

TRADITION AND THE CHURCH

“Faith then cometh by hearing; and hearing by the word of Christ.”

—Romans 10:17

TRADITION AND THE CHURCH

By
Msgr. George Agius, DD, JCD

*“But there are also many other things
which Jesus did; which, if they were written
every one, the world itself, I think, would
not be able to contain the books that should
be written.”*

—John 21:25

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“Therefore, brethren, stand fast; and hold
the traditions which you have learned,
whether by word, or by our epistle.”

—*2 Thessalonians 2:14*

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Foreword

To the Second Edition

MONSIGNOR George Agius was born on January 10, 1873 on the island of Gozo—a 40-square mile island with 30,000 inhabitants in the central Mediterranean Sea about three and one-half miles off shore to the northwest of the island of Malta.¹ He studied at the Jesuit Seminary on Gozo and was ordained in 1895 by Bishop Camilleri for that diocese. In 1897, he entered the Gregorian University in Rome and by 1901, Father Agius had earned two doctorates—one in Theology and the other in Canon Law.

One of his classmates at the Gregorian University was Father Eugenio Pacelli, who later became Pope Pius XII (1938-1958). Fr. Agius observed, “While I was a student at the Pontifical University, I never thought I was sitting on the same bench with a future successor to Saint Peter.” Shortly after Father Agius completed his doctoral studies in Canon Law, he received a letter from Bishop Thomas A. Bonacum, the first bishop of Lincoln, Nebraska, offering him the position of secretary and chancellor for the Diocese of Lincoln. Having accepted this offer, Fr. George Agius arrived in Lincoln in September of 1902 and immediately

1. Biographical information was taken from *A Priest Forever* (Sr. Loretta Gosen, C.P.P.S. The Catholic Chancery Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1988) and “A Glimpse of Our Heritage” (as found in the Southern Nebraska Register, by Sr. Loretta Gosen, June 2, 1995 through July 28, 1995).

assumed his duties as Secretary and Chancellor for the Diocese.

Father Agius continued to serve as Secretary and Chancellor for the Diocese of Lincoln for ten years. In addition to his administrative responsibilities, he had several pastoral responsibilities which included, among others, the assignment by Bishop J. Henry Tihen as resident pastor in Seward, which is the town in which the modern-day seminary, St. Gregory the Great, is located. After being pastor at Seward, Fr. Agius was transferred to Geneva, Nebraska in 1916, where he was able to devote time to study and research, in addition to caring for the spiritual needs of his parishioners. The purpose of his study was to define and then help meet some of the challenges that confronted the Church in the 1920's. He observed that the authority of the Church was being rejected, some of her doctrines were being "thrown to the wind," and some people were denying the divinity of Christ. It was during this time that Fr. Agius wrote *Tradition and the Church*, which was originally published in 1928. Testimonies on the depth of thinking demonstrated in this book were numerous. These praises came from the hierarchy, as well as from editors of newspapers and periodicals. Bishop Beckman wrote: "Dr. Agius takes a place alongside other leaders in the realm of Catholic thought and joins them in the noble effort of presenting the claims of the Catholic Church to a generation that can be saved by nothing else."

After serving for more than 18 years in the Diocese of Lincoln, Father Agius decided to seek permanent status as a priest of that diocese. Accordingly, he requested his exeat (official release) from his native Diocese of Gozo and was incardinated into the Diocese of Lincoln in 1921. In 1937, Fr. Agius was given the title of Monsignor. He was later the official representative of the Lincoln Diocese

at the proclamation of the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on November 1, 1950.

As a former classmate of Pope Pius XII, he enjoyed the privilege of a special place near the throne of the Holy Father. After serving as a priest for 67 years, Msgr. Agius died on March 6, 1962 and was buried on the island of Malta, in the same year which saw the beginning of Vatican Council II.

This book is one of the best texts written in English on Tradition, even though originally it did not enjoy a large circulation. The contents of Agius's text are largely based on the technical and scholarly work by Cardinal John Franzelin *Tractatus de Divina Traditione*, which even modernist scholars on Tradition were forced to recognize as a tour de force on the topic and, perhaps, the most comprehensive and systematic treatment of Sacred Tradition within the Church. Aguis's text is understandable to the average layman, yet it provides a solid historical and doctrinal coverage of the basics of the theology of Tradition. The publishing of this book by TAN comes at an important time in the life of the Church when many are seeking a greater understanding of the entire subject of the Catholic Church. Those seeking a basic understanding of the Tradition of the Church—unencumbered by the influences of Modernism—would be well served to read this book. It is, therefore, my hope that *Tradition and the Church* will become widely circulated and known everywhere by the faithful.

Fr. Chad A. Ripperger, PhD
Keenesburg, CO
Feast of St. Peter of Alcantara
October 19, 2021

1. Published in Rome in 1896. An English translation exists of Franzelin's work under the title *On Divine Tradition*.

Publisher's Preface

About This Book

CATHOLICS have all heard that the sources of our Faith are Scripture and Tradition. It is pretty easy to know what Scripture is, but Tradition is another story. Most Catholics have had only a vague idea of what Catholic Tradition really means and exactly what all is included in this concept. *Tradition and the Church*, however, will cure this problem, answering most of the questions that might arise regarding the nature of Catholic Tradition and how it works on a practical level. Before reading this book, most readers might think Tradition is a completely *oral* transmission of those truths we hold which are not specifically included in the Bible. This is partly true, but there is a whole lot more involved.

In this book, Msgr. George Agius has centered his discussion largely around what the Fathers of the Church have written about the faith of the Catholic Church in the early centuries of Christianity. Their writings, compiled into one edition, amount to a very large encyclopedia-sized set of volumes—perhaps somewhat larger than the biggest set of encyclopedia books in print today. And yet the Fathers of the Church have not recorded in writing *every* aspect and phase of Catholic faith. What they *have* recorded, however, is of inestimable value to the Church and to posterity, for they wrote against the early adversaries of the Catholic Church, starting already in the First Century. When problems or disputes arose as to what is proper Christian teach-

ing on any given point, various eminent Catholic writers would refute these errors with their writings. Those men have come to be known as the Fathers of the Church, and their written testimony is invaluable because they witness to the exact teaching of the Catholic Church right from its earliest beginning and on down into the Fifth and Sixth Centuries. These writings are still referred to by the present-day Church authorities—for example, when it comes time for the Pope to make a solemn definition of doctrine or for an ecumenical Church council to settle a disputed question. In other words, there is a large body of *written* testimony about the Tradition of the Church, dating from the earliest centuries of Christianity, that records exactly the same beliefs as the Church holds today.

But even more interesting—and bordering on the miraculous—is the fact that the enormous body of truths included in the Catholic Faith has remained intact and uncorrupted for nearly 20 centuries, among people of all nations, spread throughout the entire world, so that the Catholic people in South America, North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, the Middle East and the many Island Nations all learn, practice and retain exactly the same faith and morals. Moreover, as the author points out, these truths continue to be passed on even in our time—and really without the aid of Scripture as a guide. The author repeatedly demonstrates that Tradition actually came before Scripture *historically* and precedes it *theologically*. Even when a Catholic considers the source of his own personal Catholic belief, he has to admit that his instruction in the Faith basically all came from the Tradition of the Church that has been codified into catechisms and other instructional texts, and that relatively little to none of what he was originally taught came directly from Scripture. This admission may horrify Protestants, who base their belief (they say) strictly on “the

Bible alone”—*sola Scriptura* (though the author shows that they too follow *many* traditions that are not biblically based). None the less, the fact remains that the basic beliefs of Catholics, even today, come almost entirely from our Tradition, and almost nothing straight out of the Bible—exemplifying exactly the point the author makes about the relationship of Scripture to Tradition.

The New Testament itself is the product of Catholic Tradition. Our Lord did not commission the Apostles to go forth and *write*, but to go forth and *teach* all nations. The New Testament was produced by our Tradition, incrementally, *after* the Apostles had been preaching and working for a number of years to establish the Church, and here we are some 20 centuries later, and that Tradition is still working, still teaching, still informing, still permeating the entire Church of God. However, one must almost perforce be a Catholic to be able to recognize the amazing operation of Tradition and how it has been steadily working in the Church and even how it has formed one's own religious life. The New Testament, then—like the rest of the Bible—is really a Catholic book, and a person really needs to be a Catholic to have the background necessary to understand it, because it was produced by the Church to help explain her Tradition to the converts in the first century of Christianity. If a person does not know what that full Tradition of Faith teaches, he is basically blind and lost when it comes to understanding many of the meanings of the New Testament.

The author shows that even the creation of the Old Testament came out of the living *oral* Tradition that goes back to Adam and Eve. For many centuries of the Patriarchal era had passed away before the Tradition dating from Creation was written down by Moses, to form the first books of the Bible (*The Pentateuch*). The Bible, as the author points out, is really, therefore, a superb gift from God to His people,

sort of like icing on the cake of Tradition. It would not be necessary, absolutely speaking, for the Catholic Church to have Scripture—Tradition, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, being sufficient unto itself to teach the people. But Scripture is a grand and glorious adjunct to our Tradition that enlightens it, that helps us understand it better, and that gives us deeper penetration into the mysteries of God—if we know the Faith to begin with, and thereby possess the “blueprint” of Revelation in our minds in order to be able to understand what the New Testament is saying.

The only book in English we know of that discusses the nature of Tradition, *Tradition and the Church* covers most aspects of the nature of Catholic Tradition, and will be a font of tremendous understanding about the sources of our Faith for all those who are lucky enough to read it.

We are calling this publication of *Tradition and the Church* the “Second Edition,” not because the book has undergone substantial additions or deletions, but rather because it has been thoroughly retypeset, repunctuated and copy-edited to reflect current English usage—in an effort to make the book easier to read. *Tradition and the Church* was obviously written by a very intelligent, well-educated and highly competent person, but he was also one who did not speak English natively and who did not have complete command of some of the English expressions he used. These problems have mostly been corrected in this edition, as has his tremendous overuse of punctuation. However, the author alternately refers to “*the* Scriptures” and “Scripture,” as well as to “the Deposit of *the* Faith” and “the Deposit of Faith.” I have chosen to leave both modes of expression in his book, though the second usage in both cases is the more common one in English. Also, stylistically, many of the author’s original sentences were awkward; this problem was very easily solved simply by rearranging the selfsame

words of many sentences into a different order for easier reading. The result of all these changes, it is hoped, is a book that now reads far more fluently and will cost the reader a great deal less labor to read than the original edition. In all other respects, nothing of the original book has been left out, and nothing has been added, save a few footnotes, some bracketed additions (which I have supplied) and here and there a word or two to help clarify an otherwise difficult sentence. Where parentheses occur within Scripture quotes or other quotations, these are the original additions of the author.

And finally, when the author refers to the Churches that were set up by the Apostles and their disciples, the reader must understand that these “Churches” (spelled with a capital “C”) were not centers of disparate Christian faiths, not various non-Catholic sects or denominations, but rather what the Catholic Church today refers to as dioceses governed by bishops, but more likely archdioceses (metropolitan sees—or seats), which are now ruled over by archbishops or cardinals. Sometimes these principal bishops were, and occasionally still are, called “Metropolitans.” Some of them are also called “Patriarchs,” that is, if they governed Rome, Antioch, Jerusalem or Alexandria (and later Constantinople). Sometimes they are called “Primates”—if they govern the Catholic Church in an entire country or region. The reader must realize that discussion of the Catholic Church involves reference to an enormous worldwide religious organization governed by the Pope in Rome, but also including many major divisions of Church government united to Rome. These divisions in the first centuries and in the New Testament are often referred to as “Churches” (spelled here with a capital “C”), which usage we have retained to distinguish them from non-Catholic Christian churches (spelled with a lower-case “c”).

A special acknowledgement must be made to Elizabeth Moors for her typesetting of the book and her *painstaking* correction of the initial typescript of this Second Edition, and also to Maureen McDevitt, who carefully checked the entire book word-for-word (!) to insure that nothing was omitted or copied incorrectly and then who also *painstakingly* checked all the many corrections and offered helpful advice on improved modes of expression where problems of understanding occurred in the original. All these measures were necessary, in my opinion, because *Tradition and the Church* is an extremely important book, yet bore the hallmarks of a text that had come directly from the pen of the author without having passed under the eye of a competent Catholic editor. I have tried to fulfill the normal function of an editor for this book, despite the lapse of time since the first edition appeared in 1928 and in the obvious absence of the author to approve all the minor changes to his text that routinely occurs in book publishing. All this has been done in the interest of providing readers with a far easier and more intelligible learning experience from a perusal of this landmark book.

Thomas A. Nelson
Publisher, December 12, 2005
Our Lady of Guadalupe

Author's Preface

IN the history of mankind there are two events which are paramount to all others. The first is the Incarnation of Christ. The second, almost equal to it, is the institution of the Church by Christ and the descent of the Holy Ghost upon her first priests. Both facts are well established in the Scriptures. The final aim of both is the salvation of mankind. But, while all Christians recognize the first fact, not all are in agreement about what the second is and means. The consequence is that Christianity is divided and subdivided into hundreds of Churches. Each claims to be the Bride of Christ, sanctified by the Holy Ghost on the Day of Pentecost. How then can we distinguish the True Church? The wheat from the cockle? Through Scripture? That is what we were told when almost the whole of Northern Europe tore itself away from Rome. Her authority was rejected. Her doctrines were thrown to the wind. The result was and is a fearful chasm that has separated brethren from brethren—Christians from Christians. Now infidelity is rampant everywhere. The Divinity of Christ and of the Church is denied through the length and breadth of the land. Worse still is such a denial by many of the clergy, who call themselves ministers of Christ.

It is evident, then, that man has gone too far. It is time for him to come back again. And the only way is to return to that "Divine Tradition" which Christ left among us and which is sustained and guided by God the Holy Ghost—the grand Old Mother Church. The bridge that can span the chasm produced in Christianity is only a full recognition of

a Divine Tradition. *Such is the task undertaken in this work.* Scripture, being the Word of God, forms the base of our reasoning. But our reasoning must not be in conflict with the testimonies of the first Christians. The existence of Tradition is too evident for that. The doctrines of the Apostles and of the first Christians must be accepted, wherever we can find them, whether in the Scriptures or out of the Scriptures. They must not be added to, diminished or adulterated, but neither rejected if they are the truth. That they are substantially incorrupt today, as they were two thousand years ago, is due to the fact that a government for the Church and of the Church was established by the Apostles. The government of the Church of today must not then be different from the government of the Church of the Apostles. It must be homogeneous. Hence, such government is not only necessary, but it must not be transferred from the successors of the Apostles to the people. All this may be seen through innumerable testimonies, but especially, from the writings of the Fathers of the Church. The descent of the Holy Ghost gave the Church an "Intellect" which is constantly enlightened, sustained and directed to govern the Faithful in an unmistakable way. He taught the "all truth," which may be developed, not in itself, but rather, in ourselves; that is, the more we study the truth, the more we see its extent and beauty. That also means that new doctrines are never introduced in the Church. Hence, no other revelation is to be expected.

I do not expect this work to be perfect. This is something new and out of the ordinary. As far as I know, there is little of its kind in any modern language.

Whatever is herewith stated imperfectly, or not clearly enough, I wish to be understood according to the views of the Apostolic See, of which I profess to be a humble, but faithful child.

General Introduction

EVERY question of Christian Doctrine touches Tradition. The controversies of the centuries have been fought around it. Time only gives it an added importance. And now it is more important than ever; it takes deeper root as the centuries pass.

What is Tradition and what is its importance?

On the answers to these questions largely rests, under God and His grace, the return of our Separated Brethren. Were the principles of Tradition once more understood and its teachings accepted, the happy day of unity for which Jesus Christ prayed would be for many honest souls not far distant. “That they all may be one, as Thou, Father, in Me, and I in Thee; that they also may be one in us.” (*John* 17:21). That day shall certainly come, because Christ’s prayer cannot but be effectual. “Father, I give Thee thanks that Thou hast heard Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always.” (*John* 11:41-42).

God has spoken to man. He has revealed Himself in and through Christ. He has given man certain commandments to observe, doctrines to believe, institutions to make use of, and so save his soul. But how do we know that God has spoken? And what has He said? And where are the revealed truths to be found—in their fullness and not merely in part? These are questions that require an answer. Two answers are given.

For the Protestant, Scripture alone constitutes the Rule of Faith, to the exclusion of all other authority. For the

Catholic, the Church, combined with Scripture, forms his Rule of Faith.

“We believe the only rule and way, according to which all articles of Faith . . . must be judged, is no other than the prophetic and apostolic writings both of the Old as well as of the New Testament.”¹ “Holy Scripture contains whatever is necessary to salvation. Whatever is not read therein, nor can be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of faith or be thought necessary to salvation.”²

Catholics answer with St. Irenæus: “We must not seek the truth from others, when we can easily acquire it from the Church. The Apostles, in the fullness of their riches, brought into it, as into a depository, all that belongs to the truth. He who wishes may take from it the cup of life. This is the entrance into life: all others are thieves and burglars. For this reason, we must avoid them, love diligently what belongs to the Church, and learn the Tradition of truth.”³

Every Catholic who knows his Religion declares with St. Augustine: “I would not believe the Gospel were it not that I am moved to do so by the authority of the Catholic Church.”⁴ Hence the Council of Trent solemnly declares: “All truth and discipline are contained in the written books and in the non-written Traditions, which, being received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, being delivered to us, as it were, by hand, came to us.”⁵

And Tertullian, in the Second Century: “To whom

1. *Lutheran Formula of Concord*.

2. “Sixth Article of the Anglican Church.”

3. *Book III against heretics*, C. IV.

4. “Ep. Fund,” C. V.

5. Session IV.

belongs the Faith itself? Whose are the Scriptures? By whom and through whom and when and to whom was the authority to teach delivered, by which men are made Christians. For where the true Christian discipline and doctrine are shown to be, there will also be the truth of the Scriptures, and of their interpretation and of all Christian Traditions.”⁶

Christianity is, therefore, divided. According to all the Protestant denominations there is no other authentic way to know the word of God but from Scripture. Scripture is *the only Rule and the only Judge!* No living visible authority has any right to pass judgment on an article of Faith. To expect that Christians should abide by such judgment is an imposition. Each individual has the right to his own private interpretation of Scripture. “The seventh office of the Christians (who are all ministers), is to judge and to declare on the Articles of Faith . . . every one taking care of his salvation must be sure of what he believes and follows; he must be the free judge of all that teach him, being taught interiorly only by God.”⁷

Some of the more prominent denominations among Protestants, especially the Episcopalians, have indeed approved of and adopted the Symbols of Faith [the creeds] and the definitions of the first four General Councils of the Church, which, considered in themselves, are Traditions. These creeds and definitions, however, are accepted, not as traditional truths—such would be against their fundamental principle—but because and in so far as they are conformable to the Scriptures.

The characteristic note of Protestantism, then, is the negation of authority outside of the Scriptures. Catholic

6. “Prescriptions,” C. XIX.

7. Luther’s *Institution of the Ministry of the Church*, Vol. III, p. 584.

Faith, on the other hand, declares that both the Church and the Scriptures are *the Rule of Faith*. Whereas the Protestant claims he is the only judge, the Catholic believes the Church is the Judge. She it is that proclaims what doctrines are to be believed and what practices are to be observed and whether such doctrines and practices are found in the Scriptures or not.

All Protestants, in order to justify their separation from the Catholic Church, deny that Christ ever established such a living authority besides the Scriptures. But in so doing, they have committed so many errors, they have denied so many Christian principles, they have fallen into so many contradictions that, if Martin Luther and the other so-called reformers of the 16th Century could ever come to life again, they would hardly recognize their work. The leaders of Protestantism—past and present—know too well that the admission of the general principle of Tradition would carry them to that very same Divine Tradition which was rejected in the 16th Century. That Divine Tradition is nothing else than the Apostolic succession of an ever-living, indefectible and infallible Church. If they admit to a living Tradition, they must also confess their mistake and culpable rebellion.

Here is the issue: Has Christ established, besides the Scriptures, any other agency or authority to preserve, explain and propagate His doctrines? We propose to prove that He has; that there is a way, by which divinely revealed doctrine is propagated and preserved in its integrity. That way is Tradition.

TRADITION AND THE CHURCH

*“But you, my dearly beloved, be mindful
of the words which have been spoken before
by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

—Jude 1:17

General Notions of Tradition

1

Tradition Means Whatever is Delivered, as well As the Way and Means by Which the Object Delivered Came to Us.

THE proper source of Revelation is the word of God, which is both written and unwritten. The written is contained in Scripture; the unwritten in Tradition.

When we speak of the unwritten word of God, we do not mean that it has never been written, but that it was never written by the man to whom God revealed it. It was committed to writing *afterwards* by his disciples, or by others who heard it from his lips.

The word *Tradition*, considered in *its object*, means whatever is delivered or transmitted; in this sense it is called *objective Tradition*. If we consider, however, *the act*, or the *way and the means* by which an object is propagated and transmitted, this is called *active Tradition*. This active Tradition includes of necessity the object delivered to us. Likewise, the object of Tradition supposes an active Tradition, without which it could not have reached us.

We must always, therefore, take Tradition in its *composite* sense, that is, as made up of two parts—the act of transmission and the thing being transmitted. A tradition considered in its object loses its value without the Active

Tradition that delivers it. We can neither explain nor understand a tradition without knowing the source, the act, the way and the means through which it has reached us.

In the following pages, therefore, Tradition must always be understood to mean not only the doctrine accepted, or the custom that prevailed in Apostolic times, but also the way or the means by which that doctrine or custom has come down to us.

To give an instance, Scripture does not state on what day Jesus Christ was born. But an old Tradition tells us that the Son of God, as man, was born on the 25th of December. Behold the object of a tradition. The Church accepted and set that date for its celebration. Christians—in obedience to the Church—have observed it every year since Christ ascended into Heaven. Behold the active Tradition. These are the two elements: The belief that Christ was born December 25; the teaching Church that set that date for its celebration.

The observance of Lent, the Friday abstinence, the celebration of Sunday instead of Saturday . . . on these Scripture is for the most part silent. But Tradition tells us they were observed in Apostolic times. The Church approved of them and transmitted them from generation to generation to the present day. The Apostles did not write of them. Why should they? They were taken as a matter of course. Some of the early Christians, disciples of the Apostles, or in turn, of their disciples, wrote of them to inculcate in the Christians of their day what the Apostles had taught and preached. The same applies to other disciplines and doctrines that had not been written, but were believed and practiced.

Therefore, whenever we speak of Tradition in general, we always mean this “Complex Tradition”—the object with its manner of transmission, namely, the Church, which

gives it value and authority. They both go together, as philosophers say, like matter and form. It is in this sense that the Council of Trent understood and considered Tradition. It solemnly declared: "All revealed doctrine and discipline is also contained in the unwritten Traditions, which, having been received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or through the dictation of the Holy Ghost by the same Apostles, reached us as if they were handed to us" . . . "the same Traditions, which belong to the Faith and discipline, *kept by a continued succession in the Church*, we accept and venerate with a likewise affection and reverence."¹

2

Traditions, Not Being All of the Same Kind Have a Different Value and Authority.

Traditions are not all of the same kind; hence, they cannot have the same value or authority. We distinguish them, first of all, by the manner in which they are transmitted. Some of them had been originally written; others came to us orally, from father to son; or in a practical way, as through the ceremonies of the Church for instance. For this reason, Traditions are either *written, oral or practical*. Some Traditions are called *Written Traditions* because the word *Tradition* may be taken in its widest signification, to include *whatever has been delivered to us*. In this sense, even the Scriptures may be called Traditions. This point, however, will be further discussed later on.

Secondly, Traditions are distinguished by the objects they convey, *dogmatic or disciplinary*, according to whether they refer to a fundamental doctrine of the Church, or to

1. *Council of Trent*, Session IV.

some rule or law to be observed by Christians. The doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven are Dogmatic Traditions. That Mary was conceived without Original Sin, in view of the merits of her Divine Son has always been believed by the Faithful, even before its solemn proclamation [in 1854] by the Church. So, too, the doctrine of the Assumption. We hope that the time is fast approaching when this touching tradition about the Mother of God will be solemnly declared and proclaimed as a Dogma of the Infallible Church.*

Some of the *Disciplinary* Traditions are so old that we have no record whatever of the time when they were first introduced. Such are Lent, the mixing of water with wine in the Eucharistic celebration, and the Baptism of infants.

Traditions are also characterized by their *duration*—some have remained in vigor to the present day. Others were short-lived. They did not stand the test of time. The belief in the Millennium is a case in point.

Certain traditions *are found everywhere*, whereas others are only in *certain localities*. For this reason, some are *universal*, and others *local*. It is evident that the Universal Tradition is more important than the local. Universality is a mark of truth.

There are Traditions which impose *obligations*, as for instance, abstinence. Others are simply *counsels* or *recommendations*, as for instance, the vow of poverty. Hence the distinction of *preceptive* or *advisory* traditions.

Traditions may be either *constitutive* or *inhesive*. The former [Constitutive Tradition] constitutes a doctrine by

* The reader is reminded that this book was originally published in 1928 and that the belief in the Assumption was in fact officially proclaimed a dogma of the Catholic Church by Pope Pius XII in 1950.

itself, which is nowhere found in Scripture; the latter [Inhesive Tradition] speaks of a doctrine that is found in Scripture. It is well-known that the Holy Eucharist is clearly described in Scripture. Still, the same Sacrament is also very well-illustrated in other traditions, especially, in *The Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles* [the *Didache*, also called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*], a work which scholars do not place later than the year 80 A.D. Such tradition is called *inhesive*.

Finally, Traditions are either *divine* or *ecclesiastical*. As this distinction is particularly important, we shall discuss it now.

3

Traditions are Either Divine or Ecclesiastical.

Traditions are *Divine* or *Ecclesiastical*, as they originate either from God or from the Church.

I. *Divine traditions* belong generally to the Faith; *Ecclesiastical*, to discipline. Divine Traditions have God as their immediate cause and author. In the New Testament, the first visible promulgator was God Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, or the Holy Ghost, who spoke through the Apostles. These Traditions are called *Dominical*—from the Latin word *Dominus*, or Lord—if they were first revealed by Christ Himself; they are called *Divine-Apostolic*, if revealed by the Holy Ghost through the Apostles. They all consist of dogmatic truths, commandments and institutions which God directly revealed or instituted for man.

This distinction evidently supposes that not all Revelation was completed by Christ while He dwelt among us, but that it found its completion with the death of the Apostles. After Christ's Ascension into Heaven, the Holy

Ghost came down upon the Apostles, instructed and taught them, not only whatever Christ had said to them, but also all those truths which they neither heard nor knew before, nor could they understand while they lived with Christ. “But the Paraclete, the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring all things to your mind, whatsoever I shall have said to you.” (*John* 14:26). “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when he, the Spirit of Truth, is come, he will teach you all truth. For he shall not speak of himself; but what things soever he shall hear, he shall speak; and the things that are to come, he shall show you.” (*John* 16:12-13).

This distinction between *Divine* and *Divine-Apostolic Traditions* the [First] Vatican Council [1869-1870] indicates in the Constitution *Dei Filius*. “This supernatural revelation, according to the Faith of the Universal Church, declared by the Council of Trent, is contained in the written books and in the non-written Traditions, which, *being received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ, or through the dictation of the Holy Ghost, as if delivered by hand, came to us.*”² As far as their origin is concerned, there is practically no difference between a *Divine* and a *Divine-Apostolic Tradition*. They all came directly from God.

II. *Ecclesiastical Traditions* are those that were introduced by the Apostles themselves, or in post-Apostolic times. Hence, some are called *Simply-Apostolic*; others *Ecclesiastical*.

To understand the difference, one must bear in mind the double office of the Apostles. The Apostles were first of all Apostles, in the strict sense of the word—promul-

2. [First] Vatican Council, C. II.

gators of the truths and institutions revealed to them by God Himself. But they were also rectors and pastors of the Churches they founded. As promulgators, they wrote a part of those revelations made to them. They wrote as events and circumstances here and there induced them to write—to certain persons, or to the Churches which they had founded. They wrote occasionally. For their principal duty was to administer the Sacraments and “preach the Gospel,” according to Christ’s command. What they wrote forms part of the Scriptures.

That part of Revelation which as Apostles they preached only and did not write, and which was retained by their disciples, forms the *Dominical* or *Divine-Apostolic Traditions*.

But, as rectors and pastors of the Churches, they also established certain laws and rules which they deemed necessary or useful for the sanctification of the Faithful. “For to the rest, I speak, not the Lord.” (*1 Cor.* 7:12). In this manner the Apostles must be considered as the first legislators of the Church, and such rules, laws and institutions which are not all to be found in the Scriptures comprise the *Simply-Apostolic Traditions*.

The Apostles, therefore, as Apostles and ambassadors of God, preached “the Gospel to every creature.” (*Mark* 16:15). They all preached, but only *some* of them wrote. The others preached and did not write, but what they preached was subsequently retained by their hearers. This is what forms, as we have said, the *Divine-Apostolic Traditions*. Afterwards, having established here and there many Christian congregations, they made for them certain rules and laws and enacted certain precepts and institutions for their sanctification. Thus, they became the first legislators. These laws and institutions constitute the *Simply-Apostolic Traditions*.

When a tradition contains a doctrine that *belongs to the Faith* and it is proved to be of Apostolic origin, it must be considered as a *Divine Tradition—Dominical or Divine-Apostolic*—because it could have only God for its author. Only God could have made it possible. The *Apostolicity* of a certain doctrine and its *divine* origin was always considered by the Church as the same thing. On the other hand, if an Apostolic Tradition that concerns the Faith is *not divine*, then it is no tradition at all. It is *not authentic* and is not to be believed. The Church cannot think out and propose a new doctrine about the Faith. Hence, the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary are Divine Traditions, because only God could have made them possible. Such are also the Sacraments, which are institutions that give grace, because God alone is the Giver of grace. These doctrines and institutions, if they are to be found everywhere and are approved by the Church, are certainly Divine Traditions. Consequently, they must be believed and observed by the whole Church. *Divine truths and divine institutions cannot be different in different places.*

But Simply-Apostolic Traditions may be different in different places. They are not more than ecclesiastical traditions. For instance, if a tradition is believed and practiced as an Apostolic Tradition—but only in certain places and not everywhere—that tradition cannot be Dominical or Divine-Apostolic. It is simply Apostolic, introduced by some one of the Apostles—not *as an Apostle*, but as a *legislator* of the Church, namely, as rector and pastor. As such, that tradition comes under the jurisdiction of the successor of St. Peter, is subject to revision, dispensation, or if circumstances are changed, to abrogation or annulment. Such was the observance of Easter in certain

Apostolic Churches in the first centuries of the Church. Some of the Apostolic Churches in the East did not observe Easter at the same time as some of the Apostolic Churches in the West. The Eastern Churches appealed to an ancient Apostolic Tradition, but so also did the Western Apostolic Churches. That ancient Tradition affected “discipline,” not Faith. Consequently, it was a Simply-Apostolic Tradition, subject to the jurisdiction of the successor of St. Peter, the head of the Church.

The best rule, by which to distinguish Dominical or Divine-Apostolic from Simply-Apostolic Traditions is the practice and judgment of the Church. If the Church never dared to change a Tradition, or to dispense with it, that Tradition must be considered a Divine Tradition. Such is the Tradition of the Sunday observance. Such is also the mixture of water with wine in the celebration of the Sacrifice of the Mass.

Finally, concerning precepts and institutions which of their own nature do not necessarily require a divine origin, but which might have originated by Apostolic or Church authority, apply the golden rule of St. Augustine: “What the universal Church maintains, what was never instituted by the Councils, but was always retained in the Church, must be rightly believed to have been transmitted by no other than by Apostolic authority.”³

To sum up: Traditions are either Divine or Ecclesiastical. *Divine* Traditions are either *Dominical* or *Divine-Apostolic*. *Ecclesiastical* Traditions are Simply-Apostolic or Simply-Ecclesiastical. Simply-Apostolic if they began with the Apostles, but only in their offices as pastors of the Churches. Simply-Ecclesiastical if they arose in post-Apostolic times.

3. *Bapt.* IV, 24

4

**As a General Rule Tradition Must Be Considered
In its Strict Sense.**

It is a common mistake among those outside the Catholic Church to believe that Tradition can mean only doctrine or discipline not found in Scripture. They suppose, although not without foundation, that Tradition is simply an oral report, transmitted by word of mouth from father to son and from one generation to another. They may even admit that certain doctrines and rules of the Catholic Church have been consigned to writing, not by the Apostles, but perhaps by their disciples, or by others in the course of time. All this they call Tradition and nothing else. This notion is inadequate.

Tradition has more than one meaning. We must accept the signification which is generally found in Scripture. In its *broad* sense, Tradition means what has been handed on to us in any way, by writing or otherwise. In this sense, it includes Holy Scripture. In the *strict* sense it means what has been delivered *orally* or *practically*. When we say *orally*, we exclude the writings of the inspired authors. The rest of Divine Revelation, then, and most of the discipline of the Church, which have come to us, not through the writings of the Apostles, but simply through their preaching or the administration of their Churches, we call, strictly speaking, "Tradition."⁴

We say *practically*, because many laws, rules, rites, customs and institutions came to us through the practice of the Church. They are simply traditions—not that they have never been written, but the Apostles themselves never

4. From the Latin "tradere"—to deliver—as distinguished from "scripta," writing.

wrote them. The Apostles simply preached them as the word of God, if they belonged to the Faith; or imposed them on the Faithful, if they intended them to be the laws or discipline of the Church.

All these divine truths, laws, precepts and institutions were afterwards written by the disciples of the Apostles or by others who heard them or saw them practiced in the first centuries of the Church. They wrote them for no other purpose than to be better preserved and safely transmitted from generation to generation.

Nor has the Church arbitrarily accepted the term “Tradition” as a means of transmission different from the Scriptures. She accepted it because it is *generally* inculcated in the same Scriptures. We say *generally* because there is one exception. In his Epistle to the Thessalonians, the Apostle uses the word to signify both the written and the unwritten word of God. “Hold the traditions which you have learned, whether by word, or by our epistle.” (2 *Thess.* 2:14).

There are at least nine other texts where, unquestionably, the word “tradition” or “deliver” means something distinct from the Scriptures themselves. They are the following: *Matt.* 15:2, 3, 6; *Mark* 7:3, 5, 8, 9, 13; *Luke* 1:2; *Acts* 16:4; *1 Cor.* 11:2, 23; 15:3; *1 Ptr.* 1:18; *2 Ptr.* 2:21. Two more texts are doubtful: *Gal.* 1:14 and *Acts* 6:14.

It is on account of this multiplicity of texts that Catholic writers have adopted the word “Tradition” and all that it means.

5

All Traditions Approved by the Church Should be Respected and Believed.

All Traditions which are approved by the Church—whether they are Divine or Divine-Apostolic, Simply-Apostolic or Ecclesiastical—command our respect and veneration. It is true that only the Divine or Divine-Apostolic Traditions contain in themselves the revealed word of God and constitute the object of our Faith, but it is not less true that all Simply-Apostolic and Ecclesiastical Traditions are based on a supernatural power and authority. *This supernatural authority or power is itself a revealed truth.* It must therefore be obeyed. “He that heareth you, heareth me, and he that despiseth you despiseth me.” (*Luke 10:16*).

Hence, if a Divine or a Divine-Apostolic Tradition is defined and solemnly accepted by the Church, that Tradition must be upheld as sacred and true, because the voice of the Church is the word of God among us. If anyone rejects it, he rejects at the same time the infallibility of the Church, which is a revealed truth.

A man who rejects a Simply-Apostolic or Ecclesiastical tradition—for instance, the ceremonies in the administration of the Sacraments, the Signing of the Cross, holy water or other traditions, already approved by the Church—denies at the same time her revealed authority. He therefore violates the Faith. That supernatural authority was given to the Apostles and the Church by Christ Himself. He promised her the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of Truth, who abides with her forever. The Holy Ghost abides with the Church for no other purpose than to preserve all Christian doctrines, to render her immune from error in all matters of faith and morals, and to guide her

destiny till the End of Time.

This authority on which all Traditions rest is so important and necessary that some of the Fathers of the Church go even so far as to declare that all Apostolic and Ecclesiastical traditions are *Divine Traditions*, because God gave the Apostles and the Church a divine authority. Thus, the election of a bishop by the neighboring bishops of the same province in the presence of the people—certainly an Ecclesiastical or a Simply-Apostolic tradition—is called by Cyprian “a *Divine* Tradition and of Apostolic observance.”⁵

For this reason, in the same Catholic profession of Faith, we read: “I firmly admit and accept the Apostolic and Ecclesiastical Traditions and all the other observances and constitutions of the Church. . . . I also accept and admit the received and approved rites of the Catholic Church in the solemn administration of all the Sacraments.”

On the other hand the Divine or Divine-Apostolic Traditions are sometimes called by some of the Fathers *Apostolic* or *Ecclesiastical*, because the Apostles and the Church were entrusted with the deposit of the great treasure of Traditions, and are instrumental in their propagation throughout the world.

Therefore, all Traditions approved by the Church must be respected and believed.

5. Cyprian, Ep. 68.