

Fr Ormond Rush's theological reflection on Synthesis Report

Sixteenth General Congregation of the Synod

HAVING LISTENED to you over these past three weeks, I have had the impression that some of you are struggling with the notion of tradition, in the light of your love of truth. You are not the first to struggle with this. It was a major point of discussion at the Second Vatican Council. I thought it might be helpful to recall the questions they debated, and the answers they came up with. Their answers are, for us, the authority for guiding our reflections on the issues that confront us today. So, maybe Vatican II has some lessons for this synod, as you now bring to synthesis your discernment regarding the future of the church.

Over the four sessions of the council, one of the major recurring points of tension was this matter of “tradition.” In the first 1962 session, a draft text was presented to the assembly on “the sources of revelation”; it was styled in the categories of neo-scholasticism, which spoke of revelation, faith, scripture and tradition in a mostly one-dimensional way: in terms only of propositional doctrinal statements. When put to the council, the bish-

ops virtually rejected it. The next day, Pope John XXIII agreed that a new text was indeed needed. On the historic significance of this debate, as well as the pope's decision to intervene, the council peritus Joseph Ratzinger wrote at that time:

The real question behind the discussion could be put this way: Was the intellectual position of “anti-Modernism”—the old policy of exclusiveness, condemnation and defense leading to an almost neurotic denial of all that was new—to be continued? Or would the Church, after it had taken all the necessary precautions to protect the faith, turn over a new leaf and move on into a new and positive encounter with its own origins, with its [fellow human beings] and with the world of today? Since a clear majority of the fathers opted for the second alternative, we may even speak of the Council as a new beginning. We may also say that with this decision there was a major advance over Vatican Council I. Both Trent and Vatican Council I set up bulwarks for the faith to assure it and to protect it; Vatican Council II turned itself to a new task, building on the work of the two previous Councils.¹

That new task was an engagement of Christian faith with history. What Joseph Ratzinger saw during Vatican II as the source of tension here were basically two approaches to tradition. He calls them a “static” understanding of tradition and a “dynamic” understanding.² The former is legalistic, propositional, and ahistorical (i.e., relevant for all times and places); the latter is personalist, sacramental

and rooted in history, and therefore to be interpreted with an historical consciousness. The former tends to focus on the past, the latter on seeing the past being realised in the present, and yet open to a future yet to be revealed. The council used the phrase “living tradition” to describe the latter. (DV, 12) In speaking of the dynamic rather than a static understanding of “the apostolic tradition”, *Dei Verbum* 8 teaches:

“The tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress [proficit, “develops”] in the church, with the help of the holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on.”

And it goes on to speak of three interrelated ways through which the Holy Spirit guides the development of the apostolic tradition: the work of the theologians; the lived experience of the faithful; and the oversight of the magisterium. Sounds like a synodal church, doesn't it?

According to a dynamic understanding of tradition, says Ratzinger:

“Not everything that exists in the Church must for that reason be also a legitimate tradition; in other words, not every tradition that arises in the Church is a true celebration and keeping present of the mystery of Christ. There is a distorting, as well as a legitimate, tradition... Consequently, tradition must not be considered only affirmatively, but also critically; we have Scripture as

a criterion for this indispensable criticism of tradition, and tradition must therefore always be related back to it and measured by it.”³

Pope Francis alluded to these two different ways of understanding tradition, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the promulgation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

“Tradition is a living reality and only a partial vision regards the ‘deposit of faith’ as something static. The word of God cannot be moth-balled like some old blanket in an attempt to keep insects at bay! No. The word of God is a dynamic and living reality that develops and grows because it is aimed at a fulfilment that none can halt.”⁴

At the heart of *Dei Verbum*'s retrieval of a dynamic understanding of tradition was its retrieval of a personalist understanding of revelation, as found in the Bible and in the patristic writings of the early centuries of the church. Revelation is not only a communication of truths about God and human living, which is articulated in Scripture and in the statements of doctrine at particular times in the church's history, in response to time-conditioned questions put to the tradition. Revelation is primarily a communication of God's love, an encounter with God the Father in Christ through the Holy Spirit. *Dei Verbum* speaks of divine revelation in terms of personal friendship and encounter, and especially in terms of

love and truth. Let me quote DV 2:

“By this revelation, then, the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men and women as his friends, and lives among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company... The most intimate truth [intima veritas] thus revealed about God and human salvation shines forth for us in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of revelation.”

In *Dei Verbum* – and this is important for understanding synodality and the very purpose of this Synod – this divine revelation is presented as an ongoing encounter in the present, and not just something that happened in the past. The event of God’s self-revealing (always in Christ, through the Holy Spirit) and God’s offer of relationship, continues to be a living reality here and now. That doesn’t mean there can be some new revelation of who God is. But, the same God, in the same Jesus Christ, through the enlightenment and empowerment of the same Holy Spirit, is forever engaging with, and dialoguing with, human beings in the ever-new here and now of history that relentlessly moves humanity into new perceptions, new questions and new insights, in diverse cultures and places, as the world-church courses through time into an unknown future until the *eschaton*.

We see this present-nature of the divine-human dialogue in *Dei Verbum* 8:

“God, who spoke in the past, continues to dialogue with the spouse of his beloved Son [the church]. And the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the church – and through it in the world – leads believers to the full truth and makes the word of Christ dwell in them in all its richness.”

Therefore, according to Joseph Ratzinger, in *Dei Verbum* we are given

“an understanding of revelation that is seen basically as dialogue... [T]he reading of Scripture is described as a *colloquium inter Deum et hominem* [a dialogue between God and human beings]... The dialogue of God is always carried on in the present... with the intention of forcing us to reply.”⁵

This Synod is a dialogue with God. That has been the privilege and challenge of your “conversations in the Spirit.” God is waiting for your reply. At the end of this week of synthesis, you might well want to begin that synthesis by saying, as did that first Council of Jerusalem, described in Acts 15: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” In their time, their letter to the churches then went on to address an issue on which Jesus himself had left no specific directions. They and the Holy Spirit together had to come to a new adaptation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ regarding that new question, which had not been envisaged before.

Vatican II, accordingly, urged the church to be ever attentive to the movements

of the revealing and saving God present and active in the flow of history, by attending to “the signs of the times” in the light of the living Gospel.⁶ Discernment of the signs of the times in the present seeks to determine what God is urging us to see – with the eyes of Jesus – in new times; but also urging us to be attentive to the traps— where we could be being drawn into ways of thinking that are not “of God”. These traps could lie in being anchored exclusively in the past, or exclusively in the present, or not being open to the future fulness of divine truth to which the Spirit of Truth is leading the church. Discerning the difference between opportunities and traps is the task of all the faithful – laity, bishops, and theologians – everyone, as *Gaudium et Spes* 44 teaches:

“With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage.”⁷

That “revealed truth” is a person, Jesus Christ. So, as we move to

discernment of our final synthesis, may we be guided by the injunction of the Letter to the Hebrews 12: 2:

“Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.”

Meyer, Albert Cardinal. “The Defects of Tradition.” In *Third Session Council Speeches of Vatican II*, edited by William K. Leahy and Anthony T. Massimini, 79–80. Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1966.

Ratzinger, Joseph. “Chapter I: Revelation Itself.” In *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II. Volume 3*, edited by Herbert Vorgrimler, 170–80. New York: Herder, 1969.

———. “Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation.” In *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II. Volume 3*, edited by Herbert Vorgrimler, 181–98. New York: Herder, 1969.

———. *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*. New York: Paulist Press, 2009.

[1] Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 44. Emphasis added.

[2] See throughout Joseph Ratzinger, “Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II. Volume 3*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder, 1969), 181–98.

[3] *Ibid.*, 185. Meyer’s intervention can be found in AS III/3, 150–51. For an English translation of his speech, see Albert Cardinal Meyer, “The Defects of Tradition,” in *Third Session Council Speeches of Vatican II*, ed. William K. Leahy and Anthony T. Massimini (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1966), 79–80.

[4] https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/pa-pa-francesco_20171011_convegno-nuova-evangelizzazione.pdf [Accessed 26 July 2022].

[5] Ratzinger, “Chapter I: Revelation Itself,” 171.

[6] GS, §4. See also GS, §11.

[7] GS, §44.