

# TRADITION AS GIFT: ON THE THEOLOGIAN'S RESPONSIBILITY TO TRADITION

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“Any theology that does not serve that which we first adore and which cannot be translated into holy action is not truly theology.”



Knowledge is the possession of those living ideas of sacred things, from which alone change of heart or conduct can proceed. This awful vision is what Scripture seems to designate by the phrases “Christ in us,” “Christ dwelling in us by faith,” “Christ formed in us,” and “Christ manifesting himself unto us.” And though it is faint and doubtful in some minds, and distinct in others, as some remote object in the twilight or in the day, this arises from the circumstances of the particular mind, and does not interfere with the perfection of the gift itself.<sup>1</sup>

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1. John Henry Newman, Sermon XV, “The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine,” in *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford*, ed. James David Earnest and Gerard Tracey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 223–24.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

An article with the phrase “the theologian’s responsibility to tradition” in the title is bound to elicit knee-jerk reactions on all sides of the theological divide. Perhaps the prototypical “traditionalist”<sup>2</sup> will be relieved to hear a theologian speak up for tradition in a scene often dominated by historical-critical skepticism and “identity politics.” From the other side, one is open to the suspicion of hiding from contemporary, “real world” problems and injustices by escaping to the safety of some ideal age in the theological past. In short, what we have come to call theological progressives and conservatives tend to have fairly strong a priori assumptions about theology’s relationship to tradition; one is *either* a conservative who is out to preserve tradition *or* one is a progressive who sees the theologian’s task as “speaking truth to power.” In what follows, however, I would like to get beneath these all-too-superficial debates by taking a more fundamental look at what a Catholic means by tradition on the one hand and by theology on the other. As is always the case, there is no getting past an impasse as long as we do not understand the terms we too often carelessly throw around. What I would like to suggest in what follows is that a proper understanding of the role of tradition, not just in Catholic theology but in human life in general, will go a long way in helping to clarify both the theologian’s *de facto* relationship to tradition, and also the theologian’s task within the Church.

I will proceed with two main sections. My comments will presuppose a Catholic approach to these matters, but with the assumption that to say something genuinely Catholic is always also to say something catholic. Specifically, I will not be concerning myself directly or primarily with the differences between Protestants and Catholics over the role of tradition in theology. The two sections will set out to clarify what we mean

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2. I am using the term “traditionalist” in the colloquial rather than technical sense here, the latter referring to a theory “according to which man’s natural and individual reason is incapable of achieving knowledge of God and of the most fundamental and decisive metaphysical realities” (Robert Spaemann, *A Robert Spaemann Reader: Philosophical Essays on Nature, God, and the Human Person*, ed. and trans. D. C. Schindler and Jeanne Heffernan Schindler [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 37).

by tradition, first in a philosophical sense, and then in a more explicitly theological one. First, making use of Josef Pieper's classic study of tradition,<sup>3</sup> I will call attention to the underestimated shift that has occurred in *philosophy's* attitude toward sacred tradition. It is often taken for granted, even by Christian thinkers, that sacred tradition is extrinsic to the task of philosophy. I will make two main points in this section. First, historically speaking, a philosophy that attempts to do its work in abstraction from sacred tradition is the invention of modernity and does not characterize either the philosophy of ancient Greece or that of the Middle Ages (not to mention *Eastern* philosophy), and even modern philosophy has not actually succeeded in remaining neutral to a particular sacred tradition (namely, Christianity). Second, I will show that it is only a philosophy that no longer asks the question of being *qua* being and that therefore no longer concerns itself with the thing itself which thinks that it can dispense with the influence of sacred tradition. In short, I wish to show, in this first section, that not just theological thought but also philosophical or natural thought has an intrinsic relationship to some form of sacred tradition. An implication of this, furthermore, is that a theology that treats tradition as a merely theological problem, and not a problem of reason *per se*, will inevitably end up downplaying the place of tradition even in theology.

Second, in the more specifically theological section, I will do two things. First, I will look at the modern theological crisis in an attempt to clarify what lies at its root. Here, I will follow Maurice Blondel in his suggestion that the apparent opposite sides of the theological spectrum (what Blondel calls extrinsicists and historicists) share, at bottom, a common understanding of theological reason and, therefore, also of tradition. Next, I will draw some tentative conclusions about tradition properly understood in order to clarify its place in the theological task. Building on principles established in the first part, I will argue that tradition, rightly understood, is nothing less than the gift of divine life handed over to the Church from the Father, through the Son, and vouchsafed by the Holy Spirit, and which cannot be *reduced* to a set of doctrinal teachings, practices, and customs located

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3. Josef Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, trans. E. Christian Kopff (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008).

alongside those in found in Scripture. Understood accordingly, tradition is the fertile ground, first *given* as a gift from God, out of which all Christian practice, doctrine, and theology worthy of the name Catholic proceeds, regarding which the theologian's essential task in understanding the faith could never suffice to establish nor undermine.

## 2. TOWARD A FUNDAMENTAL UNDERSTANDING OF TRADITION

No matter what weight we assign to antiquity, truth must always be the prime consideration, however recently it may have been discovered. Truth is older than all opinions which people may cherish about her. People misunderstand her essence, when they believe that she first came into existence when she was first discovered.<sup>4</sup>

In his characteristically witty way, G. K. Chesterton has noted two fundamentally different approaches to the relationship between human knowledge and reality:

The general fact is simple. Poetry is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea, and so make it finite. The result is mental exhaustion. . . . To accept everything is an exercise, to understand everything a strain. The poet only desires exaltation and expansion, a world to stretch himself in. The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.<sup>5</sup>

From the context it is clear that Chesterton does not mean poetry in the technical or limited sense, but something like a poetic vision, one which, of course, includes reason. It is a vision which accepts reality as a mysterious given that is beyond reason's comprehension, but which is hospitable to reason's questions. That is why the poet *does* "ask to get his head into the heavens." The

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4. From Blaise Pascal, *Great Shorter Works of Pascal*, trans. Emile Caillet and John C. Blankenagel (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948), 55, cited in Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, 6.

5. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1908), 29.

point is that he is not foolish enough to think that he can contain reality in his head. Chesterton, in short, is talking about the very conditions within which reason operates and actually echoes a statement made by Thomas Aquinas: “The reason, however, the philosopher may be likened to the poet is this: both are concerned with the marvelous.”<sup>6</sup> More recently, D. C. Schindler has pointed out a common characteristic among the giants of modern philosophy: they downplay what is *given* to reason. They emphasize reason’s activity *upon* the external world, or perhaps even reason in abstraction from the sensible world, while downplaying the fact that reason would have nothing to work with if there were no reality given, or if the reality given were in fact fundamentally opaque to reason. Indeed, in Schindler’s view reason is itself part of the gift of the reality that is given, and should not therefore be understood as standing outside of or over and against the world “out there.”<sup>7</sup>

It may not at first be obvious what the above view of reason has to do with tradition, but an interesting link arises in Josef Pieper’s *Tradition: Concept and Claim*. Before making that connection, however, we should have some sense of what we mean by tradition, what it is, that is, that would qualify as the specifying difference that makes tradition tradition, as distinct from, say, merely passing on teaching or customs. “Tradition,” Pieper tells us, “is a question of preserving through all change the identity of something *presupposed* and *preexisting*, against the passage of time and in spite of it.”<sup>8</sup> Notice that such a definition presupposes that truth is something given to thought rather than something that thought produces. Pieper calls attention to the fact that Plato’s dialogues make at the very least an implicit distinction between tradition and dialogue/dialectic when, periodically, and often suddenly, “an act of tradition takes place.”<sup>9</sup> We may note the difference here between Socrates’s conversa-

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6. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s “Metaphysics,”* trans. John P. Rowan (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, [1961] 1995), I.3.55.

7. See, especially, the various essays in D. C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013).

8. Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, 3 (emphasis mine).

9. *Ibid.*, 11.

tion with Agathon in the *Symposium*, which is a classical example of Platonic dialectic, and his later conversation with Diotima, whose teachings are of an entirely different order and put Socrates in a totally different role. Diotima is obviously passing something on to Socrates that comes *before* human reason, and is not the product of that reason, even if it can later be thought, discussed, and compared with what can be known on the basis of human reason.

Having established this much allows Pieper to specify his definition of tradition by telling us what it necessarily and essentially entails: it entails something to be handed on (and to reiterate our above point, this thing cannot be the product of human reason), someone to hand it on, and someone to receive that which has been handed on. Consider in this regard Paul's classic passage beginning at 1 Corinthians 11:23:

For I received (*parelabon*) from the Lord what I also delivered (*paredoka*) to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said . . .

He uses almost the identical formula later at 15:3: "For I delivered (*paredoka*) to you as of first importance what I also received (*parelabon*), that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures." The point here is not to introduce prematurely the question of Christian revelation, but to give an ideal example of the three aspects of tradition as Pieper articulates it. This pattern can be found in Plato in the same form: a content (say, the teaching about the true nature of *eros*), someone who has been gifted with that content who is now passing it on (say, Diotima), and someone who receives what has been given and embraces it with his whole life (say, Socrates).

This last step is important to prevent a mere ritual passing on of something that is no longer convincing to the current generation, which would fail, thereby, to be a complete act of *traditio*.<sup>10</sup> When Christianity became the dominant religion in the

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10. "It is hard to commit a more hopeless act, for instance, than to respond to a young person who asks the question why and for what reason something handed down should continue to be valued with the words 'it's just tradition.' In such an evasion, at any rate, we see that the older generation no longer pos-

Roman Empire, the pagan religion had long since been passed on in a merely rote way, so Christianity did not need to kill something that was already dead. This might also be a good time to point out that it is very difficult to pass on a tradition to the next generation when they can see no fruit of it in the lives of those who are passing it on. Socrates's life, therefore, serves as greater proof of his embrace of certain traditions than do his arguments, which are by no means, thereby, to be made light of. Newman's distinction between notional and real assent is relevant here as well, as is Blondel's philosophy of action.

For now, let us return to the question of what the classical understanding of reason mentioned above has to do with the question of tradition. First, in the places in Plato's dialogues where an appeal to tradition is made, we are always dealing with something of fundamental importance (a "big question"), the acceptance or rejection of which would be life changing. In *Gorgias* (523a) Plato affirms his acceptance of the tradition that human beings will be judged according to their deeds upon death. In *Philebus* tradition is invoked in the context of what is perhaps the most fundamental question for all philosophy and religion: the problem of the one and the many. At 30d, Socrates says, "Do not think that we have engaged in an idle discussion here, Protagoras, for it comes as a support for the thinkers of old who held the view that reason is forever the ruler over the universe."<sup>11</sup> It is not uninteresting that the participants in Plato's dialogues who find such questions to be "idle" tend to hold a dim view, also, of tradition. In *Gorgias*, for instance, Socrates suspects that the sophist Callicles will think that the tradition about the judgment of the dead is "a mere tale."<sup>12</sup> Pieper, in fact, makes a tentative list of the things received from tradition that Plato accepts, a list culled from a variety of dialogues. It includes:

that the world has arisen out of the ungrudging kindness of a creator; that God holds the beginning, middle, and end

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sesses a living image of what is handed down, and we are already dealing with what is called "bad preservation" (ibid., 15).

11. Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 418.

12. Ibid., 865 (523a).

of all things in his hands; that spirit is Lord and rules over the whole of the world; that mankind has lost its original perfection through guilt and punishment; that on the other side of death an absolutely just court awaits us all; that the soul is immortal—and so forth.<sup>13</sup>

And lest we think this regard for tradition is limited to Plato, we should recall Aristotle's nod, in the *Metaphysics*, to the fact that "it has been handed down through the early ones and very ancient ones that the divine surrounds all nature in a circle."<sup>14</sup>

So, first, it would seem that a willingness to show regard for tradition goes hand in hand with an interest in and willingness to pursue ultimate questions concerning the whole. To go back to Chesterton, the poet wishes to get his head into the heavens; he does not think that the heavens can be contained in his head. This leads to a second and related point, this time concerning the nature of reason. Respect for these very ancient traditions points us in the direction of a paradoxical understanding of human reason. First, the reason in question is humble, acknowledging the fact that reason does not have direct, empirical access to the fundamental mysteries. There is no way to prove through reason alone, for instance, that goodness will be rewarded after death. But, secondly, and herein lies the paradox, it requires a robust or, better, erotic notion of reason which is unwilling to place premature limits on the sorts of questions with which it should be concerned. To go back to Socrates, he does not think

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13. Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, 33.

14. *Metaphysics*, 1074b1, cited in Piper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, 33. The entire passage here is of interest insofar as it helps to clarify the relationship between sacred tradition (not to be confused with myth) and philosophy, even in Aristotle. "There has been handed down from people of ancient and earliest times a heritage, *in the form of a myth*, to those of later times, that these original beings [the first substances of things] are gods, and that the divine embraces the whole of nature. The rest of it was presently introduced in mythical guise for the persuasion of the masses. . . . If one were to take only the first of the things, separating it out, that they thought the primary independent things were gods, *one would regard this as having been said by divine inspiration, and . . . one would consider these opinions of those people to have been saved like holy relics up to now*" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs [Santa Fe: Green Lion Press, 1999], XII, 8, 1074b1–14 [emphasis mine]). It is philosophical reason which enables Aristotle to distinguish between what is a genuine and inspired product of sacred tradition and that which is merely mythological overlay. The reason which makes this discernment is not the source of the tradition!



that discussion about these ultimate mysteries is “idle,” even if they exceed and/or expand reason’s grasp. Such reason is at once aware that its place is within an order of reality that is larger than and precedes it, but is not content to limit itself prematurely to that which it can master. To borrow from D. C. Schindler, it is at once humble and “ecstatic,” that is, always out ahead of itself.<sup>15</sup> And it is precisely because it is oriented in a paradoxical way to that which exceeds its grasp that it is open to assistance when such assistance sheds light on its quest for wisdom. The sort of reason we are speaking about here is captured beautifully in the following quote from Gustav Siewerth:

Reason is not a power that man sets into motion by his own effort. It is instead being as being that enables reason to come to itself and to attain truth. If man believes he is able to come to think “by his own effort,” it is only because he has this empowerment and illumination, this primal harmony [*Ureinklang*] of the spirit, always already behind him. It is not he who “grasps” being; rather, all of his grasping and perception occurs only insofar as the power of being, from which *he and things emerged*, has appropriated him to himself and, in the same event, to being.<sup>16</sup>

This leads to a third point. Such reason is intrinsically linked to faith (in the broad or natural sense of the word) but is not, for all of that, irrational or fideistic. Pieper distinguishes two ways in which this classical understanding is indebted to faith. First, following Aristotle, he points out that all reason *de facto* begins in faith insofar as we all begin learning as children and must, by the very nature of things, trust those who are teaching us. This sort of faith, however, marks the *beginning* of our journey toward knowledge and is therefore only a preliminary stage.<sup>17</sup> In other words, I can come to know for myself what I accepted on faith as a child (e.g., that boiling water scalds or that eating too much chocolate causes a stomachache). But faith in a tradition, the sec-

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15. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason*, 4–21.

16. Gustav Siewerth, *Metaphysik der Kindheit* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1957), 51–52, cited in Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason*, 8 (emphasis mine).

17. See Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, 18; Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations*, 2.2 (165b3).

ond way in which reason can be related to faith, cannot be outgrown, because what is revealed in tradition is by nature beyond reason's ability to prove. "It is an essential part of the concept of tradition that no experience and no deductive reasoning can assimilate and surpass what is handed down."<sup>18</sup> But this does not mean that reason ceases to be reason or that philosophy ceases to be philosophy and now becomes religion or theology. A philosopher like Plato does not accept tradition *because* it is tradition. He must think that it makes sense of what his reason *is* capable of understanding. If tradition in this natural sense did not enlighten but contradicted what can be known through experiential reason, then it should be rejected. Acquiescence to it, then, is not "blind," even though it is accepted on the basis of authority and could not have been deduced through unaided reason.

This leads to a fourth and final point, and recall that we are answering the question of how the view of reason captured above in the Chesterton and Siewerth quotes is related to the problem of tradition. The specific question which concerns us in this fourth point is this: what happens to reason when it sees itself as self-sufficient on the one hand—when it downplays, that is, what has been *given* to reason—and when it limits its scope on the other? Again, let us turn to Pieper:

No one can accept [the above] idea of tradition whose interpretation of human beings holds that it is contrary to the nature and dignity of their intelligence to treat information about reality as true and valid which cannot be "verified" either by experience or by rational arguments.<sup>19</sup>

We must be careful here to recall the point above about philosophy's not accepting something from tradition *just because* it is from tradition. The philosopher's reason is already reaching out by nature toward an understanding of the whole. The philosopher, in this classical view, can get a glimpse of this whole by virtue of the fact that the parts both present more than mere parts—that is, they contain the whole in a partial way—and because what is contingent cannot account for existence itself. Following Hans

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18. *Ibid.*, 19.

19. Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, 24–25.

Urs von Balthasar, we could say that metaphysics—that part of philosophy that concerns itself explicitly with the question of being *qua* being—is born out of a radical reflection on the contingency of all things (including ourselves), coupled with the rational insight into the fact that the sum total of contingent things is not sufficient to account for existence itself.<sup>20</sup> But none of this means that philosophy is thereby self-sufficient. The reason that the whole has been given to reason in the first place, that, put differently, there is something rather than nothing, is quite simply not within reason's reach. Being has been given, including the being of the reasoner (!), and there is a whylessness to this that must first elicit our wonder. Reason concerns, to go back to Aquinas, what is *marvelous*. We can now add to this that the reason that downplays what has been given will precisely be the sort of reason that finds something like revelation simply foreign to reason and philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

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20. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "A Résumé of My Thought," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 469: "We start with a reflection on the situation of man. He exists as a limited being in a limited world, but his reason is open to the unlimited, to all of being. The proof consists in the recognition of his finitude, of his contingency: I am, but I could not-be. Many things which do not exist could exist. Essences are limited, but being is not. That division, the 'real distinction' of Saint Thomas, is the source of all the religious and philosophical thought of humanity. It is not necessary to recall that all human philosophy (if we abstract the biblical domain and its influence) is essentially religious and theological at once, because it poses the problem of the Absolute Being, whether one attributes to it a personal character or not."

21. In Balthasar's "general introduction" to *Theo-Logic*, written in 1985, he states the following in the context of discussing the relationship between philosophy and revelation: "Now, at this point three different possibilities present themselves. First, one can unconsciously take over the theological data inherent in all philosophy, as Plato, Aristotle, and other pagan philosophers did. Second, one can consciously reject them, secularize them, and reduce them to immanent philosophical truth, a move that not only characterizes the method of modern rationalism, but also marks more recent developments in idealism, mysticism, and existentialism not to mention a purely philosophical personalist theory of value. Third, one can acknowledge and accept the indelible presence of such theologoumena at the heart of concrete philosophical thinking. This is the Christian option. The first way is no longer accessible to us. The second way—the secularization of theology—entails a negative prejudice against the possibility or actuality of divine revelation, *which it would have to justify theologically* even before venturing to construct a so-called pure philosophy that presumes to treat, and to rework, the truth of revelation as if it somehow belonged by nature to man. For the time being, then, the only viable option

But the second sub-question concerns the related question of reason's arbitrary self-limitation. What happens to reason when it downplays the sheer gift of being on the one hand and limits itself, thereby, to what it *can* master and prove? In another classic work, Josef Pieper helps us to answer this question as well. He offers a list of three modern statements from Descartes, John Dewey, and The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, respectively:

The first statement advocates that the place of the old theoretical philosophy should be taken by a new, practical philosophy, "which allows us to become the masters and owners of nature." The second statement declares all the achievements of human knowledge to be like tools in the great endeavor of "intellectual industry." The purpose of all mental exertion would be to safeguard life and the enjoyment of life. Philosophy would set out not to understand the world but to dominate it. The third sentence declares: "Any scientist who deals with abstract problems must never forget that the scope of all science consists in satisfying the needs of society."<sup>22</sup>

The move arbitrarily to limit reason's scope seems inevitably to have two results. First, there is a fixation on practical improvements, as if one does not have to have some sense of the truth concerning human nature before one can know what is good for human society. Secondly, there is a tendency to mistake the part that one has limited oneself to for the very whole to which reason has just been denied access. Think for instance of the utopian tendencies in modern political thought, in spite of the fact that modern political thought begins by radically limiting the nature of the political from questions of the good to questions of the expedient or contractually legal. When one defends liberalism, capitalism, or even modern science by saying its proof is to be found in the fact that it works, one is inevitably

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is the third way—to describe the truth of the world in its prevalently worldly character, without, however, ruling out the possibility that the truth we are describing in fact includes elements that are immediately of divine, supernatural provenance" (*Truth of the World*, vol. 1, *Theo-Logic*, trans. Adrian J. Walker [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000], 12 [emphasis mine]).

22. Josef Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 29–30.

begging the question of what is meant by “works.” But think also of the tendency of modern evolutionary theory to hold that it explains many, if not all, of the traditional questions addressed by metaphysics and religion. This almost inevitable inability on the part of evolutionary theorists to stick to the rather menial sorts of questions that science is by nature designed to answer is rooted in the fact that human reason is ordered to the whole and will end up saying something about it whether it intends to or not.

I will now draw some conclusions from the foregoing regarding the role of tradition in human life and thought. When human reason is not prematurely short-circuited in its natural orientation to the truth of the whole, it will tend to do two things at once. First, unsatisfied that that which is contingent explains itself, it will press on for a more satisfactory answer to the question of the ultimate cause of the whole. It will do so, however, realizing that human reason must begin with the world given to the senses and must therefore work its way tentatively to a realm that stretches it beyond its natural field of operation. Second, since it is ordered to that which naturally exceeds its ability, it will not be afraid of supernatural explanations, provided they enlighten rather than contradict what it can know through reason. Such explanations will not be accepted, then, simply because they are traditional or even sacred, but will not be rejected simply because they cannot be proved by reason alone either. This, thus far, summarizes what I have been saying, with the help of Josef Pieper and others, about the relationship between natural reason and tradition.

### 3. TRADITION AND THE TASK OF THEOLOGY

#### 3.1. *The crisis of contemporary theology*

A theology, on the other hand, which does not concern itself before anything else with the task of preserving through the ages the divine revelation that has been proclaimed to mankind alive and identical, which perhaps instead of this is occupied with reflecting and interpreting in a relevant way the religious impulse of the age (or what are taken for religious impulses)—if possible using

biblical concepts and terminology—such a theology does not deserve the name “theology.”<sup>23</sup>

One of the fundamental points of Balthasar’s forays into theological aesthetics is that the person who has lost the ability to see the beauty of being shining forth in the various beings which are given to our senses will be ill-equipped to see the glory of the invisible God shining forth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, or the glory of Jesus Christ shining forth in the various writings of the canonical scriptures or in the tradition of the Church. The implication here is that if our natural vision becomes impoverished, it redounds upon our supernatural vision as well. Of course, the supernatural gift of faith is required to recognize God in Jesus Christ or Jesus Christ in the four gospels, but the supernatural gift of faith has its analogue and forerunner in the natural gift of reason and its ability to see what is invisible in itself in the various visible things which confront our senses. It is not surprising, then, that a theology which downplayed revelation followed not too far on the heels of a philosophy which downplayed what was *given* to reason. And it should not surprise us too much that a philosophy that tried to purge itself of any influence from sacred tradition would give birth to a theology that increasingly marginalized the role of tradition/revelation in its endeavors, a theology which, in turn, became more and more confused concerning the unifying, first principle that accounted for its very essence. Adrian J. Walker has diagnosed the problem, with his characteristic precision, accordingly:

Catholic theology is in the throes of an identity crisis, because Catholic theologians work under no overarching consensus about the first principle of theological intelligence. I take it for granted that this fissiparous pluralism is a bad thing. This is not to deny, of course, that truth is “symphonic,” as Balthasar puts it in the title of one of his books. Nevertheless, the “sym” of “symphony” presupposes a unitary principle. Otherwise, legitimate theological plurality would not be symphony, but cacophony. Such cacophony, moreover, would both reflect and result in what might be called “theological emotivism.” As Alasdair MacIntyre explains in *After*

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23. Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, 47.

*Virtue*, “[e]motivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* the expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.” Similarly, what I am calling theological emotivism is the conviction, expressed or unexpressed, that theological judgments are essentially expressions of incommensurable, pre-rational commitments that, as such, cannot be impartially evaluated according to universally recognized standards, viz., in the light of a single, overarching principle of theological intelligence. *Theological emotivism thus obscures the reasonableness of the Catholic tradition and thereby calls into question the very existence of theology as “faith seeking understanding.”*<sup>24</sup>

The “theological emotivism” which characterizes what Walker calls contemporary theology’s “identity crisis” has its roots, in fact, in the modernism–historicism which was already giving rise to a similar crisis at the turn to the twentieth century. The modernism which Blondel addresses so famously in his *History and Dogma* in fact had two characteristics which sat rather uncomfortably together and which mimic in the theological sphere a similar schizophrenia that had occurred centuries earlier in the philosophical sphere. Namely, theological modernism made the following double move: first, it tended to reduce revelation to the subjective, to the level of feelings or to *experience* understood in an overly subjectivist,<sup>25</sup> or, to go back to Walker,

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24. Adrian J. Walker, “Love Alone: Hans Urs von Balthasar as Master of Theological Renewal,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 517–18 (emphasis mine).

25. In his masterful study of Blondel’s life and thought, Oliva Blanchette notes three different attitudes at the time of Blondel’s work on *History and Dogma* that characterize the thought of his age. These include a false objectivism, a false subjectivism (and it is this second attitude that is our current concern), and an inordinate agnosticism: “One was the claim that the idea is simply equal to the real, like a static or photographic reproduction of the real, which left nothing more to be thought. This attitude could take the form of realism or idealism, but in either case it could be thought of as a philosophy of the object, of which neo-Thomism was a primary example at the end of the nineteenth century, the neo-Thomism he found too domineering and intolerant of other forms of rational thought. The second attitude was the counterpart of the first, *where the idea was thought of as not equal to the real, but rather as the construction of a new reality, a sort of epiphenomenon. This was the philosophy of the subject, but one that drifted into fideism, like a kite cut loose from its string.* Third

*emotivist* manner; next, it tended to reduce the theologian's task to the historical-critical investigation of the sources of Christianity.<sup>26</sup> While these two movements seem to go in opposite directions, one subjectivist and the other objectivist, they in fact mirror modernity's tendency to limit reason to the empirical/factual on the one hand, meanwhile rendering moral and aesthetic judgments to the realm of the subjective. As Balthasar, sounding a lot like Blondel, puts it in *Theo-Logic*:

Modern rationalism, attempting to narrow the range of truth to a supposedly isolable core of pure theory, has exiled the good and the beautiful from the domain of the rationally verifiable, relegating them to arbitrary *subjectivity* or to a world of private belief and personal taste. As a result, the picture of being, the unified view of the world, is torn to shreds, so that any real conversation about truth becomes impossible. Discourse remains at the level of the generically accessible, hence ultimately trivial, while the deepest questions of truth, which need decision and taste even to be seen, are buried under the silence of a false modesty. If truth lacks decision, then decision, the personal decision that determines one's view of the world, lacks truth.<sup>27</sup>

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was the agnostic claim that the idea was mystery, a philosophy of universal relativity and positivity" (Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010], 169 [emphasis mine]).

26. This strange blend of historical-critical objectivism on the one hand combined with a subjectivist-experiential understanding of the nature of revelation on the other can be found in stark form in Adolf von Harnack's correspondence with Erik Peterson. After disputing Peterson's notion that Christianity requires an "absolute, formal authority," Harnack states that all that is needed in fact is "the experience and faith-witnessing of inspired persons evoking resonance and light in other persons" (Erik Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, ed. and trans. Michael J. Hollenrich [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011], 17). He goes on to state that "Anabaptism, Pietism, Enlightenment Lutheranism, Schleiermacherism, at one and the same time, [are] all legitimate children of Protestantism. *They're legitimate in the sense that they continue consistently the enlightened and subjective-religious line of Protestantism*" (21 [emphasis mine]). And, finally, "I can only *welcome* the development that leads more and more to independence and a purely intentional community [*Gesinnungsgemeinschaft*] in the sense—I do not shrink from this—of Quakerism and Congregationalism" (22 [emphasis original]).

27. Balthasar, *Truth of the World*, 29–30.



What I am trying to highlight here is the ironic and intrinsic connection between modern rationalism and subjectivism.

Before turning our attention to an approach to tradition which would provide an alternative to this modern schizophrenia, a few more words about the current state of confusion are in order. It is helpful to recall, at this point, Blondel's profound contribution to overcoming a similar crisis in the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century between what he dubbed the extrinsicists and historicists. While the two sides of this divide seem, on the surface, to be alternatives, Blondel claims that they share an underlying view of reality which artificially separates the material from the spiritual, the historical from the meaningful/universal, facts from dogmas, and the natural from the supernatural. It would do us well to hear some of Blondel's specific charges:

All they [the extrinsicists] ask of the facts [of revelation] is that they should serve as signs to the senses and as common-sense proofs. Once the signs have been supplied, an elementary argument deduces from them the divine character of the whole to which these signifying facts belong. . . . [W]hat was considered was their accidental, *extrinsic* and generic character; the aspect in which a phenomenon, it matters little what, appears miraculous or supernatural. . . . This means to say that a sign, a label, is simply detached from the facts and placarded at the entry to the dogmatic fortress. But it is noteworthy that this label remains external both to the events [of salvation history], which only support it arbitrarily, and to the ideas themselves, which accept it from outside, as an adventitious and empirical fact . . . for, whether this or that miracle is involved, provided it is *a* miracle, the argument remains the same. . . . Thus the relation of the sign to the thing signified is extrinsic, the relation of the facts to the theology superimposed upon them is extrinsic, and extrinsic too is the link between our thought and our life and the truths proposed to us from the outside. . . . [T]he ageless facts are without local colour, vanish, as the result of a sort of perpetual Docetism, into a light that casts no shadow, and disappear beneath the weight of the absolute by which we are crushed.<sup>28</sup>

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28. Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 226–29.

What is missing in all of this, according to Blondel, is the fact that God reveals himself to human beings in human history, in the particular acts of a particular historical human being. Within the acts and words of this person lie a surplus of meaning that can never be tapped out. What Blondel finds missing in both extrinsicism and historicism is the twofold truth that God *reveals* himself in the concrete (in time and space, and through a particular person) and that God reveals himself in the *concrete*. The extrinsicist runs afoul of this truth by looking at the specific words and actions of salvation history only long enough to distill from them timeless dogmas, so that any contemplative return to the sources or the need to see them lived out becomes *de facto* unnecessary. “Borrowing a phrase from Loisy, Blondel points out that this attitude gives the impression of people who think they know everything before having examined anything.”<sup>29</sup> The charge of Docetism is central in this regard, insofar as we have a bypassing of the historical, temporal in order to arrive directly at the supernatural, eternal.

It may seem that the simple antidote to such an approach, then, is the historicism of Loisy, but Blondel sees the same mentality at root in this approach as well.

For, in the very act of coming forward as the impartial expression of free and disinterested research, and still more so when it takes its stand in opposition to the old methods, historicism . . . cannot be fully understood except by reference to the contrasting thesis [i.e., extrinsicism], the dangers of which it claims to parry, but which in many respects it only transposes, thus aggravating the evil by the remedy, and adding a good deal not only of pseudo-philosophy but of philosophy which is false.<sup>30</sup>

Entering into the details of Blondel’s profound and subtle critique of the historical-critical treatment of Christian sources would take us too far afield, but a few observations should get us to the heart of the matter. First, the historical-critic, like the extrinsicist, separates facts from dogmas. If the extrinsicist does this through bypassing actual events in order to get to the su-

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29. Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life*, 196.

30. Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, 231.

pernatural truth indicated therein, the historicist thinks he can bracket the internal or spiritual meaning of events and focus only on the events themselves and their mechanistically conceived causes and effects. The problem is not with a historical approach with its rightful autonomy bracketing questions of the whole for methodological reasons in order to get a better focus on the part; the problem comes with thinking that such bracketing does not affect the very part which is being examined, thereby giving the impression that the whole is only extrinsically related to the part. "What the historian does not see, and what he must recognize as escaping him, is the spiritual reality, the activity of which is not wholly represented or exhausted by the historical phenomenon."<sup>31</sup> Notice again Blondel's sense of the *surplus* of meaning *in* the events of history. Of course the historian can, as, for example Loisy did, simply plead that he does not intend to say anything about the whole, that this is a task for the philosopher or theologian. The danger here is twofold. First, it gives the impression that a view of the whole comes from the side of the subject, and is not contained in the parts themselves, and, even if such a view were true, it would not be philosophically neutral. But this lands us right back into emotivism. Second, it underestimates the fact that the person doing history is a human being, and that human beings have a natural impetus to give an account of the whole. What invariably happens, in short, is that, once the whole has been bracketed from the part in the naïve way of the historical-scientist, a whole is reconstructed which is no more than the sum of its parts. This can be seen, especially, in the so-called first quest for the historical Jesus where the philosophical prejudices of liberalism provided the framework, i.e., the view of the whole, within which the individual events of the life of Jesus were understood. As Blondel sees it:

To claim to constitute the science of history without any speculative preoccupation, or even to suppose that the humblest details of history could be, in the strict sense of the word, a simple matter of observation, is to be influenced by prejudices on the pretext of attaining to an impossible neutrality—prejudices such as everyone inevitably has so long as he has not attained a conscious view of his own

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31. *Ibid.*, 237.

attitude of mind and subjected the postulates on which his researches are based to a methodical criticism. In default of an explicit philosophy, a man ordinarily has an unconscious one.<sup>32</sup>

For all of Blondel's dalliances with modern philosophy, what is being proposed here as a critique of both "traditionalist" extrinsicism and "modernist" historicism is a retrieval, although a chastened one, of the metaphysical realism of Plato and Aristotle along with the sacramental/symbolic worldview of the Fathers and high Scholastics.<sup>33</sup> I say chastened because Blondel was in fact a champion of the newfound appreciation for the proper autonomy of historical science. What he was not prepared to sanction, however, is that such a science could ever be neutral with regard to the meaning of the whole. Short of a good metaphysic, it was unwittingly (or not!) bound to import a bad one.

Let us now return to the predicament of contemporary theology noted above. It is well known that Blondel's method, although heavily criticized in his own day by the theological establishment, ended up, through students like Gaston Fessard, Jean Daniélou, and Henri de Lubac, entering into the mainstream of Catholic theology, especially during and since the Second Vatican Council. This is especially true of his critique of extrinsicism, and this in terms of a new appreciation for the intrinsic relationship between nature and grace. But it is precisely in terms of this difficult relationship that new problems have ensued in ways that mirror the schizophrenia noted above. On the one hand, de Lubac's critique of the nature-grace extrinsicism of neo-Scholasticism has held the day in the mainstream of Catholic theology. Unfortunately, it has given birth, especially in Rahner's less careful students, but not without fault in Rahner's

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32. Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, 237.

33. Speaking of this time in Blondel's life (1899 to be exact; the essay that we have been quoting dates from 1904), Blanchette says the following: "Blondel was beginning to discover St. Thomas for himself, long before he read interpretations by Rousselot and other commentators able to adapt to the modern critical view of philosophy, and he was not finding himself at odds with what he was reading. At one point, with reference to the *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, qq. 171-174, he notes, no doubt with some glee, that for Aquinas there is no revelation that is merely received and repeated passively. Adherence implies moving with a revelation" (Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life*, 179).

own theology,<sup>34</sup> to a virtual elimination of any distinction between nature and grace whatsoever. It is a “world of grace,” we are told. Ironically, what had originally worried Blondel and de Lubac about extrinsicism paving the way for secularism, insofar as everything that has to do with Christ no longer had any bearing on “this” world, was now being introduced in a new way by declaring what was secular to be already graced, and this without the careful distinctions that characterize de Lubac’s work. De Lubac alludes to this danger in the preface of his *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, published in 1965, right at the close of the Second Vatican Council.

On the one hand, though the dualist—or, perhaps better, separatist—thesis has finished its course, it may be only just beginning to bear its bitterest fruit. As fast as professional theology moves away from it, it becomes so much more widespread in the sphere of practical action. . . . Today . . . secularism, running its course, is beginning to enter the minds even of Christians. They too seek to find harmony with all things based upon an idea of nature which might be acceptable to a deist or an atheist: everything that comes from Christ, everything that should lead to him, is pushed so far into the background as to look like disappearing for good.<sup>35</sup>

The only thing that would have to be added to make this quote more applicable to the current situation is to note that even much of our theology today is little more than individual or (marginalized) group experience, sociology, and politics masquerading as theology. At the risk of oversimplification, we are faced here with a naturalization of the supernatural. The secularization that de Lubac fears above to have entered into the “practical action” of modern Christians has also now entered into much contemporary theology.

And yet, as indicated above, there is an “on the other hand” as well. If giving supernatural status to that which is natu-

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34. See, for instance, Joseph Ratzinger’s astute critique of Rahner in *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 122–30, 161–71.

35. Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 15.

ral (and even sinful) gives expression to an overreach on the part of nature, contemporary theology is also still marked by what amounts to an underreach in terms of its self-understanding of the theological task. As David L. Schindler puts it in his important introduction to the 1998 English edition of de Lubac's *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, while the dualist thesis is hardly defended in contemporary theology (we may note in passing that this may no longer be the case), "a 'softer,' or what may be called 'methodological,' version of the 'pure nature' theory remains widespread."<sup>36</sup> We can see evidence of this, Schindler tells us, in the attempt to find common ground in the public square by strategically abstracting from theological content so as to find a common basis for dialogue in a pluralistic society. More to our point, he goes on:

Something analogous happens in the academy: each of its disciplines involves a certain methodical abstraction: "x" must be temporarily bracketed in order to get clear first about "y." This methodical abstraction has probably been most resolutely practiced in the "natural" or "physical" sciences, but the pertinent point is that all the disciplines, in some significant sense, characteristically bracket Revelation, or the Christian Fact, for critical-methodological purposes.<sup>37</sup>

Schindler, like Blondel above, is not denying the legitimacy of the proper division of the disciplines or even the legitimacy of certain methodological abstractions for strategic or methodological reasons. He explains this well:

The point, and it is fundamental for de Lubac, is that this abstraction must not be taken to imply that the order of grace is to be subsequently (simply) *added* to what has been first abstracted. . . . The fact that the "superaddition" occurs now for methodological reasons does not render it any less problematic as a false abstraction, hence as wrongly autonomous, relative to the order of grace. . . . The crucial question is whether, in abstracting . . . one remains dynamically open . . . to the realities of grace and sin that are always-already operative in the one historical order. The fact that the realities of grace and sin may sometimes . . . be left (*temporarily*) unthematic does not mean that

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36. *Ibid.*, xxix.

37. *Ibid.*

these realities in the meantime cease to operate, both in the inquiring subject and in the object of inquiry!<sup>38</sup>

Let us now return to the central point of this section. Contemporary theology is suffering from an identity crisis that stems from a twofold error that moves in separate directions: a falsely objectivist one (just criticized by Schindler, echoing Blondel above) and in a falsely subjectivist/emotivist one (noted by Walker in the quotation that began this section). This double move mimics the move in modern philosophy which reduces knowledge to the realm of the factual, thereby giving the subject a sort of absolute mastery over that which he studies, while denying any possibility of ascertaining the truth, goodness, and beauty of the whole. In short, theology is still suffering from a false adherence to the fact-value separation that characterizes modern and even postmodern philosophy. In what remains of this essay, I would like to suggest that the robust theology of tradition, found in theologians like Blondel, Newman, Ratzinger, and Congar and expressed officially in *Dei verbum*, can provide us a way out of this theological crisis.

### 3.2. *Recovering the full meaning of tradition*

A truly supernatural teaching is only viable and conceivable if the initial gift is a seed capable of progressive and continual growth. The divine and human Word of Christ did not fix itself in immobility. Jesus wrote only in the sand and impressed his words only on the air.<sup>39</sup>

[True reform comes about through] an appeal made by a less perfect tradition to one more perfect; the appeal made by a shallower tradition to the one more profound; the withdrawal of tradition to reach a new depth, to carry out research at a deeper level; a return to the source, in the literal sense.<sup>40</sup>

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38. De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, xxx–xxxii.

39. Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, 275.

40. Charles Péguy, speech of January 25, 1959, cited in Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 6.

All that was said in the first part of this paper about the relationship between reason and sacred tradition takes on a new meaning when we enter into the explicitly theological realm. Not only does the God of Christianity inspire prophets to reveal truths that are not accessible to reason alone, but the God of Christianity takes on flesh in order to reveal himself to human beings in and through an unabridged human nature. There has been a decided tendency since the Council of Trent to think of tradition as revealed teachings that have been passed on orally alongside those which are contained in Scripture.<sup>41</sup> Such an understanding, while not simply incorrect, results in a drastic reduction of the fuller concept of tradition that is found throughout the Church's history. For that fuller understanding,<sup>42</sup> tradition is not first and foremost about a set of things that Catholics are required to believe but which are not contained in Scripture; rather, tradition is a "handing over" of nothing less than divine life.<sup>43</sup> It is first a

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41. Council of Trent, Sess. 4, c. 1 (April 8, 1546): Denz., 783, cited in Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, 40. For a brief discussion of the decision to go with "et" rather than "partim . . . partim," see *ibid.*, 40–44. For a more thorough treatment, see Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967), 156–69; Joseph Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 41–89; George Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 195–209.

42. My claim is that this fuller understanding of tradition as gift can account for the important distinction between Scripture and tradition without reducing tradition in the way in which we have been describing. In *Meaning and Tradition*, Congar gives ample evidence to this fuller understanding going back to the Apostolic Fathers, running through the Fathers and Middle Ages all the way up to Bossuet. Note the following quotes as a small sample: Clement of Rome, "The apostles have been dispatched to us by the Lord Jesus Christ like the bearers of good tidings. Jesus Christ was sent by God. Christ, therefore, comes from God, and the apostles come from Christ; these two acts result fittingly from God's will;" Tertullian, "We must keep what the Churches have received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ and Christ from God;" Bossuet, "The tradition to which I allude here as interpreter of God's law, is an unwritten doctrine coming from God and preserved in the feelings and universal practice of the Church" (all cited in Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, 10–13).

43. "Tradition is the offering by which the Father's gift is communicated to a great number of people throughout the world, and down the successive generations, so that a multitude of people, physically separated from it by space and time, are incorporated in the same unique, identical reality, which is the



matter of the Father handing the Son over to the world in order to offer his very life for the life of the world. This self-giving can be spoken of, as I just have, in terms of life—e.g., God gives us a share in the very life of the Trinity in the sacraments—or in terms of truth—God shares his very self-knowledge with us in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. As the gospel of Matthew puts it, “All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Mt 11:27).

*Dei verbum*, therefore, rightly places the theology of tradition within the broader theology of revelation, and places the doctrine of revelation in a decidedly trinitarian and christological context.

After God had spoken many times and in various ways through the prophets, “in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:1–2). For he sent his Son, the eternal Word who enlightens all men, to dwell among men and to tell them about the inner life of God. Hence, Jesus Christ, sent as “a man among men,” “speaks the words of God” (Jn 3:34), and accomplishes the saving work which the Father gave him to do (cf. Jn 5:36; 17:4). As a result, he himself—to see him is to see the Father (cf. Jn 14:9)—completed and perfected Revelation and confirmed it with divine guarantees.<sup>44</sup>

This double embedding, first of the doctrine of tradition within the doctrine of revelation, and then of the doctrine of revelation within the doctrine of the Incarnation, stands as a safeguard against what Ratzinger has called “the later process [after Trent] of historicizing and materializing the concept of revelation.”<sup>45</sup>

It was precisely this truncated version of tradition that Blondel saw as being presupposed by both the extrinsicists and historicists of his day. “The usual idea evoked by the word Tra-

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Father’s gift, and above all the saving truth, the divine Revelation made in Jesus Christ” (Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, 12).

44. *Dei verbum*, 4, in *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents: Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, Fourth Printing, 1998).

45. Ratzinger, *God’s Word*, 87.

dition is that of a transmission, principally by word of mouth, of historical facts, received truths, accepted teachings, hallowed practices and ancient customs.”<sup>46</sup> He also gives us a clear sense of what Ratzinger means by the “historicizing and materializing” of a great deal of post-Tridentine Catholic theology. According to this common misunderstanding:

[T]radition only reports things explicitly said, explicitly prescribed or deliberately performed . . . ; it furnishes nothing which cannot or could not be translated into written language, nothing which is not directly and integrally convertible into intellectual expression: so that as we complete our collection of all that former centuries . . . confided to memory. . . . Tradition, it would seem, becomes superfluous.<sup>47</sup>

But such a view of tradition actually undermines what tradition is in its essence. It is precisely because what God has revealed of himself in Jesus Christ is an inexhaustible and life-giving mystery that Scripture cannot exhaust the fullness of revelation. “But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (Jn 21:25).

As such, *Dei verbum* astutely refuses to treat tradition, first and foremost, as a separate source of revelation, distinct from Scripture. Indeed, it works hard to locate both Scripture and tradition within the one self-giving revelation of the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit.<sup>48</sup>

Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both

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46. Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, 265.

47. *Ibid.*, 266.

48. Ratzinger makes the point as well: “To make further progress, it will therefore be necessary to deepen our approach, not being preoccupied with such superficial implications as the sufficiency or insufficiency of Scripture, but presenting as a whole the overall problem of the mode of presence of the revealed word among the faithful. Then we can see that we have to reach beyond the positive sources of Scripture and tradition, to their inner source: the revelation, the living word of God, from which Scripture and tradition both spring and without which neither can be grasped in the importance they have for faith” (Ratzinger, *God’s Word*, 50).

of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.<sup>49</sup>

Tradition is not, first, then to be understood as additional information, but as the never-ending fruit of the surplus or *excessus* of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. "The Word of revelation infinitely surpasses all that the word that testifies can possibly contain; and this superfluity becomes available to the Church in the living Eucharistic presence of Christ; the necessary reflection of this vitality in verbal form is the principle of tradition."<sup>50</sup> Tradition is required, in short, precisely because Scripture cannot contain in an exhaustive way all that God has to give. Tradition is the unfolding of God's self-giving through time.

Before turning brief attention to the role of the theologian in response to the fuller notion of tradition just outlined, a few more important details are in order. First, tradition as we are describing it here concerns tradition at its heart or center: that is, God's handing over of himself to the world in his Son. It is out of this that various traditions (now plural) accumulate at various times and places in the Church. Some of these traditions prove to be quite helpful in making tradition in the primary sense available to people of different times, places, and cultures. Some, however, work at one time, but then lose their efficacy. It is the same Spirit who leads the Church into a deeper understanding of the faith "delivered once and for all" (cf. Jude 3) that

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49. *Dei verbum*, 9.

50. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, vol. 1, *Explorations in Theology*, trans. A. V. Littledale and Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 19.

*assists* the Church in discerning which traditions are dispensable and which are not. As we shall see, the theologian can play an important role here.

Next, tradition, in the proper sense, was given to the Church and is vouchsafed for her by the Spirit. We can properly say that it is “all there” in that initial outpouring. But what is given is infinitely rich and can never be adequately grasped by the Church at any given moment of her journey through time. The Church grows in understanding it through the leading of the Holy Spirit. There is a “conservative” and “progressive” aspect here that simply must be held together. To be a *traditionalist* or a *progressive* is precisely to turn one’s back on tradition in its truest sense. Blondel is especially helpful on this point:

In brief, whenever the testimony of Tradition has to be invoked to resolve one of the crises of growth in the spiritual life of Christians, it presents the conscious mind with elements previously held back in the depths of faith and practiced, rather than expressed, systematized or reflected upon. This power of conservation and preservation also instructs and initiates. Turned lovingly [and not first critically!] towards the past where its treasure lies, it moves towards the future, where it conquers and illuminates. It has a humble sense of faithfully recovering even what it thus discovers. It does not have to innovate because it possesses its God and its all; but it has always to teach something new because it transforms what is implicit and “enjoyed” into something explicit and known. . . . However paradoxical it may sound, one can therefore maintain that Tradition anticipates and illuminates the future and is disposed to do so by the effort which it makes to remain faithful to the past. . . . As against those who offer us a Christianity so divine that there is nothing human, living or moving about it, and those who involve it so deeply in historical contingencies and make it so dependent upon natural factors that it retains nothing but a diffused sort of divinity, one must show it to be both more concrete and more universal, more divine and more human, than words can express.<sup>51</sup>

In short, a proper understanding of tradition militates against innovation and clamoring for novelty as much as it militates against

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51. Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, 267–68, 286.

a theology content simply to repeat the past. The faith is living and often finds expression in ways that are surprising and even shocking to those who have understood only the letter of the Church's teaching.

Third, we would do well to remember Congar's division of tradition in the following manner: first, the Holy Spirit is the *transcendent subject of tradition*. We could say that the Holy Spirit takes what is properly the Trinity's and gives it to the Church for the sake of the world. The Holy Spirit takes from that which is God's and shares it with his creatures. It is in this sense that we can say that the whole reality was there from the beginning in a way analogous to the way in which an entire oak tree is already in the acorn. This prevents any sort of simple novelty in the Church. "The grace and truth of the Gospel has been fixed once and for all, at least with regard to its essential features . . . ; it is useless to expect or create other forms. . . . The special task of the Spirit is to ensure from within that many different people down the centuries and scattered over the surface of the globe share in this unique form of truth and life."<sup>52</sup>

Then we have the Church (and this is still an unpacking of Congar's division of tradition) as the *visible and historical subject of tradition*. While it is a mistake to equate the Church with the hierarchy, it is an equally serious mistake to deny the hierarchy's unique role in handing on the faith:

Within the body of Christians, that is, the Church, the hierarchy, following the apostles, have received the mandate, authority, and corresponding power to keep the apostolic deposit and Gospel and to explain them authentically. The mere transmission is one thing: at least in a certain way it concerns everyone; keeping, judging and defining it with the authority of the Magisterium is another: it is the function of the hierarchy, comprising the college of bishops united with the Pope, who is head of this college as Peter was head of the apostolic college. Collectively and organically the faithful and the hierarchy form the subject of tradition.<sup>53</sup>

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52. Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, 53.

53. *Ibid.*, 63.

Finally, and I only mention it here given the treatment above, we have the *content* of tradition found in both tradition and Scripture.

### 3.3. *Tradition and the theologian*

Theology is the expression of the verdict passed by the divine word over the human. This is, in fact, the form taken, from the beginning, by the entire word of scripture; and it is impossible for theology to evade this form.<sup>54</sup>

The thought of previous generations (even if it has resulted in conciliar definitions) is never a pillow for future thought to rest on. Definitions are not so much an end as a beginning. Nothing that is the fruit of hard struggle is ever lost to the Church, but this does not mean that the theologian is spared further work. Whatever is merely put in storage, handed down without any fresh efforts being made on one's part . . . putrifies, like the manna did. And the longer the living tradition has been broken through purely mechanical repetition, the more difficult it may become to renew it.<sup>55</sup>

Two things remain axiomatic for Catholic theology: that the *Word* became flesh and that the Word became *flesh*. That which is infinite and eternal took on that which was finite and temporal without ceasing to be infinite and eternal. This is why Jesus could say, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." The first part of this axiom, that the *Word* became flesh, means that we will never be the masters of what has been given to us in Christ. God, in himself, cannot be comprehended by human reason: *Si comprehendis non est Deus*. What God has given us can never be contained in a final way in our words, propositions, confessions, statements, creeds, etc. Nevertheless, the Word did become *flesh*, and it is this latter that justifies and even requires the sanctioning of certain words and actions (and the prohibiting of others) in order to safeguard what God has given to the world in Christ. Indeed, the Holy Spirit has been given to the Church—the whole

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54. Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 155–56.

55. *Ibid.*, 157.

Church, including its theologians even—in order to aid her in this task. But

to speak of the Holy Spirit as the Church's soul and the transcendent principle of her identity, does not mean that *all* that happens in the historical life of this Church is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. There is a kind of subtle and complex gradation in what might be called his commitment in the human aspect of the history of salvation, ranging from his perfect gift to Christ to the laborious gropings of the theologians and passing by the graces given to the apostles, prophets, Fathers and great pontiffs or religious founders.<sup>56</sup>

This quote rightly puts the theologian at the bottom of its list of gradations, but inclusion on the list is still significant.

If anything that was said above about the essence of tradition seemed to disparage the actual concrete statements and practices of the Catholic Church in history, this was not my intent. As Balthasar says in the quotation that heads this section, nothing of the fruit of the Church's long struggle with various heresies is ever lost. Never again can an authentic Catholic theology say that the Son is a creature or that the Eucharist is not a sacrifice of the Church. Even if we are to say that the fruit of these struggles, as expressed in the various definitions of the Councils and the proclamations of various popes, is largely negative—that is, telling us what we cannot believe rather than what we do—the Catholic theologian still does his work *from* the Church's teachings rather than *toward* them or, worse, *outside* of them. And this is not because the theologian is dedicated to the words as ends in themselves. Rather, like the Church that defines them, he is dedicated to the lifegiving faith that they proclaim and protect. At its heart, this faith—that which we have been saying tradition hands on from one generation to the next or from one person to the next—is quite simple and can be captured in a few words. “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the

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56. Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, 56.

third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Cor 15:3–5).

Over time, however, this simple “gospel” has been attacked in various ways by various heresies, and it is in response to these that the Church and theologians have had to say so much more. The point, however, is that such saying is always in the service of that which was given, to that which, before demanding our words, demands our faith, hope, and love. This is what Balthasar means when he calls for a kneeling rather than merely sitting theology. A theology that begins on the knees can give rise to one that takes place in a chair, but one that begins in a chair can never become true theology. Religious studies, perhaps.

Nevertheless, the first aspect of our axiom remains true: what was given in words and practices always infinitely exceeds those words and practices. Just because the Church teaches us that Jesus Christ has two wills does not mean that we will ever be done trying to understand what that means or what it might imply. In fact, the Church is most often content to allow a variety of positions—for instance on the doctrine of predestination or on the exact meaning of Christ’s descent into hell—to remain “on the table” in order to give theologians the (proper) freedom to do what they do: strive better to understand the faith which they already believe. Realizing that what was once given is not his product but is at the same time infinitely rich in what it suggests, the theologian is at once humble and fearful on the one hand, and bold on the other:

The theologian who lets himself be guided by authority must have an especially strong sense of his own responsibility toward the teaching authority, for, if he is exercised thoroughly in obedience to the Spirit, his own suggestions, emendations, his general view or new insight may have an important part to play in the formulation of doctrine and its promulgation.<sup>57</sup>

There is something paradoxical in this statement. It is precisely the theologian’s “strong sense of responsibility toward the teaching authority” that spurs him on in thinking and re-thinking

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57. Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 158–59.



the truths of the faith so that they might continually be better formulated. The theologian does the important work of assisting the Church in its discernment of what in the Church's past is lasting and what is not: of discerning, as we have said, between tradition and traditions, and even between traditions that are dispensable and those that are not. Blondel reminds us in this regard that the Spirit guides the Magisterium not by revelation nor even by inspiration but by *assistance*. "Assistance implies a simple negative help; that is, God requires man to use all the resources of science and reflection as though to hide his regulative action behind the natural means."<sup>58</sup> One need only be reminded of the hard work of Paul and Barnabas before and at the so-called Jerusalem Council, which came before a letter could be drafted by the apostles stating that "the Holy Spirit and we agreed" (Acts 15:28).

The tightrope to be walked here has to do precisely with the two aspects of the axiom stated at the beginning of this section. What has been given has really been given, in time, in place, in words, and in actions. The theologian's main task is in the clarification of all of this. But what has been given is in itself not the product of the theologian's activity. The faithful do not wait on the findings of theologians to decide what to believe and how to live, even if the theologians may contribute to the development of our understanding of these beliefs and practices. Balthasar, therefore, rightly places theology between worship on the one hand and faith translated to action on the other, "a form of contemplation which is neither an act of worship nor conjoined with action wherein the truth is embodied."<sup>59</sup> But what is crucial here is that it remembers from whence it came and where it is going. Any theology that does not serve that which we first adore and which cannot be translated into holy action is not truly theology. Far from disparaging the work of the theologian, even the most seemingly mundane and painstaking of his activities—research in "dead" languages, close reading of obscure thinkers, and the like—can now be seen to be at the service of that which is neither the theologian's to give nor to take away.

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58. Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, 272.

59. Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 152.

## 4. CONCLUSION

We began this essay by describing the change in attitude that happened in philosophy in the modern period with regard to sacred tradition. We pointed out that this philosophy was at once too humble and too bold: too humble by restricting reason's scope to the quantitative, too bold by now reducing philosophy's object to that which can be comprehended and thereby controlled. The alleged agnosticism about the whole ended up absolutizing the parts. We then pointed out parallels between this and the current state of contemporary theology. On the one hand, this theology tends to limit itself to questions of a historical-critical or practical nature, only then to weigh these findings with the weight of the supernatural. In both cases, that of modern philosophy and that of contemporary theology, we have suggested a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of tradition and of reason's relationship to it. At its heart, tradition concerns something that is properly God's that has been given to us. The Holy Spirit is the transcendent subject of this tradition, just as the Church is its historical subject. It is the Church that has been entrusted to hand on what has been given to it. The theologian, as we have just seen, has an important role to play here. But this is the case only if we rediscover the grandeur of the theologian's task. The theologian assists the Church in growing into a better understanding of that which was given "once and for all" in Christ. In order to fulfill this task, the theologian can neither rest content with repeating what has already been said nor should he think that the Church and the faithful must await his work in order to know what to believe and how to act. In short, we need neither extrinsicists nor historicists; "we need individuals who devote their lives to the glory of theology, that fierce fire burning in the dark night of adoration and obedience, whose abysses it illuminates."<sup>60</sup> □

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60. *Ibid.*, 160.