

ESSAY
BA course year 1 no. 5
"Revelation"

Trace the history of the doctrine of Tradition, with particular focus on the teaching of the Fathers, the Council of Trent, and the Second Vatican Council Chapter 2. To what extent does the Catholic idea of revelation as expressed in DV Chapter 1 require a living tradition as well as a written scriptures? To what extent does Vatican II support a "two-source" theory of Scripture and Tradition?

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1. Introduction

Before we are going to look at the history of Tradition we have to define this word:

The word “tradition” derives from the Latin, “traditio”, corresponding to the Greek “paradosis”: both mean “transmission”. The basic meaning refers to the transmission in the church, of beliefs, doctrines, rituals, and entitles such as the scriptures.¹ But it does not only mean an oral tradition but also other ways of transmission, e.g. the sacraments.

The transmission of divine revelation is known as the transmission of Jesus Christ, who is the revelation of God, and is transmitted by words / by the Gospel.

In the following pages we'll look more closely on the history of the revelation and the history of Tradition.

2. History of Revelation

Prior to Jesus Christ there has already been a revelation of God, starting with Adam and Eve (preternatural gifts), the Fall, Abraham, Moses (10 commandments) and the Prophets.

(DV 3: “...he manifested himself to our first parents from the very beginning. After the fall, he buoyed them up with the hope of salvation, by promising redemption (cf. Gen. 3:15); and he has never ceased to take care of the human race. For he wishes to give eternal life to all those who seek salvation by patience in well-doing (cf. Rom. 2:6-7). In his own time God called Abraham, and made him into a great nation (cf. Gen. 12:2). After the era of the patriarchs, he taught this nation, by Moses and the prophets, to recognize him as the only living and true God, as a provident Father and just judge. He taught them, too, to look for the promised Saviour. And so, throughout the ages, he prepared the way for the Gospel.”)

After the prophets Jesus Christ came as the presence of God (self-manifestation cf. Dei Verbum I 4) and with the death of his last apostle the public revelation ended – until Jesus Christ will return.

(DV 4: “After God had spoken many times and in various ways through the prophets, ‘in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son’ (Heb. 1:1-2). For he

¹ The New Dictionary of Theology

sent his Son, the eternal Word who enlightens all men, to dwell among men and to tell them about the inner life of God.”)

With the Gospel given to us human beings, the two sources of revelation, Tradition and Scripture, followed as a deposit of faith.

3. History of Tradition

When Christians gave up their early expectation of a prompt return of Christ in glory, it became imperative, in the second century, to agree on the sources of authentic teaching. From being chiefly prophetic, the Christian faith became predominantly historical.

3.1 The Church Fathers

The Church Fathers (from Irenaeus, in “Against the Heretics”, to Vincent of Lerins, in the “Commonitorium”), who can be called the first witnesses to Tradition, drew on a stoic philosophical model to determine that binding Christian tradition should have the three marks of “antiquity, universality and consensus”. In the early times the Gospel was mainly passed on to next generation orally, as a tradition of that time. No fixed canon of the New Testament existed. But over the years streams grew, who interpreted the gospel on their own, false claims were clearly at work, especially in the second century the Gnostic heresy flourished. There are a lot of sources, where the fear of this false understanding is preserved for us; here are two examples:

St. Paul’s First Letter to Timothy (1 Tim 6:20): *“Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith.”*²

History of the Church by Eusebius on Papias, a bishop of Smyrna (H.E. III.39): *“Papias also gives certain other things as having come down to him by unwritten tradition, and some strange parables of the Saviour and pieces of teaching, and certain other things of somewhat mythical character.”*³

The Gnostics did see the universe no longer as the image of God – as the bible sees it – but rather as a prison from which escape must be the aim of life. They believed in the superiority of mind over flesh and in the radical evil of matter, and their salvation was found in the secret teachings from their own special sources of information or their own interpretation of Christian tradition and scripture.

² *The Theology of Tradition*, Anthony Meredith SJ

To react on this danger, the early Fathers of Church had a twofold task: the establishing of the Canon of the New Testament and the attempt to discover some criterion whereby to decide which were the true and which the false understanding of evidence.

But how were they able to decide whether the interpretation or scripture was authentic or inauthentic? And how was the Church to refute the claim that the Holy Spirit had spoken through their prophets in a better way than he had done through the apostles (claim advanced by the Montanists)? To find a solution of these problems the appeal was made over the heads of the heretics to the teaching and authority of the apostles: "Church declared that it stood by the Apostolic teaching, summed up in the Apostolic rule of faith and in general by the tradition of the Church as founded by the Apostles."⁴

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, wrote in his five-volume-book "Adversus Haereses":
"When we appeal to that tradition which is kept by the successive elders in the churches, they oppose that tradition and lay claim to a wisdom superior to that of both elders and apostles." Further on he says: *"You can establish true doctrine by appealing to the teaching of those who have the closest links with those authors and eyewitnesses of the faith, the apostles."*

In 206 Tertullian wrote a book called "De Praescriptione Haereticorum", in which he rejected any over-simplified doctrine to see the scripture alone (Scriptura sola). For him Scripture does not provide its readers with a clue to its own meaning. There has to be a standard to judge by.

In the interest of preserving sound doctrine against the heretics, the patristic age established the canon of the New Testament and provided its own elaborate commentaries on the Word of God, which themselves as time went on came to be treated as authoritative.

*"Perhaps the most important lesson, however, the age of the Fathers, the decrees of general councils and the liturgy contain is not to be thought of as scraps of unscriptural information, but rather aspects of the saving mystery at least implied by the scriptures."*⁵

This has been adopted by the Second Vatican Council, to manifest that Scripture and Tradition are of equal value, everyone can exist side by side with the other.

³ *The Theology of Tradition*, Anthony Meredith SJ

⁴ *Schism in the Early Church*, Dr. S. L. Greenslade

⁵ *The Theology of Tradition*, Anthony Meredith SJ

3.2 The Council of Trent (1545-47, 1551-52, 1562-63)

The teaching of the Council of Trent on the transmission of revealed doctrine was framed in two decrees approved on 8th April 1546. In its first document the Council declares Old and New Testament and also the apostolic traditions as normative for Christians. The second document starts with the defense of the Latin Vulgate as “authentic” for church use and goes on with norms for the correct interpretation of the Bible. Trent’s reception of the biblical books coincided with its formal clarification of the contents and limits of Scripture.

The second major step of this council was the reception of normative apostolic traditions along with the Scripture – in reaction on the streams of the Reformation, which brought the notion of tradition into question historically and theologically (=> “*Decretum de libris sacris et de traditionibus recipiendis*”). In this response Trent presupposes that the apostolic church “did exist, with living faith implanted in believing hearts, before the composition of the New Testament books.”⁶ They explained their reception as “apostolic in origin” (bishops => apostles) and “transmitted in unbroken succession to the living, teaching and worshiping church of today”. So this tradition had to be normative.

For the Council of Trent the gospel is *one* source of saving truth (this is picked up by the Second Vatican Council, as we’ll see later) and it suggests that the traditions are materially distinct from Scripture rather than just differentiating them modally from Scripture.

In the following centuries theology – mainly forced by the counter-Reformation - got to the conviction that Scripture and Tradition are “two sources”, parallel and diverse in content, instead of being “two loci” in which church and theology find concrete expressions of the one gospel. It is taught that the gospel is contained “partim” in Scripture and “partim” in the Tradition – “*a formulation that the council had replaced with the more open wording ‘et... et’*”⁷. Trent even left open the question whether or not tradition is a source additional to scripture or parallel to scripture. In this way the dual-source theory was created.

⁶ *Dictionary of fundamental Theology*, Latourelle / Fisichella

⁷ *Dictionary of fundamental Theology*, Latourelle / Fisichella

3.3 The Second Vatican Council (1962 – 65)

In the 1940's and 50's, discussion of several points in the Catholic concept of tradition prepared the ground for Vatican II. The constitution *Dei Verbum* was promulgated at Vatican II on 18th November 1965. It was a work of a "mixed commission" established by John XXIII. on 21st November 1962.

With the document "Dei Verbum" Vatican II linked up with the documents of the Council of Trent in saying that the gospel is one source of all saving truth (DV 7 "*This Gospel was to be the source of all saving truth and moral discipline.*")⁸. The sacred tradition and Holy Scripture spring from the same divine source and form an unity (DV 9 "*Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, some together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal.*"). Additionally the special standing of Scripture in the progress of handing down is described as "*Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit*" (DV 9), compared to this "*Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God...*" (DV 9).

Especially with the deepening of the concept of revelation (DV 2 – 6) and the concept of the church (*Lumen Gentium*) the relationship between Scripture and Tradition changed and particularly the understanding of tradition got new determined.

Tradition was no longer seen as a collection of individual truths but as the presence of God's word (DV 8 "*The sayings of the Holy Fathers are a witness to the life-giving presence of this Tradition, showing how its riches are poured out in the practice and life of the Church, in her belief and her prayer.*").

Vatican II recovers a comprehensive understanding of tradition and its role in the life of the Church, as well as it shows its theological and historical dimension.

Conferring to session IV of the Council of Trent the Second Vatican Council stated that Scripture and Tradition are both in equal value (DV 9 "*Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal feelings of devotion and reverence.*").

The scholars disagreed – in studying the Council of Trent – as to the meaning of "and" (et), which ties together the scriptures and the traditions (in the decree of

⁸ *Vatican Council II, Volume 1*, Austin Flannery, O.P.

1546): Does the expression “partim... partim” – which Council Fathers wanted to say, but which didn’t find a place in the final wording - mean “partly... partly” or “and”? Does “and” imply that revelation is partly in each, or totally in both, or partly in one and totally in the other?

The answers to this questions and the discussion on the “two-source” theory will follow in article 5 of this essay.

4. To what extent does the Catholic idea of revelation (DV I) require a living tradition as well as written scriptures?

Dei Verbum emphasizes throughout the interconnection and unity of Scripture and Tradition, they both can’t be separated. Scripture can be seen as the written part of or second witness to Tradition.

“Holy Scripture ... is the divinely inspired record which testifies to the privileged experience that men had of the divine in their lives. It is, therefore, the interpretive norm for the Church’s experience of revelation throughout the centuries. Similarly, tradition in its primary meaning refers to the whole dynamic life of God’s people guided by the authoritative teaching of His ministers. A written word without a life would be an empty word; a life without a word to interpret it would be an unintelligible life. Holy Scripture and tradition thus constitute the inseparable elements in the Church’s understanding, possession, development, and communication of God’s revelation to mankind.”⁹

Historically seen the Gospel might have been passed on to other nations and other generations in the early years orally, as it wasn’t usual that everybody was able to read and write, only a few “chosen” people have had this knowledge. A relic of this times might be the reading of the gospel and the homily in Mass.

Some elements of the Tradition can’t even be described detailed in writing, e.g. elements of sacramental rites, the liturgy and ecclesiastical discipline. They have to be passed on by word and living, by witnessing. Would it have been written down completely without living it, nobody would be able today to interpretate the 2000-year-old scriptures.

Additionally would the Bible lend itself to a variety of interpretations – some might be contradictory – without a living tradition.

Scripture and Tradition do support each other.

There's only one theological problem: Granted that the revelation is final, Church couldn't add any doctrines to the original deposit of revelation, but on the other hand the doctrine develops through the Holy Spirit, which is in the Church. So there's the question how this development of doctrine can occur with retaining contact to the original sources. Three theories on this case do exist – the logical, the transformist and the theological theory. In 1846 Cardinal Newman has written an essay on the development of Christian Doctrine, which influenced the documents of Vatican II.

5. To what extent does Vatican II support a “two-source” theory of Scripture and Tradition?

The Counter-Reformation took the Council of Trent to mean that scripture and tradition are two complementary sources of Christian doctrine, each containing one part of the divine revelation. This seemed to oppose the Catholic concept of tradition to the Protestant notion of “Scripture alone” as the only source of faith.

Above all, the Second Vatican Council wanted to restore the reading of Scripture as a major element in Catholic theology. While it did not end debate, it favoured a non-dualistic view of Tradition and Scripture.

The Second Vatican Council sees Scripture and Tradition not as two separate parts, but as two aspects of the same living stream, of the same source, the Word of God (DV 9: “*the same divine well-spring*”). This two streams come together “in some fashion to form one thing” (DV 10: “*Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church*”).

But again, Vatican II refuses to find an answer to the question whether there are any truths in addition to those contained in Scripture to be found in Tradition.

DV 9: “Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal feelings of devotion and reverence.”

This means that the Church draws her certainty about revealed doctrine from Tradition as well as Scripture.

Tradition itself is described as both process and content.

⁹ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, McGraw Hill

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