

SUMMARY OF PART IV

The Catholic understanding of Christianity which we have called Catholic hermeneutics comprises a living tradition which is its own justification. It justifies itself in that there is no rationale for it apart from the divine self-bestowal in Jesus Christ, whose historical and ecclesiastical representative the Catholic Church alone claims to be. This is not to deny the evils or falsehoods committed by the Church throughout its history. But just as a human being is more than this or that action, and can be loved and trusted despite breaches of faith, so the Church wins the loyalty of the Catholic interpreter. Such interpreters admit that their particular understanding of faith may be prejudiced and even distort their knowledge. Their attempts to verify the truths of Christianity may well be hindered by an inadequate conceptual apparatus promulgated by their own teachers. And their interpretation of Christianity, they readily concede, is fully imbued by the value which they attach to the historical facts. But when confronted by these problems, Catholic interpreters have no recourse to divine guarantees unmediated by history. They can only confess that the Catholic tradition is their own, that they have found it trustworthy, and that they anticipate its continued claim upon their loyalty.

The theology of tradition is Catholicism's exposition of the way in which the Church transmits the gospel. The value of this theology lies in its presentation of tradition as contemporary, autonomous, and authoritative. Against those who would regard tradition as a thing of the past, Catholic theology stresses that Christian tradition exists in the present faith of the Church. Abiding independently of historical research, but never willing to dispense with it, tradition is the life of the people of God, constantly expressing it self, but resisting all attempts to fix it in mere assertions. The Catholic acknowledges the authority of tradition above and beyond the extent to which he or she can be said to embody it. In the theology of tradition, one attempts to understand the means by which God has delivered revelation into the hands of a particular historical people.

Two objections can be made to this estimation of the theology of tradition. The first is that such a theology contradicts science, and the second is that it has had harmful consequences for the Church. Among the scientific objections to the theology of tradition is the statement that it assigns a value to the facts of Christian history which the facts do not, in and of themselves, fully warrant. Indeed, the scientist may object that the theologian begins with belief in the truth of the gospel, and then proceeds to verify it, instead of believing only what can be verified. The knower, by consequence, has no objectivity toward the known. To these scientific objections, however, philosophical hermeneutics offers a persuasive answer. It suggests, first of all, that an absolute distinction between interpretation and evaluation cannot be made. Every interpretation includes an application of the subject matter, at least in an anticipatory way, to the situation which first brought the matter to attention. Secondly, philosophical hermeneutics suggests that a truth and its verification take place within a history of whose effect both are an expression. To verify a truth is not to stand outside history, but to secure the truth in terms of the possibilities which history has granted. This means, finally, that the attempt to preserve a rigid distinction between the knower and the known

is fundamentally misguided. Philosophical hermeneutics teaches that both are encompassed by a history which has raised up the object to critical scrutiny and shaped the investigator's approach to it. Within that history the object has acquired a de facto authority as a source of knowledge, and the knower has been guided by authorities who possess a superior insight into the matter. The objection to the scientific status of the theology of tradition is blunted by the development within philosophical hermeneutics of the doctrines of application, effective history, and authority.

The second objection to a positive evaluation of the theology of tradition – namely, that this theology has had harmful consequences for the Church – calls for a dual response. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that the modern theology of tradition put undue weight on the role of the magisterium. Although the magisterium remains for Catholics the authoritative judge in matters of Scriptural and doctrinal dispute, such matters occupy a relatively small part of the life of the Church. The whole of the people of God, to use the phrase of Vatican II, are the bearers of tradition. This truth received disproportionately little emphasis from the theologians of tradition. They feared the loss of magisterial authority, and perceived a threat to it in the critical history of modern scholarship. Their subordination of historical to dogmatic tradition can be said to flirt with extrinsicism, at least insofar as they resisted the efforts of historical theologians to grasp dogma more exactly by historiographic means. The clearest example of this was the reluctance of the magisterium to approve the use of historical-critical methodologies in Biblical studies. Not until the 1943 publication of the encyclical “*Divino Afflante Spiritu*” were Catholics free to employ the exegetical tools pioneered by Protestant scholars. This fostered an impression of the Church's distrust of the Bible. The doctrine of the formal insufficiency of Scripture can be seen as an effort to diminish the authority of the Bible in relation to the magisterium's exposition of tradition. The over-emphasis of the theology of tradition on the juridical role of the magisterium, on the limits of historical research, and on the insufficiency of Scripture, was hardly a step forward for the Church.

But on the other hand, the theology of tradition marks the Church's effort to come to grips with its own historical nature. We can better appreciate this effort from the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics. From that perspective, the distinction between active and objective tradition appears as a distinction-in-unity. The theology of tradition differentiated between the object which is transmitted and the transmission itself for the sake of clarifying the unified phenomenon which they comprise. This is nothing other than the union of the knower and the known. There is no object of Christian faith, the theologians of tradition mean, which exists apart from the act by which Christians apply their tradition, refine it, and transmit it.

A similar idea illumines the distinction between dogmatic and historical tradition. The heart of this distinction is not a devaluation of historiography, but an appreciation for the Christian's participation in tradition. Such a participation cannot be confined to Christian truths which have a documented first-century origin. Rather, the Christian is caught up in a history whose effects are always greater than one can say. Dogmatic tradition should not be restricted to oral teachings independent of Scripture which have

been passed on from the apostolic generation. To be sure, the term was coined in order to describe explicit truths or practices which survived independently of written transmission. But it is no violation of Catholic theology to include under dogmatic tradition the inexplicit presuppositions of Christian dogma, presuppositions which can come to conscious attention, or to say that the verification of tradition takes place within a context which tradition itself provides.

As for the distinction between the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition, this is a matter which emphasizes the activity of understanding. The sufficiency of the Scriptures in conveying the saving truth of the gospel depends upon the interpreter's proper understanding of them. This understanding occurs only within the Christian community, which believes that the decisive event of salvation history has occurred in Jesus Christ. Apart from that community, the truths of Scripture are not saving truths. In other words, the facts of salvation history already possess a value as saving truths, even before historical analysis secures them as facts. Only within the Christian community are the Scriptures the authoritative word of God. This means that they are understood within a tradition which alone comprises truth and its understanding, long before the Christian articulates what that tradition is.

In the theology of tradition, to sum up, Catholics understand their faith in historical terms. Theirs is not a philosophy of understanding, but understanding itself. Catholic interpreters do not try to understand what they must believe, but what they already believe. Their theology, conceived in classical terms as faith seeking understanding, exemplifies Gadamer's dictum that we come too late if we want to know in advance what our faith should be. The objection to Gadamer's philosophy, that it refuses to legislate criteria for the truth, is overcome in the actual hermeneutical practice of individuals within a tradition. There actual criteria emerge and are employed, expressing the tradition itself. The tradition is, no doubt, an object of study. But it is far more the Catholic's very identity, the history which is working itself out in the individual and the community.

One can investigate it and even reform it. But in the investigation and reformation of the tradition Catholics apply it to their lives, presupposing its importance, bringing it up to date, renewing it. The verification of the tradition is a matter for theological vigilance. But the tradition remains authoritative, even when aspects of it are brought into question. No Catholic should (or ultimately can) curtail the process of objectifying, verifying, and evaluating the tradition. But throughout that process the tradition is understood as the Catholic's own, as something irreducible to an object, as normative. This is what philosophical hermeneutics teaches about the nature of interpretation within history. It justifies calling the understanding of Christianity within the Catholic tradition Catholic hermeneutics.