

Tradition

Dear pilgrims,

You are taking part in the pilgrimage of Our Lady of Christendom, one of the 3 founding pillars of which is **Tradition**. It's a word that comes up a lot in the news:

we talk about the *traditionalists*, the *traditionalist world*, the *traditional Mass*, etc. But these notions are often confused, and this does not help to move forward in truth. So let's take the time to understand what it's all about.

The Tradition of which we are speaking here is written with a capital T.

It should not be confused with human "traditions", for example cultural traditions, even if there is a link between the two.

Generally speaking, the word "tradition" comes from the Latin *tradere*, which means "to transmit": a tradition is **a content** (for example: an inheritance, an art, etc.) that **is passed on** from generation to generation.

But the Tradition (with a capital T) has a double particularity:

- **Its content is of divine origin:** it is Revelation ;
- **Its means of transmission is supernatural**, because it is **the Church** whose mission is to transmit Revelation continuously, with special assistance from God.



Nativity, Don Silvestro dei Gherarducci (1339-1399)

The Revelation

To understand this, let's start from the beginning. We have an extraordinary destiny: to see God face to face, to participate in his beatitude. But this destiny is so high that **God has chosen to reveal himself to men, so that men may know this destiny, and especially the means to achieve it.** This Revelation, which begins in the Old Testament, culminates in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the Word of God, in the New Testament.

The set of these revealed truths is called the "**deposit of faith**". In its content, **this deposit is completed at the death of the last apostle:** no new public revelation is to be expected, no new truth is to be added. **And the fundamental role of the Church is to preserve, transmit, and explain this deposit of faith.**¹ It is a question of the salvation of souls! Christ's message must reach all generations, for God "*wills that **all men** should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth,*"² that is, to the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Sacred Scripture and Tradition

This transmission of the revealed deposit is carried out by two main routes:

- **By Sacred Scripture**, inspired by God;
- Through **oral preaching, the faith of the Church, the practices of the Church (sacramental order, liturgy, etc.).** It is this, as distinguished from Sacred Scripture, that is called "Tradition" in the strict sense.

Sacred Scripture and Tradition spring from the same source, they transmit to men the same deposit of faith, but by two distinct and complementary paths. Sacred Scripture must not be disconnected from^{Tradition3}: in a certain way, the oral transmission of Christ's words **preceded** the writing of the books of the New Testament, so that **Sacred Scripture is rightly interpreted only in the Tradition of the Church.** This is a very important point of disagreement with the Protestants, who cling to Scripture alone, "*Sola Scriptura*," without the help of the

1. Vatican I, *Pastor aeternus*, 4: "For the Holy Spirit was not promised to the successors of Peter to make known a new doctrine under his revelation, but that with his assistance they might keep holy and faithfully expound the Revelation handed down by the apostles, that is, the deposit of faith"; cf. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 4; Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, 6.

2. 1 Tim 2:4.

3. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 14.

of Tradition and the Magisterium to interpret it accurately... As a result, there are today multiple variants and subdivisions among Protestants with doctrines that are sometimes totally opposed, while there is only one Catholic Church, united by one and the same faith.

The different organs of Tradition

The role of **guarding, transmitting, and explaining this deposit of faith** belongs in the first place, and primarily, to **the Magisterium of the Church**, that is, to the pope first, and then to the bishops in communion with the Pope. They constitute **the teaching Church** : they have a magisterial authority that comes directly from God. Under certain very specific conditions, the Magisterium of the Church can be clothed with *infallibility* in its teaching⁴: in these cases it cannot err. This is the case, for example, with the proclamation of a dogma by the pope, or with the declarations and condemnations of certain councils.

However, this role cannot be limited to the pope and the bishops alone: *under the paternal vigilance of the teaching Church*, it is also up to other secondary actors to " *transmit the deposit* ": the Fathers of the Church, the Doctors of the Church, the preachers, the approved writers... among them, the Church has especially recognized the eminent role of Saint Thomas Aquinas⁵.

The role of the faithful and the laity **must not be neglected either**. Because of the presence of theological faith in them, it is their duty to preserve and transmit this deposit of faith, living and proclaiming it, through the **witness of faith**. In them, faith acts as an "inner instinct"

4. This is infallibility *in docendo*. The criteria of infallibility were taught at the First Vatican Council. Concretely, when **the pope alone** ("papal magisterium"), or **the pope with the subordinate bishops** ("universal magisterium") directly teaches a truth, addressing the whole Church, and that **truth is presented as revealed, or necessarily linked to revelation, or to be believed compulsorily**, the magisterium is then infallible, and the faithful must respond with absolute and irrevocable adherence. In other cases, the magisterium is " *simply authentic* ", not infallible, and the faithful are called to a docile, but revocable, assent.

5. Pius X, *Doctoris Angelici*, 29 June 1914; PIUS XI, *Studiorum Ducem*, 29 June 1923; PAUL VI, *Lumen Ecclesiae*, 20 November 1974, 22: " *The Church covers with her authority the doctrine of St Thomas and uses it as an instrument of choice, so that, as much as and more than her other great doctors, he extends his magisterium in some way.*" Cf. Vatican II, *Optatam Totius*, Decree on the Formation of Priests, 16, which recommends that seminarians take him as their teacher; and JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et ratio*, 14 September 1998, 78: " *The demands of reason and the strength of faith have found the highest synthesis that thought has ever achieved in the reflection of Saint Thomas.* »

which makes them incline in the direction of truth, **at least by an ability to refuse what contradicts the Truth**, to "**feel error**". And collectively, when the Christian people are in agreement on a truth perceived as revealed, they also enjoy an infallibility⁶: this is infallibility *in credendo*, or the "*sensus fidelium*"⁷. But be careful: **the exercise of this *sensus fidelium* is never independent, it requires fidelity to the permanent Magisterium of the Church** (here again, Protestant doctrine, with "free examination", departs from Catholic doctrine) This is why it has nothing to do with possible claims by the faithful (even numerous, or even the majority!) who, in the name of progress, would like to change the infallible divine constitutions of the Church, as is claimed today with a false conception of synodality. This is also why **a part of the Church can never** proclaim itself to be "Tradition", independently of the teaching Church (pope + bishops).

Is Tradition fixed?

The deposit of faith **is immutable in its content**: since the death of the last apostle, there is no new truth to add. This deposit contains **explicit elements**, very clear to all since the earliest times of the Church; but also **implicit elements**, truths that will be better and better understood by the Christian people and explained by the Magisterium: **these truths have been in the divine deposit from the beginning**, but will not be manifested until later. under the assistance of the Holy Spirit. So **we can say that there are new dogmas, new definitions, but no new truths**. We can cite, for example, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (proclaimed in 1854), of the Assumption (1950), or certain points concerning the Eucharist, definitively explained by the Council of Trent...

6. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 12: " *The universality of the faithful, having the anointing that comes from the Holy One, cannot be mistaken in the faith; and this particular gift which she possesses she manifests in the supernatural sense of faith which is that of the whole people.* »

7. Cf. J. RATZINGER, *Called to Communion*, Paris, Fayard, 1993, pp. 158-159, who affirms the importance of the *sensus fidelium* in the service of Tradition in times of crisis in the Church: " *This does not mean that believers possess the omniscience of content, but it indicates the veracity of Christian memory, which certainly always needs to learn, but who knows how to distinguish, in his sacramental identity, between the development of memory and its destruction or falsification. In the present crisis of the Church, we are experiencing the strength of this memory and the truth of the apostolic word; More than hierarchical indications, it is the power of distinction of the simple memory of faith that allows the discernment of spirits.* »

This is what is called **the homogeneous development of dogma**. But once a truth of the faith has been presented and explained by the authentic and infallible Magisterium, **it is definitive** : the explanation is now part of Tradition, the Christian is bound to adhere to it once and for all, and cannot deviate from the meaning defined by the Church, even if deepening is always possible⁸.

As we can see, being " *traditional* ", in the Catholic sense, does not necessarily mean saying: " *It was better before: the further back I go , the more traditional I will be.* »

It is an easy temptation, of which he must guard against it: just as we must resist the temptation to believe that

" *It will be better tomorrow .* " And it must sadly be recognized that this temptation to "return to the sources" was very strong in the wake of the Second Vatican Council: many wanted to sweep away 2000 years of deepening of the Tradition, especially in relation to the Eucharistic dogma, by emancipating themselves from a magisterium considered too restrictive like that of the Council of Trent, to return to the " *purity of the Gospels* " ». This rejection of the homogeneous development of dogma is a misunderstanding of Tradition, it was at the origin of a wind of madness that troubled many of the faithful, and which unfortunately still remains present in some parts of the Church today.

Can the Church fail in its role of transmitting the faith?

The answer must be, for us, immediately: NO. The Catholic Church has received a fundamental promise, the continued assistance of Christ and the Holy Spirit until the end of time, which assures her that she will not fail



The Mass of Saint Gregory, School of Spicre (1438)

8. Vatican I, *Dei Filius*, quoting St. Vincent of Lerins: "Let [...] and in the course of the ages and centuries there will progress widely and intensely, for each as well as for all, for one man as for the whole Church, in the course of the ages and centuries, intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, but exclusively according to their kind, that is, in the same belief, in the same direction, and in the same thought. »

in its role of transmitting the faith: this is the dogma of the Church's indefectibility⁹.

But if the Church is indefectible, it must be remembered that the pope and the bishops do not enjoy infallible assistance in everything. They may fall into error in their daily non-infallible teaching; They can also, alas, remain silent in the face of obvious errors that are spreading. We must not forget the attitude of almost all the bishops towards the Arian heresy; or the case of Pope Honorius I, condemned by the Third Council of Constantinople, for having favored heresy. This should not give rise to an a priori mistrust of the Magisterium, but rather encourage us **to pray, as Christ himself did, for the pope and the bishops**, so that they may persevere in their role of confirming us in the faith.

Moreover, it would be wrong to think that **what the Church says today is always clearer, or more complete, than what she said yesterday**. The integrity of dogma is not always transmitted in an equal and luminous way at every moment of history: on the one hand, the acts of the Magisterium at a given moment are dictated by historical circumstances and opportunities, they focus on one aspect or another; on the other hand, the presentation of dogma can be made more confused at a certain period because the tools used to present it (human instruments, philo-sophical and cultural institutions) are weaker or even deficient¹⁰.

It would therefore be a mistake to have an approach to Tradition that refers **exclusively** to current or recent teaching. **The doctrinal value of a teaching of the Church is not determined by its date**. In this sense, the Nicene Creed (325) or the decrees of the Council of Trent (1563) are elements of Tradition that are totally unsurpassable.

In a word: the concept of "Tradition" requires us to look at **the life of the Church in its continuity, through time** : the Church cannot be at odds with herself. An act of the magisterium is part of the current of the previous Tradition; it must always be interpreted in the light of previous Tradition; interpretations that *contradict* the previous magisterium – such as those that multiplied after the Second Vatican Council – *must* be rejected as not Catholic.

9. Mt 28:20: " *And I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"

10. Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 24 June 1973, no. 5, and *Donum veritatis*, 24 May 1990, no. 24.

The "monuments" of tradition and the liturgy

In addition to *Sacred Scripture*, Tradition has "taken shape" in what are called **"monuments of Tradition"**, that is, in works that give us permanent access to the deposit of faith, like cases protecting a jewel. Among the most important are the writings of the Fathers of the Church, especially if they are unanimous among themselves; the acts and writings of the popes and councils; the discipline of the Church (its private life, its institutions); and above all, **the Sacred Liturgy**¹¹. On this subject, let us listen to Dom Guéranger: *"It is in the Liturgy that the spirit that inspired the Sacred Scriptures still speaks; the Liturgy is tradition even in its highest degree of power and solemnity."*¹² »

Yes, there is a fundamental link between Tradition and the liturgy. On the one hand, the liturgy of the Church goes back uninterruptedly to the apostles, to those who first received the deposit of faith; on the other hand, the liturgy **preserves and transmits the faith** of the Church. It has a doctrinal value: through it one has permanent access to the deposit of faith; hence the well-known adage: *lex orandi, lex credendi*.

Thus, even if it was composed in part by men, **the liturgy is not just a simple human tradition** that can change according to the times. This is why the Church has always endeavoured to **maintain the ancient rites** and customs which could lay claim to antiquity and duration. But the Liturgy, like Tradition, **is not fixed** : it lives, especially to accompany the process of the development of dogma: the addition of the elevation in the middle of the canon (which does not appear until the thirteenth century) or the prayers of the Offertory (tenth century) are fine examples.

Preserving, conserving and transmitting these monuments of Tradition is also the traditional spirit of the Church, **since these monuments give us permanent access to the deposit of faith**, preserved intact and deepened under divine assistance throughout the centuries since the apostles.

This is why, for example, the doctrinal teaching of the Council of Trent has a permanent authority, and not only "for its time".

11. *Dei Verbum* 8; CCC 1124: the liturgy is "a constituent element of the sacred and divine Tradition".

12. *Institutions Liturgiques*, vol. 1 (Société Générale de la Librairie Catholique, 1878), p. 3; cf. also Bossuet: "The principal instrument of the Tradition of the Church is contained in her prayers." (*Instruction on the States of Prayer*, First Treatise, Book VI)

For this reason it is strictly impossible for the Church to abolish or prohibit **the Tridentine liturgy**, as Cardinal Ratzinger recalled:¹³ as a particularly eminent vehicle for the deposit of faith, it remains permanently a source of spiritual goods and a path to sanctification in its own right.

Finally, in addition to Tradition with a capital T (also called Divine-Apostolic Tradition), there are also traditions in the Catholic Church that do not come directly from Jesus Christ, but from an apostle, or from ecclesial authority, or even from the faithful themselves (popular traditions). This is the case for certain customs or devotions, such as keeping the saint

Eucharist, to adore him publicly, to make processions, rogations... We can also mention the sign of the cross, holy water, the rosary... **These traditions, especially when they have been tried and tested by the Church, shape the historical being of the Church;** and they call for a response of filial piety on our part, that is, great veneration and respect; they express the memory of the Christian people, they are a heritage that shapes our Christian identity, **they are a precious spiritual and temporal heritage that carries our faith.** It would be ignoring the historical condition of man to reject or despise them, as has unfortunately been done since the 1960s, on the pretext that "we did not do it like that at the beginning of the twentieth century."



Gospel according to Saint John, page of the illuminated manuscript of the Great Hours of Anne of ...

13. J. RATZINGER, Concluding Conference at the Liturgical Days of Fontgombault on July 22-24, 2001, published in *Une histoire de la Messe*, by a monk of Fontgombault, La Nef, 2003:
"In order to emphasize that there is no essential rupture, that the continuity and identity of the Church exist, it seems to me indispensable to maintain the possibility of celebrating according to the ancient Missal as a sign of the permanent identity of the Church. For me, this is the fundamental reason: what was until 1969 the liturgy of the Church, the most sacred thing for all of us, cannot become after 1969 – with incredible positivism – the most unacceptable thing [...]. There is no doubt that a venerable rite such as the Roman rite in force until 69 is a rite of the Church, a good of the Church, a treasure of the Church, and therefore to be preserved in the Church. »

Christianity". These traditions, as well as this popular piety, have **a very powerful missionary force**, because they have permeated the culture of societies, to the point that they are for many the first place of access to God and to revelation. If they are not to be given the same degree of authority as **to divine Tradition** itself, the normal attitude of the Catholic is to receive these traditions filially, and to seek to make them live, for they too are vectors of faith.

Crisis of the Church and "traditionalism"

For the past sixty years, **there has been a crisis in the Church, which affects the transmission of the faith**. Cardinal Ratzinger evokes the vertigo that followed the Second Vatican Council, this "*impression that nothing was stable in the Church, that everything needed to be reviewed. [...] It seemed that it was possible to modify the faith, contrary to what had been thought until then.*"¹⁴ In the name of a fallacious "spirit of the Council"¹⁵, erroneous interpretations of certain ambiguous passages of the conciliar text have multiplied; The "Church of the past" was strongly criticized, modernist theses reappeared, without being condemned by the authorities. In the eyes of many, the Second Vatican Council was seen as a doctrinal revolution. Paul VI himself described this crisis: "*Through some crack the smoke of Satan has entered the people of God. [...] It was believed that after the Council the sun would have shone on the history of the Church. But instead of sunshine, we had clouds, storm, darkness, searching, uncertainty. How could this have happened? An opposing power has intervened whose name is the devil, that mysterious being to whom Saint Peter alludes in his letter*"¹⁷. »

Faced with these upheavals that affected the faith itself, some Catholics, priests and laity, mobilized: let us cite Jean Madiran, Father Calmel, Father Berto, Dom Gérard, Archbishop Lefebvre: this is what we will call the "traditionalist" current. It is important to say that this reaction began **long before the liturgical reform** : it was first of all a question of defending the traditional catechism, that is, a catechism that transmits

14. J. RATZINGER, *Ma vie – Souvenirs 1927-1977*, Fayard, 1998, p. 115-116.

15. Benedict XVI, in his address to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2005, said that this Spirit is "*like a poison that has penetrated the Church in every fibre. If we now want to clean up the Church, we must not annul the Council, but free it from the so-called 'spirit of the Council.'*"

16. " *The Church peacefully made its October Revolution*. Y. CONGAR, *Le Concile au jour le jour*, 2nd session, Le Cerf, 1964, p. 115.

17. PAUL VI, homily of 29 June 1972 for the 9th anniversary of his coronation.

the entirety of the deposit of faith, against catecheses that call into question or suppress whole sections of doctrine, such as the doctrine around sin, the last ends, the uniqueness of salvation in Jesus Christ, the social reign of Christ, the veneration due to the Blessed Sacrament...

The criticism of the liturgical reform came second, in 1969. Let us be careful to situate at what level this criticism is placed. The Catholic Church cannot propose to her faithful a rite that is heterodox, or "intrinsically evil" by nature, because then she would fail in her mission to sanctify: the *validity* of the Reformed liturgy must be recognized when the essential elements of the sacrament (matter/form/intention of the celebrant) are present, as well as its ability to transmit grace. However, it is possible that the Church, at some moment in her history, produces liturgical elements that are deficient: Pius XII explicitly affirms^{this,18} and Cardinal Ratzinger spoke of the "*deficiencies of the reform*."¹⁹ Now, there is reason to express serious reservations about an impoverishment of the liturgical expression of certain truths of faith in *Novus Ordo* ²⁰ (cf. *Meditation F and Reading 4*); or to criticize the way in which the reform was carried out, which has more to do with "*construction*" than with "*organic evolution*", according to Cardinal Ratzinger's own analyses²¹. Following the example of Benedict XVI, "*the crisis of the Church that we are experiencing today rests largely on the disintegration of the liturgy*"²²: for the believer always ends up believing as he prays: *lex orandi, lex credendi*²³.

18. Pius XII, International Congress of Liturgical Pastoral Care, September 22, 1956: "There are immutable elements in the liturgy, a sacred content that transcends time, but also variable, transitory, sometimes even defective elements."

19. J. RATZINGER, "Response to Father Gy", *La Maison Dieu*, n° 230, 2002 (2), p. 116.

20. Here are some studies: Cardinals OTTAVIANI and BACCI, *Brief Critical Examination of the New Mass*, September 1969; A group of theologians, "L'Ordo Missae", *La Pensée catholique*, n° 122, 1969; Amaldo Xavier DA SILVEIRA, *The New Mass of Paul VI, what to think of it ?*, Chiréen-Montreuil, Diffusion de la Pensée Française, 1975 ; Klaus GAMBER, *La Réforme liturgique en question*, Le Barroux, Éditions Sainte-Madeleine, 1992; Louis SALLERON, *La Nouvelle Messe*, 2nd edition, Paris, Nouvelles éditions latines, 2008.

21. J. RATZINGER, *Ma vie, Souvenirs 1927-1977*, Paris, Fayard, 1997, pp. 134-135; Introduction to K. GAMBER, *The Liturgical Reform in Question*, p. 8: " What happened after the Council means something quite different: in place of the liturgy, which is the fruit of continual development, a fabricated liturgy has been placed. We have left the living process of growth and becoming to enter into manufacturing. We no longer wanted to continue the organic development and maturation of living things through the centuries, and they were replaced – in the manner of technical production – by manufacturing, a banal product of the moment. »

22. J. RATZINGER, *My Life, Memories 1927-1977*, op. cit.

23. A famous adage, a summary of a sentence written in the fifth century attributed to Saint Celestine I. Cardinal Journet said that "*the liturgy and catechesis are the two jaws of the pincer with which faith is torn away*" (Quoted in Lucien Meroz's book, *Obedience in the Church, Blind or Clairvoyant?* Martingay, Geneva, 1977, p. 104)

The word "traditionalist" was coined in this context of crisis; it is a label, which did not please the great figures of this movement (such as Jean Madiran), because a Catholic is necessarily attached to the Tradition of the Church. This word simply describes the desire of many Catholic families to faithfully preserve those monuments of Tradition which are the Tridentine liturgy, the traditional catechism, the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas, the permanent magisterium of the Church, against those who advocate a **rupture** between the Church of today and the Church of yesterday, or those who allow this rupture to take place without saying anything. To this are added, **without confusion**, a piety and attachment to **the traditions** of the Church in which, down the centuries, Tradition has been incarnated. Because we are not yet out of the crisis and confusion, as the religious news gives many examples. It is therefore legitimate to apply **the precautionary principle: to go as far as possible** to transmit the faith, that is to say, to go to the traditional pedagogies, tested by the Catholic Church for 2000 years.

On the other hand, the word "traditionalist" would be wrong if it is used to say that only a part of the Christians constitutes "The Tradition." **These expressions are dangerous, because Tradition is constitutive of the Church:** it is the consequence of the indefectibility of the Church, in which we believe. It is therefore for the Catholic Church, our Pope and our bishops that we must pray, that the crisis of the transmission of the faith may cease and that the effort to clarify doctrine and morals, led for example by John Paul II and Benedict XVI²⁴, may continue, for the good of the Church and the salvation of souls.

" What does the past matter to me as the past ? Don't you see that when I cry over the rupture of a tradition, it is above all of the future that I think of ? When I see a root rotting I pity the flowers which tomorrow will dry up for lack of sap. »

Gustave Thibon, *Our Gaze That Is Missing in the Light*

24. Among the great recent texts, cf. the declaration *Dominus Iesus* of Cardinal Ratzinger in 2000, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under John Paul II; *Evangelium vitae*, *Fides et ratio* ; the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in 1992 by John Paul II, and of the *Compendium* by Benedict XVI in 2005; cf. *Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum* by Benedict XVI, etc.

To go further:



Father Louis-Marie DE BLIGNIÈRES, *Tradition* :
<https://www.nd-chretiente.com/dossiers/pdf/articles/2020-La%20Tradition.pdf>



Jean DE TAURIERS, *Reflections on Tradition* :
<https://www.nd-chretiente.com/dossiers/pdf/articles/2021-%20Reflexion%20sur%20la%20Tradition.pdf>

Monsignor Athanasius SCHNEIDER, *Fuyez l'Hérésie*, Éditions Contretemps 2025

Abbé Bernard LUCIEN, "The Magisterial Authority of Vatican II",
Sedes Sapientiae 119, pp. 9-80

Roberto DE MATTEI, *Apologie de la Tradition*, Éditions de Chiré, 2015

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, § 75 to 83, 109 to 120, 174, 1124 to 1126, 2650 to 2651

Cardinal Charles JOURNET, *The Revealed Message, its Transmission, Its Development, Its Dependencies*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1964.



First Vatican Council (1870)