

1 Some definitions:

1.1 As a secular term, "tradition" means either the handing on of the achievements of the past, or the knowledge and techniques which are handed on.

1.1.1 Tradition, in this sense, is always cumulative: each generation receives tradition from the past, adds to it, and passes on the enriched result to succeeding generations.

1.2 In different traditions the originating period can have greater or lesser importance.

1.2.1 Reflect, for example, on the ongoing disagreement about the significance of the "original intent" of the framers of the American Constitution.

1.3 In a specifically Christian sense, tradition is the handing on of the story of Jesus as the story of one who lives. The term can also refer to what is handed on, and in this case it means Jesus' story as the story of one who lives.

1.3.1 Paul was aware of the importance of this in 1 Cor 11, where he talked of handing on the tradition which he received from the Lord, and where he implied this is an all-important task. (This is the text which deals with the Eucharist.)

1.4 The originating events, the events which stand at the beginning of Christian history, are all-important for both Catholics and Protestants.

1.4.1 But, in general, Catholics have been more willing to see Christian tradition as cumulative, to welcome additions, and to justify them in the name of the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit as the church moves on its way through history.

1.4.2 Protestants, on the other hand, have strongly emphasized the absolute priority of the originating events, as these are preserved in the New Testament.

1.4.3 At Vatican II, in the Constitution on Divine Revelation, chapter 2 § 10, the Catholic church took a long step toward making the traditional Protestant view its own.

2 The church itself, as the ongoing community of disciples, came into existence to insure that Jesus' message would be preached as the word of one who lives.

2.1 The church came into existence gradually, over the span of many decades, as Jesus' followers become more and more aware of what was necessary to insure the continuation of his message.

2.1.1 This is what it means to speak of Jesus' founding of the church. The coming-to-be of the church is the definitive act of handing on the message of Jesus.

- 2.2 The writing of the NT and the coming-to-be of the church are two sides of the same event.
- 2.3 In the NT, the originating events (Jesus' words and actions) attained a form in which they could play a critical role in Christian life.
 - 2.3.1 It was in the writing of the NT (particularly the Gospels and the authentic letters of Paul) that the originating tradition took on definitive form and assumed critical power.
- 2.4 There was no complete agreement in the early church about this originating tradition, and this, too, is recorded in scripture.
 - 2.4.1 For this reason we cannot avoid the question of the canon within the canon: that is, the question of which parts of scripture bring us to the authentic message of Jesus, and can therefore be used as a diagnostic tool to judge other parts of the NT, as well as everything in Christian faith and life.
- 3 The roots of the Christian tradition were Jewish.
 - 3.1 But at the very beginning of tradition, in Jesus himself, the Christian tradition broke with Judaism, and specifically with that which was most characteristic of Judaism - the Law - and it did this in a very radical way. The historical Jesus criticized the very substance of the Law - that is, the notion that by correct observance of dogmatic, moral, and ceremonial norms, we can create a claim against God himself.
 - 3.1.1 However, the Jews who followed Jesus and who formed the nucleus of the Jewish-Christian church apparently did not see this; they seemed unwilling to accept the freedom which Jesus wanted to give them. (Mk 2:20; Mk 2:23-28)
 - 3.1.2 Paradoxically, Jesus' enemies among the priests, the Scribes, and the Pharisees may have understood him much better than his early followers.
 - 3.1.3 This may be why many priests and Pharisees came into the church in Jerusalem in the thirties and forties (cf. Acts 6:7, for the priests, and Acts 15:5, for the Pharisees); they found in it a Jewish sect and a quite legalistic community much to their liking.
 - 3.1.4 This shows that the tradition was present only in an inchoate way, and partly formed in the early Jerusalem community. This (the imperfect form in which the tradition was preserved) would occur again and again in the later history of the church.
 - 3.2 Paul saw the problem of the Law very clearly and summed up his own solution in Rom 10:4: "Christ is the end of the Law."
 - 3.2.1 But the tradition did not prevail without opposition; Paul had

had difficulty with Jewish-Christians, who wanted to imposed the burden of the Law on the new converts.

- 4 The meeting of Paul with the leaders of the Jerusalem church about 49 A.D. recalled the church to its originating tradition.
 - 4.1 Paul's view prevailed, and Christianity could no longer be regarded as a Jewish sect. But it was a victory which had to be defended for about thirty years after Paul's time.
 - 4.2 Paul's triumph marked the victory of the position which Jesus himself represented, and it meant the definitive break with Judaism.
- 5 Peter seems to have had an important role in preserving the Christian tradition, not because he was a theologian or a writer, but because he was the spokesman for the first group of disciples, and because it was commonly accepted that the risen Lord had first appeared to him.
 - 5.1 What Peter did was important; it had normative character (which is why Paul was so angered by Peter's conduct in Antioch).
 - 5.2 Both Matthew and John, in different ways, emphasize Peter's responsibility for the church.
 - 5.3 Perhaps most important was that Peter was seen as the one with whom it was important to be in agreement, in communion. (This is also a reason for Paul's insistence on agreement with Peter at the Council of Jerusalem in 49 A.D.)
- 6 The Gospels, which are the work of different Jewish-Christian communities from the late sixties to the early nineties, give us a picture of Jesus which has been edited to some degree in line with Jewish concerns, but they do make it possible to find the real historical Jesus behind these edited accounts.
 - 6.1 They can do this, of course, only when they are read historically and critically.
 - 6.2 It is in Mark's Gospel that the Jesus tradition was most faithfully preserved.
 - 6.2.1 But this was the very Gospel which, from the second century on, was read less than the others because of the worthless Papias tradition.
- 7 However, the originating tradition which is visible in the Gospels was a difficult one to pass on, because the church in, for, and by which it was written ceased to exist within little more than thirty years.
 - 7.1 If the Jewish-Christian church had continued in existence, there might have been a gradual recovery of the historical Jesus about the turn of the second century.
 - 7.2 But the Jewish-Christian church died out. The church turned to the Greek world, but this world lacked the context needed for a full understanding of the Gospels, and did not have the historical knowledge to

- create it.
- 7.3 Greek Christianity made use of allegorical exegesis, and made of the Christian message a kind of mystical code to use in unraveling the mystery of life, in a way which had little to do with the original meaning of the text
- 8 In the closing years of the first century, the institution of episcopacy arose, and the main function of the "bishop" was that of preserving the tradition and passing it on intact.
 - 8.1 This is the notion of the role of bishop which is preserved especially in the Pastoral Epistles (1,2 Timothy and Titus).
- 9 The Gnostic crisis of the second century led to renewed concern that the originating tradition be passed down intact. This concern expressed itself in two ways:
 - 9.1 It strengthened the position of the church of Rome, because Irenaeus and other opponents of the Gnostics argued that the tradition had been preserved in its purity in the church of Rome.
 - 9.2 It led to efforts to determine precisely what writings belonged to the NT, because it was recognized that these canonical writings stood at the source of the tradition.
- 10 After the Gnostic crisis and as the years passed, the NT was more and more often called on to answer questions which arose from Greek philosophy - particularly that of Plato.
 - 10.1 This was already happening at the time of the Apologists (about 150 A.D.) and it was in full swing by the time of Clement of Alexandria, about 180 A.D. Toward 250 we find it in the works of Origen, and then at Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon Greek philosophical concepts were officially accepted into the church as a privileged way of articulating the faith.
 - 10.2 In general, the questions raised at these councils would have been almost completely unintelligible to the men and women of NT times, just as they are to most Christians today.
 - 10.3 The net effect of this process was the unfortunate de-emphasis of something central to the tradition: the humanity of Jesus. Jesus was gradually "divinized" - that is, he was made to conform to what Greek philosophy thought a divine being should look like and act like.
 - 10.3.1 It is important to distinguish this false "divinizing" from an understanding of the fact that God is exhaustively revealed in the integral humanity of Jesus.
- 11 In the West, the Christian tradition was given shape by Augustine, between about 390 A.D. and his death in 430.
 - 11.1 Augustine's exegesis was allegorical, but allegorical exegesis is inca-

- pable of exercising a critical role in regard to faith and life.
- 11.2 His theology of grace and his theology of the sacraments led to a certain "mechanizing" of sacramental practice, and to a diminishing of the role of the faith of the recipient.
 - 11.3 Augustine became obsessed with the question of predestination in his later years, and his "god" began to look more and more like a vicious and arbitrary sadist. This represented a dangerous departure from the NT tradition of a merciful God, and would appear in later forms of theology which were inspired by this aspect of Augustine's thought (Calvinism and Jansenism are two examples).
- 12 Shortly after the year 400, the faith began to be passed to the Germanic peoples who were pouring into the Western Empire. Many of them had been Arians, but after 500 most of them became Catholics.
 - 12.1 They had never been well-instructed, and they were not given a liturgy and scripture in their own languages.
 - 12.1.1 As a result, their contact with the originating tradition (scripture) was tenuous in the extreme.
 - 12.1.2 What was called "faith" was often little more than superstition.
 - 12.2 During this period and up to the time of the Council of Trent, the word "tradition" came to mean "what is done in the church and has been done for a long time."
 - 13 The monastic movement, which originated in Egypt at the end of the third century and spread to the west in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, played a key role in preserving the tradition, because much of their day was spent in meditative reading of scripture.
 - 13.1 Up until about the year 1000, the monasteries (where at least some of the monks learned Latin and therefore understood the liturgy and scripture) were the guardians of the originating tradition.
 - 13.2 Where monasteries had been founded, the monks would often go into the surrounding countryside to preach, and lay-people would come to the monastery for liturgy. In this way some of the laity were brought into contact with the word of God.
 - 13.3 In Cluny, the monastic movement stretched a reforming hand into Rome itself.
 - 13.3.1 But unfortunately, the message they got was not really scriptural ("I am among you as one who serves") but rather the conviction that churchmen must assert their independence of political rulers and their authority over them.
 - 14 In the early medieval period clergy were often poorly trained. Churchmen often lived lives which were a scandal and an insult to the Gospels, and laypeople

were beginning to suspect that something was wrong.

- 14.1 High churchmen were often from the nobility and lived more like secular lords than leaders of the church.
- 14.2 From about the middle of the twelfth century on, the call began to be raised for the reform of the church, and many sensed that this could come about only by listening again to the critical voice of scripture.
 - 14.2.1 About 1175 Pierre Waldes, in Lyons, urged that scripture be made available in the vernacular languages; but the Council of Toulouse (1229, at the end of the Albigensian Crusade) forbade such translations, and thus choked off the critical power of the Christian tradition.
 - 14.2.2 Wicliffe made the same demands in the late 1300's in England - he appealed directly to the ideals of the early church which were so different from the scandalous life of the clergy in his own day.
 - 14.2.3 Hus did the same thing in the early 1400's in Bohemia, and was burned at the stake in Konstanz for his trouble.
- 15 Between 1100 and 1300, scholasticism (the attempt to penetrate the mysteries of the faith by making use of the philosophy of ancient Greece - particularly that of Aristotle) became the favored way of doing theology.
 - 15.1 The achievements of the scholastics were often brilliant, but they often ran the risk of diluting the Christian message with material from un-Christian philosophies.
 - 15.2 Between the thirteenth century and Vatican II, this scholastic tradition was often confused, by Catholics, with tradition itself.
- 16 Medieval and renaissance churchmen developed efficient ways of avoiding the reform for which many were calling, and by the early 1500's, the situation was becoming impossible. The Renaissance Papacy was an ongoing scandal. The only road to reform was to open up the channel to the originating tradition, and it was Luther who did this.
 - 16.1 Unfortunately, he had to do this against the corrupt church of his day. The church had become so adept at blunting the call for reform that it could deal with Luther only by throwing him out of the church.
 - 16.2 Luther was able to do this because he had a unique relationship to the scriptural word, and he knew that it had the power to transform the individual and the community.