

TRADITION AS A SOURCE OF MORAL THEOLOGY

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THIS ESSAY IS divided into sections each with a number of distinct points.

I. Philosophy and Culture

1. Tradition was the chief cause of conflict between conservatives and progressives both in religion and politics in the period of modernity.

2. Enlightenment philosophers (Descartes, Locke, *etc.*) rejected tradition as incapable of making the premises and assumptions that supported it clear and evident.

3. Many contemporary philosophers, however, recognize that such clear assertions depend on tacit or background knowledge and information. Tradition was retrieved (Möhlner, Newman, *etc.*) because it performs a double task: epistemologically, it functions to justify our beliefs and assertions; socially, it is the life force that generates and regenerates communities. When these two aspects are wedded they carry a society's cultural inheritance forward, recreating it in ever new forms into the future.

II. The Second Vatican Council.

1. This situation provided the setting for Vatican II to rethink the relation of Scripture and Tradition in its Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* on Divine Revelation. The Council fathers broke through the impasse that had divided Catholics and Protestants since the Reformation and which baroque scholasticism had 'set in concrete' by distinguishing Scripture and Tradition as *partim-partim* sources of God's revelation. Geiselmann¹ reopened the discussion by pointing out that Trent said 'et-

et' and not '*partim-partim*.'

2. The result was what Max Seckler does not hesitate to call a 'paradigm shift.'² It turned our previous theological conceptions 'upside down' so that they have to be redefined and then realigned within a new constellation of meaning. There is now only one source, the *Verbum Dei*, God's self-revelation to us through the two channels of Tradition and Scripture. The order of these terms is inverted since the Church preaches and communicates Scripture as Tradition. The Church is the subject of Tradition as she transmits the written record of the *Locutio Dei* as normative for her life and action. The magisterium's task is to preserve and authentically interpret Scripture and Tradition under God's Word. In the Church's life Tradition, Scripture and magisterium are inseparably linked as principles of coherence and unity. This new paradigm of revelation retrieved mostly from Scripture and the Fathers of the Church renders the question of Scripture's material sufficiency rather irrelevant.

3. *Dei Verbum* no. 8 describes the concrete process of transmission and the development of doctrine.

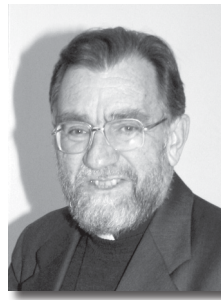
The Tradition that comes from the Apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is growth in insight into the realities that are being handed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes about through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their heart (cf. Lk 2:19 and 51). It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those who have received, along with the right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth. Thus as the centuries go by, the Church is

always advancing toward the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her.

III. The Theological Explanation of Tradition

1. Tradition is an inner moment in the very process of revelation as God's self-communication to us. Congar has suggested a model. The origin of Tradition as distinct from individual traditions lies in the Father's handing over of the Son and the Son's subsequent acceptance of betrayal (*traditio* in Latin means handing over) into the hands of sinful men. This two-fold act is productive, as Aidan Nichols explains.³ Revelation is 'linked to a *masculine* divine symbolism, is received and transmitted into the Church's tradition whose ultimate subject is the Holy Spirit and which Congar conceives in essentially *feminine* terms.' The Church is the realization in time of the self-communication of the triune God. The entire Church as the *communio* of all who live this faith, whether lay or clerical, is the mediating subject of Tradition which she passes on not just as a teaching, but as a reality, the reality of Christianity itself. Moral theology's intentionality is primarily directed to this. It is interested in life, lived reality, experience and the Church's *praxis*. These provide its object of study.

2. Tradition is an ecclesial reality that has a sacramental structure, 'disclosed through created signs.' Congar⁴ asserts that it 'presupposes an action of the Holy Spirit in a living subject, and this subject is the Church, the people of God and the Body of Christ.' The mystery hidden in God is manifest in time. And this manifestation is revelation that transmits God's life and knowledge to us through his self-giving. Tradition 'is the Church, salvation and tradition again, *paradoxis* being the content of saving knowledge and practice which the Church transmits and by which it lives.' It involves God's awakening our free co-operation through his graceful initiative. Ultimately it



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means the missions of the divine persons in our times. They stir up the response of faith and love to God's freely chosen self-communication.

3. 'The two hands of God,' as St. Irenaeus would say, are forever actively fashioning human history into the story of salvation. The divine missions have consequences often overlooked in moral theology. First, after the Council of Trent the grace tract was moved from moral to dogmatic theology. No moralist denies grace but the discipline lacks a systematic account of the Spirit's action in history transforming the human heart and destiny. Second, the renewal since Vatican II has wisely introduced the idea of Christocentrism into moral theology. Unfortunately, this has often been of a type inspired by or at least similar to Barth's contention that the dogma of Christ's perfect humanity, the human face of God, makes the moral decisions to be taken immediately obvious. In this model faith replaces rational moral deliberation.⁵ This deprives Tradition of its deepest and most truly human and historical dimension whereby it lives in, and has to be worked out through, human deliberation and decision-making in real worldly time.

IV. Sources and Melchior Cano's 'Loci Theologici.'

1. A renewed notion of revelation involves, according to Max Seckler, redefining our conception of theology and its sources. He believes Cano was seriously misunderstood as

trying to defend an epistemology of dogmatic reasoning against sixteenth century Protestants. Instead, Cano cast Aristotle's idea of *topos* in an original way. A *locus* is not an axiom from which to derive a system but a *domicilia*, housing both the knowledge and the living realities from which theology draws life and nourishes its existence. He saw Scripture not in terms of propositions, *dicta probantia*, but as where God's revelation could concretely be identified. Individual propositions arise by *inventio* and *iudicium* from these sources. This global conception applies to all ten *loci*. Each is constituted as an autonomous subject with its own method and hermeneutic.

2. Cano classified ten sources: 1. *Auctoritas Sacrae Scripturae*. 2. *Auctoritas Traditionum Christi et Apostolorum*. 3. *Auctoritas Ecclesiae Catholicae*. 4. *Auctoritas Conciliorum*. 5. *Auctoritas Ecclesiae Romanae*. 6. *Auctoritas sanctorum Veterum*. 7. *Auctoritas Theologorum scholasticorum*. 8. *Ratio naturalis*. 9. *Humanae Auctoritas Historiae*. The distinction between core and supporting sources should be obvious and does not detract from the fact that both testify to God's self-manifestation in the Church and in the world.

3. They all interact in a holistic open system that points to the mystery that cannot be fully grasped or exhausted. Theology is the science of faith, understanding dependent on God's revelation through Tradition. Seckler maintains that Tradition is composed by the *loci*. In so far as they describe the essential structure of the Church that transmits the content of revelation forming a *communio* between God and humanity. This sacramental reality witnesses to God's acting through the Spirit in Christ. For Seckler the *loci theologici* reflect a theology of *communio* and *vice versa*.

4. Congar⁶ emphasized the importance of the monuments of Tradition that make it accessible so that the Church can benefit from it in a practical way. Among other monuments he added the liturgy, styles of life and popular piety that lead to sanctity and the perfection

of charity, and great creations of culture in literature, art and architecture as evidence of the vitality of the faith.

V. Sources and Moral Theology.

1. Seckler argues that all branches of theology share the inseparable unity of Tradition, Scripture and magisterium as points of reference as well as the other *loci* sketched by Cano. Each theological community—dogmatists, moralists, *etc.*—forms a distinct ecclesial subject that determines how the discipline can incorporate these sources. And thus different intellectual traditions and sciences evolve in theology.

2. Moral theology is interested in all aspects of human behaviour as enlightened by faith. The old dispute over the moral systems proved that its sources cannot be limited to Scripture, the Fathers and the magisterium.⁷ It must pay close attention to society's real state so as to do its work. Moral theology concerns how Tradition touches and is assimilated into culture through people's decisions in conscience. It helps form conscience not in the abstract but according to Tradition's claims in this time and in this situation. For us that means taking the 'signs of the times' seriously not only as sources of moral knowledge but as generating new *loci* that enrich moral theology in its service of Tradition.⁸ The critical criterion is to discern how far the proposed *loci* witness to revelation as transmitted by Tradition. The system of the *loci* is radically open to the invention of new sources⁹ and so to the development of moral doctrine.

Conclusion.

The above considerations show that moral theology needs to undertake a more widely ranging dialogue with fundamental theology and to ensure a better and deeper reception of the Council, especially *Dei Verbum*. This should help to clarify many outstanding questions about its status as a theological science.

NOTES

1 See J. Ratzinger, 'The Question of the Concept of Tradition' in *God's Word*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2008, 41-88, especially 48.

2 This study uses two of his essays. 'Il significato ecclesologico del sistema dei 'Loci theologici,' in *Teologia, Scienza, Chiesa*, edited by G. Coffele, Morcelliana, Brescia 1988, 171-206, and, 'L'ecclesiologia della *communio*. Il metodo teologico e la dottrina dei *loci theologici di Melchior Cano*, ' in *Il metodo teologico*, edited by Manlio Sodi, Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2008, 163-189.

3 See his chapter on Congar in his *From Newman to Congar*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1990.

4 Matter relevant to this section can be found in *Yes Congar. Theologian of the Church*, edited by G. Flynn, Peeters, Louvain 2005, particularly John Webster's 'Purity and Plenitude. Evangelical re-

flections on Congar's *Tradition and Traditions*, 43-65-

5 See John Webster, *Barth*, Continuum, London 2004, especially 129, 160-161.

6 See his *Tradition and the Life of the Church*, Burns and Oates, London 1964, chapter IV.

7 Cf. Heinrich Klops, *Tradition und Fortschritt in der Moraltheologie*, Bachem, Köln 1963.

8 8 See Paolo Prodi, 'La storia umana come luogo teologico,' in *Il Regno Attualità*, 20(2008), 706-716. Prodi identifies what appears to be the underlying problem in discussions on Tradition, the overlooking of history, even its suppression, as a *locus theologicus* necessary to make theology the science of salvation history.

9 See Peter Hünemann, 'Neue *Loci theologici*. Ein Beitrag zur methodischen Erneuerung der Theologie' in *Cristianesimo nella Storia*, 24 (2003), 1-21.

This talk was given at the Moral Theology Congress, 'From the Council of Trent to the Future,' Trent, 21-24 July, 2010.

Moral theology is a term used by the Roman Catholic Church to describe the study of God from a perspective of how man must live in order to attain the presence or favor of God. While dogmatic theology deals with the teaching or official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, moral theology deals with the goal of life and how it is achieved. So, the goal or purpose of moral theology is, simply stated, to determine how man should live.

Moral theology studies and examines such things as freedom, conscience, love, responsibility, and law. Moral theology seeks to set forth general principles to help individuals make the right decisions and deal with the details of everyday living in a way that is in accordance with the Church's dogmatic theology. Moral theology is essentially the Roman Catholic equivalent to what Protestants usually refer to as Christian Ethics. Moral theology deals with the broad questions in life and attempts to define what it means to live as a Roman Catholic Christian. Moral theology seeks to define and address things such as the different methods of moral discernment, the definitions of right and wrong, good and evil, sin and virtue, etc.

-from <http://www.gotquestions.org>