

## **Is the Church Today What the Apostles Wanted?**

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Is the Church today what the Apostles wanted? I believe it is. Jesus entrusted his mission to the Apostles, giving them everything necessary to carry it out. We stand in the apostolic tradition because the same Spirit that moved the Apostles moves us as well. Tonight I intend to offer no new criteria for judging the apostolicity of today's Church. But all of us have questions about the relation between this or that tradition of the Church and the mysterious God whom those traditions reveal. What do we do when some of the Church's traditions do not seem apostolic? That is my topic, and I'd like to begin with some thoughts about the film "Conclave" and its view of apostolic succession.

"Conclave" was nominated for eight Oscars including Best Picture. Peter Straughan took home the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay. The film dramatizes events at the Vatican where, after the death of a pope, cardinals from around the world must pick a successor. In an atmosphere of tension, conclave participants eye each other as potential pontiffs who will steer the Church in different directions. After embarrassing revelations about two cardinals, and the exposure of a third as a right-wing extremist, a fourth passes judgment. Cardinal Vicente Benítez condemns his brother cardinals. He says they are self-absorbed and concerned mainly with themselves and with maintaining power. He says in Spanish,

These things are not the Church. The Church is not a tradition. The Church is not the past. The Church is what we do next.<sup>1</sup>

The words of Cardinal Benítez deserve our attention. "The Church is not a tradition," he says. The Church is rather "what we do next."

Online commentators have both liked and disliked Benítez's equation of the Church with "what we do next." One wrote that the film's solution to problems in the Church is simplistic, namely, "a morally pure pope who exposes the hypocrisy and misogyny of the old traditions." Nevertheless this commentator did admire the line about the Church as "what we do next." In his view, "What is next is always God and God's will, here and now."<sup>2</sup> The Church looks to the future in hope and should not be mired in tradition.

A second online commentator said that "what we do next" implies something philosophically wrong. The words imply, said this commentator, that "there is no being, only becoming." If "there is no being," he wrote, then the words of Cardinal Benítez represent the thought of Darwin and Marx. The hallmarks of their wrongheaded worldview, this commentator

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Straughan, 2024 Screenplay for "Conclave" (based on the novel by Robert Harris), available on the website "[Deadline](#)" (at p. 117) and accessed on March 14, 2025. Cardinal Benítez's exact words are "Pero estas cosas no son la iglesia. La iglesia no es la tradición. La iglesia no es el pasado. La iglesia es lo que hagamos en adelante."

<sup>2</sup> Micah Cronin, an Episcopal priest of the Diocese of New Jersey (writing for the Center for Barth Studies), "[Conclave, Christian Witness, and the Hope of the Church](#)," Substack page "God Here & Now," accessed on March 15, 2025.

said, are “change, materialism and the preeminence of action.”<sup>3</sup> An understanding of the Church in relation to God’s being, he wrote, is better than a view that Church is in constant flux.

What did Cardinal Benítez mean? Is the Church “what we do next”? Undoubtedly, all Christians agree that we live in hope, believing that God is with us as a guide. We march through life, assuming that it is purposeful, and its full meaning is known to God alone. What made Cardinal Benítez’s line controversial is what precedes it, namely the assertion, “The Church is not a tradition.” To me, these words are hard to swallow. They seem to undercut something fundamental about Catholic Christianity, namely, its connection with the past. Catholics believe that God’s revelation has come down from the time of the Apostles. Revelation is contained in Scripture and tradition.<sup>4</sup> The words of Cardinal Benítez – “The Church is not a tradition” – are disturbing, and they ought to disturb us.

### Apostolicity

Let us begin with the concept of apostolicity. When we recite the creed at Mass, we profess our faith in “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic” Church. The Church is apostolic, we say, because it is founded upon the testimony and spirit of the Apostles of Jesus. It is they who, inspired by his charism and mission, proclaimed their faith to Jews and gentiles. In the centuries since the creed was first expressed in writing, our reverence for apostolicity has deepened. The Church is apostolic, we say, because it stands with the Apostles. When they met Jesus, they encountered the very presence of God. The Apostles shared their faith, first with their fellow Hebrew speakers and then with the wider Greek-speaking world. Even St. Paul, who never knew Jesus before the crucifixion, counted himself an Apostle because of his experience of the risen Lord. *The Acts of the Apostles* describes the Church’s earliest moments. Apostolic experience is decisive for every Christian. The same Holy Spirit that animated them fills us as well.

We are indebted to the apostles. Our faith and practice depend on them. We think about St. Peter, the first to rightly name Jesus as the Messiah (Mk. 8:29). He was also the one to whom Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom (Mt. 16:16). We think about James the son of Zebedee and his brother John, the “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17). They defended Jesus’ dignity (Lk. 9:54) and wanted to sit at his right and left when he came into his kingdom (Mk. 10:37). We think of doubting Thomas, who would not believe in the resurrection without first putting his fingers into the side of Jesus (Jn. 20:27). We even think of the sign of the cross. It is never depicted in the New Testament, but it is almost certainly an apostolic tradition. All of these testify to the Holy Spirit that animated the apostles and inspires us.

Apostolicity characterizes what we call Catholic tradition. We Catholics say that our tradition, along with Sacred Scripture, contains the Gospel. Scripture and tradition reveal who God is. In them we discover the presence of the invisible God. The Apostles, who encountered God in Jesus Christ and who recognized in his voice and person God’s very Word made flesh,

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Liedl, Senior Editor for the *National Catholic Register*, “[Elevating Becoming Over Being](#),” TheCatholicSpirit.com, accessed on March 15, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Vatican I, Third Session, “Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* on the Catholic Faith” (1870), Chapter II, cited in Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, editors, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, revised edition (New York: Alba House, 1982), p. 75.

were filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit set the Church in motion and we continue to pass it on. As we shall see, however, the reality of an apostolic tradition is complicated.

### The Complications of Apostolicity

The apostolicity of the Church, Catholics affirm, is a dogma. Christ founded the Church. He entrusted it to the Apostles. Textbooks distinguish among an apostolicity of origin, of teaching, and of succession.<sup>5</sup> In the 1950s, these three explained apostolicity.

- Origin. We Catholics said, first of all, that the tradition of the Church mediates revelation in a way comparable to Scripture. Tradition is defined by the pope and bishops. In Scripture and tradition, God is revealed. We are apostolic in our *origin*.
- Teaching. Second, the official teaching of the Church, we said, “is” tradition. There is an organic connection between the Church of the present day and the Apostolic Church. The *teaching* of the Church reflects its apostolic tradition.
- Succession. Third, we said that the popes are the *successors* of Peter. They stand in an unbroken line from the time of the Apostles. The apostolic Church and its teaching are, in the words of a 1952 textbook, “where Peter or his successor is” (Ludwig Ott, p. 308).

Apostolicity and tradition are as essential today, I believe, as they were in the 1950s. If we claim to be disciples of Jesus, we do so because the same spirit that animated the Apostles animates us.

Apostolicity, as I said, is complicated. The film “Conclave” reveals just how complicated it is. We Catholics admit that political considerations go into the choice of a new pontiff. There are factions within the Church that vie for ascendance. This is especially true today, when the prestige of the Church has been damaged by scandals that have played out in the world’s newspapers. Scandals put the textbook claim – namely, that the apostolic Church and its teaching “are where Peter or his successor is” – in a different context. Even Catholics ask, “Is the Church today what the Apostles wanted?”

There is a further complication. Apostolic succession is intertwined with doctrine. Doctrinal truth depends on its connection with the Apostles. As Catholics, we profess to believe what the Apostles believed. But since Vatican II, some Catholics have called this principle into doubt. I’m thinking of the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. He regarded the use of the vernacular in the Mass as an “invasion,” he viewed Communion in the hand as a diminution in reverence, and he felt that to describe the Eucharist as a “meal” or “gathering” obscured its proper character as the offering of sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> The followers of Lefebvre – by some estimates,<sup>7</sup> as many as 600,000 – prefer to celebrate the Latin Mass in the Tridentine Rite. This minority has argued that the liturgical reforms of Vatican II were not prescriptions binding on the universal

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<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, translated from the German by Patrick Lynch, edited in English by James Bastible, first published in English in 1955, fourth edition of 1960 (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1974), p. 308. It is a translation of *Grundriss der katholischen Dogmatik* (Freiburg in Breisgau: Herder, 1952).

<sup>6</sup> Marcel Lefebvre, *A Bishop Speaks*, English version by V.S.M. Fraser (Kansas City, MO: Angelus Press, 2007), p. 38 (on the vernacular as an invasion), p. 196 (on communion in the hand), and p. 97 (on the Mass as a sacrifice).

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth D. Whitehead, *Mass Misunderstandings* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2000), p. 10.

Church but experiments that overtook and obscured the Church's long tradition. My point is this: the Lefebvrists certainly do not believe that today's Church is what the Apostles wanted.

We Catholics profess that our Church is one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic – even as we are aware of scandals in the Church. Some of our own fellow Catholics doubt the Church's apostolicity. I have already expressed my conviction: the same Holy Spirit that animated the Apostles fills us as well. In a few minutes I will defend my conviction by sketching recent arguments about tradition that deserve criticism. Then I will turn to the Spirit-filled character of the Church. Before I do so, however, I need to say a word about tradition in philosophy.

### Tradition in Philosophy

As a graduate student, I wrote a dissertation on the Catholic theology of tradition in light of a German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer, who was born in 1900 and died in 2004, proposed a "rehabilitation" of tradition. Since the Enlightenment, he said, tradition had fallen into philosophical disfavor. With the rise of the scientific method, European thinkers wanted to emancipate themselves from tradition. They regarded it as a source of error and prejudice. Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition rejected this. It argued that reason, far from being the enemy of tradition, in fact hinges on it. He said that what we understand as "reasonable," and what we regard as the rational criteria for truth, both depend on realities that can never be brought fully to the light of reason. Tradition shapes what we consider reasonable. Individual truths, demonstrated empirically, are not truth itself. We must not confuse the parts with the whole.

Gadamer was a Protestant Christian. His philosophical rehabilitation of tradition was far from an endorsement of the Catholic view that tradition mediates the revelation of God. But Gadamer recognized the limits of reason. He distinguished between a reality known to the mind alone – the reality being the truth itself – and the way we express and understand that truth. There is a difference. Many people claim to be truthful and try to persuade us with their eloquence. Their arguments, however, may be weak, misleading, or downright false. Eloquence differs from truth. The difference is hard to see, but we can detect it.

St. Thomas Aquinas grasped this point. He maintained that we can indeed know "divine things" such as being, truth, and God. But we know them, St. Thomas said, in an indirect way. We cannot know the truth of God, for instance, as we know the things we see and touch. No, he said, divine truth comes to us by comparison. It is possible to compare God to other things that are not God. For example, we know God by comparison to a loving father. We know God's justice by comparing it to a sound legal judgment. We know God's beauty in comparison to beautiful works of art. Indeed, knowledge of God would not be possible without our mental images of God. So for St. Thomas, divine knowledge is indirect. It is mediated. God is known to us only through the medium of things that are not God.

This is a roundabout way of talking about apostolic tradition, but it leads to my main point. Tradition expresses itself in a variety of ways. We know tradition through our parents, for example, and those who introduced us to faith. We experience it in the liturgy. We listen for an echo of God's voice in catechesis. We hear it in the teachings of the bishops and the pope. All of them mediate the apostolic tradition. Without them, we would not know it. But no one of these "media" of tradition completely expresses the apostolic tradition. That tradition, we Catholics

say, reveals the divine. Through those who share the faith, who pray, catechize, and teach, we encounter God.

Let me return to the film “Conclave.” Cardinal Benítez, I said, criticized his brother cardinals. They were concerned with themselves, he said, and with maintaining power. To them he said, “The Church is not a tradition. . . . The Church is what we do next.” Now we have a philosophical clue for understanding Benítez properly. The Church, he said, is not “a” tradition. It is not the sign of the cross, not the Bible, not the Vatican. It transcends each of them, just as God transcends the mental images by which we know God. The Church is not “a” tradition. It is more than any one tradition. To this extent, Benítez is correct.

The cardinal neglected, however, to say something essential. He did not say that, without the traditions, we would not know God. The Church is not “a” tradition, to be sure. But without traditions, God remains a cipher or an empty word. Without traditions, we neglect the millennia during which we Christians have prayed to God, immersed ourselves in the divine mystery, and taught our children. In a few moments, I will ask you to reflect on my distinction between tradition and traditions. Cardinal Benítez, I believe, missed that important distinction. Philosophy teaches that knowledge of the invisible God always takes place through things that are not God. No one tradition is God, but tradition is essential to knowing God.

### Inadequate Understandings of Tradition

Let us take stock of our progress to this point. We Catholics profess to follow the apostolic tradition. We stand within that tradition because the same Spirit that animated the Apostles animates us. That is my conviction, but not everyone agrees. Some say that scandals in the Church expose it as anything but apostolic. Others say that the Church once was apostolic, but Vatican II experiments obscured the tradition of apostolicity. Having reviewed those arguments, I made a proposal. I suggested that a proper discussion of apostolic tradition requires philosophy. We are mistaken, philosophically speaking, when our sole criterion for truth is the scientific method. There is more to truth than empirical analysis. The heart has its reasons that reason cannot fathom.<sup>8</sup>

St. Thomas said that it is possible to know God, but only through things that are not God. That, I submit, is the correct way to understand tradition. The Church is not “a” tradition, as Cardinal Benítez rightly said in the film “Conclave.” To shrink the Church in that manner would do it violence. But traditions are necessary. Without history, there would be no Church. Traditions themselves are not God, but they are the only ways to God. That is why theologians of an earlier era spoke of “divine” tradition. The divine tradition that reveals God finds its expression in the many traditions of history, some of which, we must admit, are more divine than others. Divine tradition, in short, transcends every one of its expressions.

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<sup>8</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, translated by W. F. Trotter, Introduction by T. S. Eliot (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958), *Pensée* no. 277, p. 78. “Le coeur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît point.” Pascal, *Pensées et Opuscules*, avec une introduction, des notices, des notes par M. Léon Brunschvicg (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1961?), no. 277, p. 458.

I read a recent article in a theological journal about dissent and tradition.<sup>9</sup> The four authors, all associated with the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, argue for the importance of dissent in the Church. They allude to dissent over matters such as sexual ethics, divorce, and the ordination of women, but the authors are not advocating a single issue. Their thesis is about the value of dissent in general. High courts publish dissenting opinions, they say, so why not the Church? It too ought to acknowledge dissent among Catholics.

The Church's Magisterium, the University of Leuven authors contend, refuses to acknowledge dissent. The authors attribute this to the Magisterium's false understanding of tradition. The authors assert that, in the eyes of the pope and bishops, tradition is nothing more than their own teaching. The pope and bishops falsely equate tradition, according to this article, with what they themselves say. It is false, argue the authors, to claim that tradition never changes, that the pope and bishops alone define tradition, and that the laity's role in tradition has no place. The Church does not tolerate dissent, the four authors continue, because the pope and bishops are self-protective. They accuse them of distorting tradition. Tradition, the authors insist, does in fact change. Tradition is more than magisterial teaching. Tradition is made by lay people as well as by the clergy. If the Magisterium rightly understood this, say the four authors, it would welcome and not suppress dissenting opinions.

This deserves thought. The four authors, to their credit, want an honest theology. They dissent from some of the Church's teachings, and they deserve a hearing. But their understanding of tradition is limited. They conceive it in terms of dichotomies. Either tradition changes or it doesn't. Either tradition is more than what the pope and bishops say or it is not. Either lay people shape tradition or they passively receive it from the Magisterium. The authors dichotomize tradition, I believe, because they lack a way to unite the dichotomies. Focusing on the changing expressions of tradition, they neglect the unchanging God who is the source of tradition itself. History changes, yes, but they fail to see that the divine Word in human words remains constant. A narrow focus on the many words, I believe, can obscure the one Word.

The authors from the University of Leuven criticize the time-bound teachings of the Magisterium. Without those time-bound teachings, however, none of us could grasp the eternal reality to which the teachings testify. The authors emphasize the rightful role of the laity in shaping tradition. And in truth, every Catholic plays a part in shaping our reception of the faith. The authors want an honest theology. But there is a difference between the diversity of gifts and the authority of magisterial teaching. All Catholics contribute to tradition, but not all do so authoritatively. In short, the four authors do not distinguish between Tradition (as a transcendent reality) and traditions (the historical events that give it expression).<sup>10</sup> I will ask you, in a few moments, to reflect on this with me. The four authors, by failing to distinguish between tradition and traditions, myopically focus on the concrete expressions alone, neglecting the transcendent.

These critics of the Magisterium blame it for an inadequate understanding of tradition. Their critique echoes theological efforts of the past quarter century. The efforts relate the

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<sup>9</sup> Travis LaCouter, Ryszard Bobrowicz, Taylor Ott, and Judith Gruber, "Contra Silentium Obsequiosum: On the Roman Catholic Approach to Dissent and Tradition," *Theological Studies* 85:4 (December 2024): 652-669.

<sup>10</sup> Yves M.-J. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*, translated (part one) by Michael Naseby and (part two) by Thomas Rainborough (NY: Macmillan, 1967). The original French edition was published by the Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1960 (vol. I) and 1963 (vol. II). Congar distinguishes between tradition and traditions in his discussion of "The Relation between Tradition and Its Monuments," pp. 451 ff.

Church's tradition to philosophies that have arisen since Vatican II. I'm thinking of Postmodernism, Pragmatism, and Nonfoundationalism. These philosophies, to their credit, put us on guard against the manipulation of tradition. *Postmodern Catholics*, for example, warn us of the danger of reducing tradition to traditionalism.<sup>11</sup> Catholic *Pragmatists* remind us that tradition – which we might imagine to be stable, orderly, and consistent at every stage – results from negotiations and compromises that deserve critical attention.<sup>12</sup> Catholic *Nonfoundationalists* remind us that, by raising up any one interpretation of tradition as the foundation of faith, we abbreviate the fullness of tradition and overlook its complexity.<sup>13</sup> These philosophies alert us to the ways in which tradition can be misused and misinterpreted. But each one overlooks the Thomistic distinction between the transcendent reality and the way we express it. Without the concrete expressions of tradition, as St. Thomas said, we would not know the reality. The reality of tradition, I believe, cannot be reduced to its concrete, historical expressions – and these are precisely the focus of Postmodernism, Pragmatism, and Nonfoundationalism.

For that reason, the University of Leuven authors leave me dissatisfied. By focusing on the concrete expressions of tradition and by neglecting the transcendent, they think in dichotomies. They fail to see that the one divine tradition manifests itself in a myriad of changing ways. Emphasizing the self-protectiveness of the pope and bishops, they imply that tradition is not what the Magisterium says. In order to highlight the contribution that all Catholics make to tradition, they neglect the Magisterium's authoritative role. This, I believe, is not right. We need to see that tradition both changes and remains constant, both resides in magisterial teaching and transcends it, and both expresses itself in authoritative pronouncements and also in the life of lay Catholics. The dichotomies offered by the Leuven authors keep us from seeing things in a unified way.

### Invitation to Dialogue

Let us review our argument and have a discussion. We started with the words of Cardinal Benítez from "Conclave." He said, "The Church is not a tradition . . . . The Church is what we do next." He rebuked his brother cardinals for their self-absorption and lust for power. Benítez is correct, I maintain, in saying that the Church is not "a" tradition. What the Vatican does at any one moment is not the Church. But Cardinal Benítez is incorrect in suggesting that the Church and tradition are separate. He is wrong to imply that the Church only has to do with

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<sup>11</sup> Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, translation by Brian Doyle of *Onderbroken traditie. Heeft het christelijke verhaal nog toekomst?* [Dutch: *Interrupted tradition. Does the Christian story still have a future?*], No. 30 in the series *Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs*, originally published in Kapellen by Pelckmans, 1999 (Louvain, Belgium and Dudley, Massachusetts: Peeters Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Terrence E. Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000). On p. 37 of *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, Tilley aligns himself with those "rare" postmodern theorists who write about tradition as "constructs." "All traditions are in some ways constructed," he writes, "by those who participate in them" (16).

<sup>13</sup> John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). In Thiel's discussion of "Arguments without Foundations" (pp. 116 ff.), he sketches his own position, "Nonfoundationalism" (which is also the title of a book that he published in 1994). Nonfoundationalism is indebted to analytic philosophy's critique of "The Myth of the Given," the title of a 1956 lecture by Wilfrid Sellars. No foundation, not even God, should be considered a "given," that is, accepted without critique.

the future, with “what we do next.” To support my point, I went back to the arguments of St. Thomas. He said that we do not know God directly, but instead through things, such as our own mental images, things that are not God. I applied that insight to tradition. The Church tells us that the gospel, the Good News of God, is contained in tradition and Scripture. Tradition and Scripture are not God, but through them, God speaks to us. Cardinal Benítez said that the Church is not “a” tradition. True enough. But the traditions of the Church do reveal God. They raise our minds to what we would not know without them. We are wrong to confuse any tradition with the unknown and unseen God, but the traditions remain invaluable. They make God knowable and visible.

At the outset I said that I would not propose any criteria for assessing the apostolicity of the Church. No one can stand apart from faith, I believe, and truly pass judgment on it. But what happens when some of the Church’s traditions do not seem apostolic? I proposed that we reflect on the difference between tradition and traditions. No one person can know the fullness of divine tradition, I said, any more than one can know the fullness of God. But we can know God indirectly, through things that are not God. The same is true, I maintain, for tradition. We know our Catholic tradition through the many traditions that it comprises. But no one of those traditions is divine tradition itself. Now I invite you to weigh what I have said. How does my distinction between tradition and traditions help us to answer our question, “Is today’s Church what the Apostles wanted?”

### Christology and Tradition

It is not surprising that we understand tradition in different ways. The Church itself, when it speaks of tradition, is very concrete. Only on occasion does it distinguish between historical traditions and tradition as a transcendent whole. Vatican I, for example, spoke of “unwritten traditions which have come down to us, having been received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself.”<sup>14</sup> Christ spoke words and the Apostles received them. Nothing could be more concrete than that. Vatican I did not distinguish, as I want to do, between “divine tradition” and many traditions, all of them less than divine, that express it.

Vatican II, however, does seem to make the distinction I am making. We see it in *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. *Lumen Gentium*, for example, says that the apostolic tradition is “manifested” in the bishops (no. 20). It says that tradition is “expressed” in liturgical rites, such as the Eucharistic words of Jesus (no. 21). It says that tradition draws attention to Mary, the mother of Jesus (no. 55). In each of these, something concrete – the bishops, the liturgy, and Mary – makes the tradition, itself transcendent, visible and knowable. But tradition is not identical with any one of these traditions.

What happens when some of the Church’s traditions do not seem apostolic? Earlier I said that no one can stand apart from faith and truly pass judgment on it. We are members of the Church and no one of us is superior to it. But as members, we must be honest. We have a duty to speak out when something is put forward in the name of tradition that does not correspond to what the Apostles believed. God’s Spirit dwells with us, the people of God. The privilege of speaking freely is ours by right.

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<sup>14</sup> See Neuner and Dupuis, footnote 2.



Ultimately, the distinction between a transcendent tradition and its concrete expression brings us back to Jesus himself. The Gospel of John speaks of Jesus Christ as the “word” of God. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Son of God shared our human nature. In Jesus, we say, God “spoke.” In him, the divine Word became visible and audible. The mystery of the unseen God cannot be reduced to the humanity of Jesus. But through Jesus’ humanity, we hear God’s voice. The Word that became flesh is the divine Word, speaking to us.

John’s Gospel makes this clear in a pointed exchange with Philip the Apostle. It takes place at the Last Supper. Jesus gently rebukes those at the table with him. “If you had known me,” he says, “you would have known my Father also” (14:7). This provokes Philip. He confronts the difference between the humanity of Jesus and the divinity of God the Son. In the very next gospel verse, Philip voices a kind of challenge. “Lord,” he says, “show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.” At this, Jesus seems to be disappointed. “Have I been with you so long,” he tells Philip, “and yet you do not know me?” Jesus is not saying that he is God the Father. After all, he has prayed to his Father. Moreover, Jesus gave the Our Father to his Apostles, teaching them to pray. His prayer signals his humanity. But in this dialogue with the Apostle Philip, Jesus alludes to himself as the Word of God. He says to Philip, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” Here Jesus acknowledges his own human nature as a visible sign. He also invites us to recognize in his own humanity the unseen divine nature. Through his visible human nature, we glimpse the invisible God. Every Christian knows that Jesus is not God the Father, but rather the Son of God. He is the divine Word who became flesh. He makes God visible.

This helps us understand the difference between the apostolic tradition in itself and the many traditions that reveal it. The many traditions express the one, but they must be distinguished from it. Without those traditions, however, we would not know the apostolic tradition. It is there, in that tradition, that we stand. The very spirit of the Apostles is our spirit too. That’s why the apostolic tradition remains important. That’s why we profess the Church’s apostolicity. That’s why our Church, for all its problems, is the Church the Apostles wanted.