

Tradition's role as source of truth being revisited

Robert McClory | Jan. 17, 2012 NCR Today

Editor's note: An earlier version of the story incorrectly identified who issued inter insignores. The error, for which NCR apologizes, has been corrected.

The two sources of divine revelation accepted by the church, Scripture and Tradition, have followed very different paths in the last 100 years. Sacred Scripture has been so thoroughly analyzed, reinterpreted, even deconstructed, through various forms of scholarly criticism that our understanding of the message has been greatly transformed. Catholic Tradition, however, experienced little change, remaining almost static over the same time period. If some new interpretation of Scripture seemed to shake long-held presumptions, Catholic apologists could always point to tradition as a corrective and bulwark against challenging ideas or radical changes.

Now, the status quo of tradition is also experiencing tremors. In a chapter in the recent book *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, Jesuit theologian Francis Sullivan shows how our once-comfortable, unexamined view of tradition is undergoing scrutiny.

Theologians have always held that tradition comes in two forms. There's Tradition with a big "T" and there's tradition with a little "t." Big "T" Tradition encompasses the authentic teachings, life and worship of the church handed on through the ages; it's the presence of the Christian mystery revealed in time and space. With a little "t," tradition refers to beliefs, devotions, pious practices, regulations and interpretations of the Gospel that may have impact for a time but are of human origin. Not everything labeled Catholic tradition is necessarily big "T." So how do we tell the difference?

The long-assumed gold standard test was the staying power -- the longevity -- of a tradition. It was taken for granted that a tradition that held up without contradiction or significant change over many centuries must be a big "T" tradition. Clearly, this was the assumption of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith when in 1976 it issued *inter insignores*, a document declaring that the church is "not authorized" to admit women to priestly ordination. The practice of a male-only priesthood has "a normative character," said the congregation. "It is a question of an unbroken tradition throughout the history of the church, universal in the East and in the West, and alert to repress abuses immediately." This norm, according to the doctrine, "is considered to conform to God's plan for his Church."

However, as Sullivan shows, the notion that long, unquestioned traditions are, by their very existence, guaranteed to be carriers of revelation was already under criticism in 1962 at the Second Vatican Council. Chicago Cardinal Albert Meyer intervened during the discussion of the proposed council document on the sources of revelation. He argued that tradition is subject to the limits and failings of the pilgrim church.

"How can we distinguish between traditions embodying the true Tradition and merely human traditions?" he asked. "Where do we find the genuine Tradition, and where the impoverished tradition or even distortion of Tradition?" Meyer's call for clarification, something stronger than mere longevity, failed to find expression in

the final version of the document on revelation. But he had opened a discussion that is gathering momentum

The same questions were raised in the late 1960s in a commentary on the document on revelation by none other than Professor Joseph Ratzinger at the University of Tübingen. He regretted that Vatican II had not followed up on Meyer's intervention and not taken a new examination of tradition. "Not everything that exists in the Church must be for that reason also a legitimate tradition," the future pope wrote. "There is a distorting, as well as a legitimate tradition. ... Consequently, tradition must not be considered only affirmatively but also critically," with Scripture serving at times as a criterion for "this indispensable criticism of tradition."

In 1976, the eminent theologian Karl Rahner discussed the congregation's declaration on ordination: "If the declaration appeals to an uninterrupted tradition, this appeal is not necessarily and justifiably an appeal to an absolutely and definitively binding tradition, an appeal to a tradition which simply transmits a 'divine' revelation in the strict sense, since there is obviously a purely human tradition in the Church which offers no guarantee of truth even if it has been long undisputed and taken for granted."

If longevity is not an absolute criterion, Sullivan looks for other criteria that could explain how some traditions become "obsolete in the course of time" and drift into the mists of history. Among the lost traditions he discusses are the church's moral positions regarding slavery and religious liberty. Slavery, Sullivan contends, fell by the wayside, despite centuries of quiet acceptance, through the development of Catholic doctrine on the dignity of the human person in the 19th and 20th centuries. Similarly, he notes, Vatican II authorized a reversal of the traditional position that church and state ought to cooperate in suppressing non-Catholic views. The shift came about, he says, thanks to a growing awareness of the innate right to freedom. As the council noted in its document on religious liberty, "The leaven of the gospel has long been about its quiet work in the minds of men."

The practical implications of a new approach to tradition's role in the church are most intriguing. What current teachings, long deemed irreversible by reason of tradition's firm grip, might undergo change under a revision of tradition? Unfortunately, Sullivan raises only one potential example. He wonders if reflection on the shrinking availability of celibate priests will "lead to a consensus that whatever value this tradition had in the past ... it is now in conflict with a fundamental element of the Catholic faith and the practice must be set aside?"

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