac, *Catholicisme* (Paris: Cerf, 1983), 61: “*Fontes apparuerunt. . . Ostensis sacramentis adventus, vult ostendere quid illa sacramenta faciant, scilicet Ecclesiam*” [“The sources appeared. . . The One who has come by the sacraments that were manifested, wants to manifest what those sacraments make, namely the Church”].

the love of the Lord for his Bride. Formed in the sacraments, in which the form of Jesus' life is contained, the Church transmits this same life.

Such a sacramental context is necessary in order to understand the role of the Magisterium in the service of tradition. The authority of the Magisterium and its ability to manage to "listen to [the Word of God] devotedly, guard it with dedication and expound it faithfully"⁴⁸ depends on the place on which the edifice of the Magisterium arises, which is apostolic succession, founded on the Eucharist. The role of the episcopal Magisterium is understood within this channel, inserted into the harmony of the sacraments, inasmuch as it belongs to the bishop to preside at the Eucharist. In other words, if the Magisterium can give us the correct interpretation of the received doctrine, it is because it is sacramentally configured to Christ the Head.

In summary, the sacraments, by communicating Christ's way of life to the life of believers in time, are the supporting element of the Church's tradition. Recall that we are talking about the sacraments centered on the Eucharist, which include among them the creaturely experience of marriage. Included also in this sacramental channel is the apostolic succession, since in the Eucharist the bishops have the role of representing Christ the Head and the Bridegroom of the Church. Therefore, if the grammar of spousal love is eliminated, and also if the Eucharist is separated from the concrete lives of persons, this damages the very basis for the ministry of teaching in the Church and therefore the ability of this ministry to recognize tradition. This point proves to be of great interest for the current debate surrounding *Amoris laetitia*.

48. Cf. *Dei verbum*, 10 (DH 4214, Flannery edition, 756); Cf. also Vatican Council I, *Pastor aeternus*, 4 (DH 3069–3070): "Romani autem Pontifices . . . ea tenenda definiverunt, quae sacris Scripturis et apostolicis traditionibus consentanea, Deo adiutore, cognoverant. . . . Neque enim Petri successoribus Spiritus Sanctus promissus est, ut eo revelante novam doctrinam patefacerent, sed ut, eo assistente, traditam per Apostolos revelationem seu fidei depositum sancte custodirent et fideliter exponerent" ["For their part, the Roman pontiffs . . . have defined as having to be held those matters that, with the help of God, they had found consonant with the Holy Scriptures and with the apostolic tradition. . . . For the Holy Spirit was not promised to the successors of Peter that they might disclose a new doctrine by his revelation, but rather that, with his assistance, they might reverently guard and faithfully explain the revelation or deposit of faith that was handed down through the apostles"].

CONCLUSION: A FEW CONSEQUENCES FOR THE
CURRENT DEBATE

We have shown that tradition is finely tuned to the sacraments. The sacraments have appeared as the form of tradition, or more precisely, as the necessary channel through which it can hand its content on to us intact.

I began this article by pointing out that some interpretations of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* appear to call into question this sacramental framework of the Church. 1) For example, they question the harmony between the sacraments, specifically between marriage, on the one hand, and the Eucharist and Penance, on the other hand, saying that this harmony is a theological conclusion from which it is inadvisable to draw exaggerated conclusions.⁴⁹ 2) Furthermore they deny that there must be consistency between the sacraments and the way of Christian life, so that someone who lives contrary to that way could receive them. 3) They make the economy of the sacraments subjective, so that it ceases to be a visible economy in the flesh and in history and turns instead into an economy of the isolated, self-referential conscience. 4) All this happens, moreover, by calling into question the essential properties of marriage, since analogies are drawn between it and other lifestyles contrary to spousal love, such as cohabitation or a second union after a divorce. In this way, the basic creaturely point of reference for understanding tradition is undermined: the reference point of marriage, which was taken up, purified, and transformed by Jesus so as to include it in the economy of his sacraments.

The conclusion of this essay is that these misinterpretations of *Amoris laetitia* affect not only specific contents of tradition, but also refer to its very channel. These opinions attack the very place that enables us to grasp the unity of tradition and, therefore, the ability of this same tradition to put us in contact with Christ. The matter is serious because this is the place on which the edifice of the Church's Magisterium arises. This interpretation of the pope's teachings undermines, therefore, the Petrine ministry itself, depriving it of the sacramental

49. Cf. Victor Manuel Fernández, "El capítulo VIII de *Amoris Laetitia*: lo que queda después de la tormenta," *Medellín* 43 (2017): 449–68.

basis on which it is founded so that it might place itself at the service of tradition.

The debate could have a positive outcome if it teaches us greater appreciation for the richness of what we have received in tradition. Returning to the image of Irenaeus of Lyons, it is a treasure which regenerates the very vessel that contains it. And this vessel is the fragile flesh in which Christians live, a fragile flesh which, nevertheless, proves to be capable, through the Spirit who renews it, of fidelity until death: in the baptismal vocation, in the conjugal bond, in ministerial service. By renewing this flesh, tradition, as Paul says, makes it possible for us to love Jesus Christ without having seen him and to believe in him without beholding him now (1 Pt 1:8). We find these words of the Apostle in a baptismal catechesis, of all places: the sacraments are the channel of knowledge of Jesus, so as to gladden us with his presence and to lead us to the goal of our faith (1 Pt 1:8–9).—
Translated by Michael J. Miller. □

JOSÉ GRANADOS, DCJM, is vice-president of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at the Lateran University in Rome.