

PART THREE:
A RECONSIDERATION OF THE
MODERN THEOLOGY OF TRADITION

INTRODUCTION TO PART THREE

Although there is, within Catholic theology, a well-defined discussion of hermeneutics, this discussion does not raise the hermeneutical question in its modern theological form. That is, it treats hermeneutics as the science of Biblical interpretation, rather than as the general epistemological problem of Christian understanding.¹ In other words, the understanding of Christian truth, and Biblical hermeneutics in particular, are regarded within Catholic theology as topics whose context is the Church and its tradition. There, for Catholic theology, do epistemology and hermeneutics – and indeed, the question of truth in general – have their real home.

This viewpoint stands in marked contrast to that of Protestant theology. The church is not, for Protestantism, the authoritative locus of Christian truth. That locus is rather the word of God transmitted through Scripture. The word remains, for Protestants, the norm of Christian truth, and the criterion by which Church and tradition are to be judged.² With the relative devaluation of the Church by Protestantism coincided a profound examination of the nature of Christian interpretation in general. This led to the development of the hermeneutical question in its modern theological form as the question of Christian understanding. For Protestant theology, it is an understanding of God's word distinct from an ecclesiastical understanding. For Catholic theology, however, such a question is improperly posed if it fails to see the role of the Church as fundamental. The Catholic treatises, whose general title is *De ecclesia*, always affirm that the Church teaches nothing but the doctrine implicit in what the apostles were given by Jesus Christ and have handed down.³ This brings us to the topic of tradition. The hermeneutical question of Christian understanding is, from the standpoint of Catholic theology, a far broader question than that of Biblical hermeneutics. It is intimately linked to the Church and its tradition. The reconsideration of the theology of tradition proposed here aims at the explication of the link between the hermeneutical question and the Church which, according to Catholic theology, is the proper context of the question.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, "Hermeneutics," in Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 2 vols. in 1, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 11.605-623. See also the bibliography in Brown's *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore: St. Mary's University, 1955), which was augmented by him in "The *Sensus Plenior* in the Last Ten Years," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 262-285.

² *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd (1959) ed., s. v. "Hermeneutik, II by Gerhard Ebeling, III. 242-262.

³ Hermann Dieckmann, *De ecclesia: Tractatus historico-dogmatici*, 2 vols. Freiburg in Breisgau: Herder and Co., 1925), II.7 (assertio 24); Ludwig Lercher, *Institutiones theologiae dogmaticae*, 4th ed., prepared by F. Schlagenhaufen, 4 vols. (Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 1945), 1.258 (Liber secundus: De ecclesia Christi, thesis 28); Christian Pesch, *Praelectiones dogmaticae*, ed. 6&7, 9 vols. (Freiburg in Breisgau: Herder and Co., 1924), I.185ff. (Pars secunda: De ecclesia Christi, proposition 241.

The Catholic theology of tradition has been given what some would call its classical formulation by the Jesuit theologian, Johannes Baptist Franzelin (1816-1886). Franzelin, born in the Italian Tyrol, became rector of the German theologate in Rome, and was named a cardinal in 1876 by Pius IX. His Tractatus de divina traditione et scriptura was published in 1870, during the period of the First Vatican Council, at which Franzelin was papal theologian. This work has influenced all subsequent Catholic discussions of the topic.⁴ Indeed, it has been said that Franzelin ushered in a new period in Catholic theology. The Irish Catholic theologian and Edinburgh professor, James P. Mackey (b. 1934), has written that the “modern” Catholic theology of tradition begins with Franzelin: “it was Franzelin who first related the concept of Tradition so closely to the infallible teaching of the Magisterium as to derive his definition of Tradition from that relationship.”⁵ Exactly how Franzelin related tradition to the magisterium is a question which we will take up at a later point.⁶ For the present, it suffices to say that Franzelin inaugurated the modern theology of tradition, and that the principal characteristic of this theology is the manner in which it united the activity of the magisterium with the transmission of Christian truth. Since our concern is the relation of the hermeneutical question to contemporary Catholic thought, we must examine the theology of tradition in what Mackey calls its modern form.

Mackey's discussion, to which our analysis owes a great deal, pinpoints the origin of the modern period in the work of Franzelin. But what of the period's conclusion? From a perspective shaped by the Second Vatican Council and by the hermeneutical philosophy of the past twenty years, many aspects of the so-called modern theology of tradition seem dated. Mackey's book, published in 1963, the year after the council had begun, concludes by questioning the definition of tradition as the activity and content of magisterial preaching. The word tradition does not convey, he notes, the authoritative aspect of what the magisterium does.⁷ This suggests that, for Mackey, the principal characteristic of the modern theology of tradition, its definition in terms of magisterium, demands a number of qualifications and refinements. He takes a critical stance toward this theology. But his book, The Modern Theology of Tradition, is meant not only as an historical overview but also as a summary of contemporary thought. One can say that, at

⁴ Although there is no modern scholarly treatise devoted solely to the work of Franzelin, there is one rather pious biography: Nicholas Walsh: John Baptist Franzelin, S.J.: Cardinal Priest of the Title SS. Boniface and Alexius. A Sketch and a Study (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1895).

⁵ J. P. Mackey, The Modern Theology of Tradition (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), vii-viii.

⁶ See the sections below entitled “Active Tradition: the Formal Element,” “Problems Posed by Scholastic Terminology,” and “Tradition and Magisterium.”

⁷ Mackey, p. 201.

least at the time that Mackey completed the book, the modern period of the theology of tradition had not yet ended.

It was at approximately this time that the French Dominican, Yves Congar (b. 1904), published his great synthesis of the theology of tradition.⁸ Congar does not speak of the modern theology of tradition as if there were only one. He prefers to speak of Franzelin not as the founder of a single consistent theology which has remained dominant up to the period of the Second Vatican Council, but rather as the major figure of the Roman school.⁹ Congar's work inserts the Roman school into an historical context, enabling theologians to see that there were other views on tradition apart from it. Yet it must be said that the Roman school dominated Catholic thinking on tradition during the modern period through the Latin theological manuals, a fact to which Mackey's book bears witness. Furthermore, as we shall see, the major characteristics of that theology of tradition are appropriated by Congar. To be sure, he emphasizes the role in tradition played by segments of the Church distinct from the magisterium. And he criticizes that tendency in the thought of the Roman school which subordinates the content of tradition to the authoritative form which the magisterium gives it. But Congar, like Mackey, is not breaking with the thought of the past. His work is a critical synthesis, an attempt to draw from an historical overview the ideas central to what the Church, on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, could call its theology of tradition. In many respects the work of Congar can be described as modern theology of tradition's very culmination.

Thus a problem presents itself. In order to raise the hermeneutical question for Catholic theology, one must situate it within the Church and its tradition. The theology of tradition becomes the point of analysis. Yet the modern theology of tradition, that to which the syntheses of Mackey and of Congar bear such eloquent testimony, appears somewhat dated from a perspective shaped by the Second Vatican Council and by the hermeneutical philosophy whose influence has grown in the last twenty years. How is the theology of tradition to be characterized, if not under its modern aspect, that is, the aspect of those who wrote between the two Vatican councils?

Our solution to the problem is to present a critical reconsideration of the modern theology of tradition. In order to gauge how the theology has changed in the last twenty years, a characterization of it prior to the Second Vatican Council is necessary. Yet such a characterization cannot simply duplicate the work of Mackey and Congar. Rather, it

⁸ Yves M.-J. Congar, La Tradition et les traditions, vol. 1: Essai historique; vol. 2: Essai théologique; 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1960-1963); translation: Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay, 2 vols. in 1, trans. Michael Naseby (vol. 1) and Thomas Rainborough (vol. 2) (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.250-260; trans., 196-209. The Roman school has been characterized in an authoritative way by Walter Kasper, Die Lehre von der Tradition in der römischen Schule (Giovanni Perrone, Carlo Passaglia, Clemens Schrader), vol. 5 of Die Überlieferung in der neueren Theologie, ed. J.R. Geiselmann (Freiburg: Herder, 1962).

must assimilate their work, drawing attention to those characteristics of the modern theology which they affirm but which appear, from a post-conciliar viewpoint, to offer difficulties.

The task, then, is threefold. First, aspects of the modern theology must be selected which are both representative and problematic. In other words, the aspects chosen must be central to the theology, not marginal issues; but illustrative of a point of view which has been, in some yet-to-be-explained fashion, superseded. Second, these aspects of the modern theology must be fairly represented. What they mean, and the importance of what they mean, cannot be overlooked or slighted. Third, the shortcomings of these aspects must be brought out in an anticipatory way. Doubtless, the full import of the shortcomings, and the difference between the modern theology of tradition and the post-conciliar theology of tradition, must await a fuller treatment than the following pages can offer. But it would be disingenuous not to clarify, in at least a preliminary way, the objectionable features of those aspects of the modern theology of tradition which are to be presented for reconsideration.

The aspects we have chosen, and which will be presented below, are the distinctions made between active and objective tradition, between historical and dogmatic tradition, and between the formal and material sufficiency of tradition (and of Scripture). The distinction between active and objective tradition aims at determining how the objective material from the Christian past is made active through the teaching of the magisterium. It will lead us to consider how, from that immense storehouse called the deposit of faith, aspects are selected and selectively applied within the contemporary Church. The distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition focuses on the relation between the documentary evidence available to the historian and the living faith of the Church as expressed in dogma. The extent to which faith is grounded in history, and to which history is an interpretation shaped by faith, shall be explored. Finally, the distinction between the material and formal sufficiency of tradition – and even more to the point, of Scripture – suggests that the two media of Christian revelation convey the Gospel differently. Living tradition, bound to the faith of the Church, is sufficient for Catholic theology in a way which Scripture, subject to misinterpretation, is not. This raises the issue of authority, with its attendant problems of genuineness and abuse. All of the distinctions above are characteristic of the modern theology of tradition. And each one seems, from a perspective shaped by the Second Vatican Council and by hermeneutical philosophy, to be somewhat dated.

In what follows, however, the shortcomings of the modern theology of tradition shall not be unduly emphasized. Rather, we shall attempt to penetrate to the truth of that theology, which the characteristic distinctions tend to obscure. The theology of tradition explains, in a way which merits consideration, the transmission and preservation of the revelation of God, a revelation which is both past and present. To say that much is to affirm the trustworthiness of the Church, an affirmation which can be questioned from a number of perspectives. How can the Church be said to accurately represent and embody the revelation of God? Why was the revelation entrusted to a community whose members are so weak and liable to corruption? How can the process of Christian

tradition, of transmission through a community of flawed human beings, be proposed as a model for the handing-on of truth? These questions suggest the kind of doubts inevitably raised by the theology of tradition. But they should not deter a critical reconsideration of that theology. On the contrary, they are the indispensable cautions without which our study would be naive, and which mark it as a product of our own day, mediating between the modern period of the theology of tradition and the period, if we can call it that, which is now underway.