

# The Analogy of Tradition

TOWARD A MORE RADICAL RESSOURCEMENT

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Neither the dogmatic soundness of orthodox Pharisees, nor the poetic extravagance of free-thinking Sadducees will renew the sending of the Spirit who drove the holy men of God (εὐκαίρως ἀκαίρως) to speak and to write.

—Johann Georg Hamann<sup>1</sup>

It was always necessary to begin anew. To ensure the multiflowering of a people of saints; if only to make good the losses, stop the leaks, the growing impiety, the incredulity. It was always necessary to begin anew. An eternal foundation does not exclude the need to begin anew. No degree of eternal foundation alters the fact that the foundation is, in a certain sense in the world, and eternity in a certain sense, in time.

—Charles Péguy<sup>2</sup>

It is a question of renewing structures. That's a bigger job than simply insisting on canonical practices. It demands going much further back, all the way to the sources. . . . It is not outside or against the tradition of the church that the

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1. Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, 6 vols., ed. Josef Nadler (Vienna: Herder, 1949–57), 2:211. The Greek is a reference to 2 Tim 4:2, generally translated as “in season, out of season.” N.B., this quote is one of the epigraphs to the first volume of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982).

2. Charles Péguy, *Temporal and Eternal* [An adaptation of Péguy’s *Notre Jeunesse* and of *Clio II*], trans. Alexander Dru (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001), 91.

movement wants to find a solution, but in the very depths of the tradition itself.

—Yves Congar<sup>3</sup>

Recalling previous ressourcement movements, most notably that of Erasmus and others during the time of the Reformation, and more recently that of the *nouvelle théologie* of the past century, the titular purpose of the new ressourcement and its eponymous journal is likewise to go back “to the sources.” But as obvious as the new journal’s intention would seem to be, it also raises a number of questions that warrant further consideration. For example, to what sources are we returning? Is the new ressourcement, like that of the past century, also about returning to “the Bible, the Fathers, and the liturgy,” as Jean Daniélou programmatically put it in 1946?<sup>4</sup> But if the intention is to do the same thing as Daniélou and the other *nouvelle* theologians did, what then is the difference between the new ressourcement and the old? Is this new movement not, in fact, at its very inception passé? What, indeed, is the point of going back again? Is the *Sources Chrétiennes*, comprising now over six hundred volumes, incomplete? Did Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, and Claude Mondésert leave something unfinished? Were they not thorough enough, or did they not go back far enough? Did they fail to find what they were looking for? Or, to put it more positively, did their research yield so much treasure that a new expedition was necessary to recover what they themselves could not bring back? Is this, then, what is new about the new ressourcement? Or is the “new” here as meaningful as most novelties on the market, which are usually just refurbished versions of old things and about as newsworthy as the latest news cycle, which, however “breaking,” usually has nothing of any importance to say?

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3. Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, trans. Paul Philibert, OP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2011), 52.

4. See Jean Daniélou, “Current Trends in Religious Thought,” *Communio* 50 (Spring 2023): 164–85.

From such preliminary questions, it is evident how much remains to be explained about the new journal's stated intentions—lest those who would heed its call and board the ship set out from the harbor without a clear sense of purpose and end up inviting the suspicion of progressives, “forward-thinking” persons, who cannot understand why any “going back” is necessary in the first place and would see in the new *ressourcement* just another reactionary movement that longs for an idealized past, which it imagines to be better than the present. How, then, assuming a certain sympathy with the journal's stated intentions, might one respond to such questions?

In response, one might first point out that there can be no going forward that is not conscious of the past, no more than one can think without memory or go about one's life without an awareness of where one has been. In other words, there is something to be said for memory, which is arguably as constitutive of ecclesial consciousness as it is of individual consciousness. One might point out, furthermore, the immensity of the past and how much remains to be recovered. But is this a sufficient justification for the new *ressourcement*? No doubt, it may be sufficient for scholars who are already inclined to value the kind of research they do, but is this all that we mean by the “new” in the new *ressourcement*? I would think not, or at least hope not, because I dare say it is not enough to justify, much less inspire, a new movement; nor will it be convincing to persons of a more progressive bent, who may see in it a retreat from the problems of life and the needs of the moment. Indeed, if the only thing justifying the new *ressourcement* is a need for more historical-critical editions of works that have long since been available or the ostensible need to search for some lost (or imaginary) manuscript that may be tucked away in some cave or monastic library, the entire enterprise might well be written off as *passé*, fanciful, or simply irrelevant—as just another instance of irresponsible traditionalism, which is concerned more with the past than

with the present. How, then, shall we address these questions and the serious challenges they pose?

What is needed, I would suggest, is a more radical theology of tradition that goes beyond the kind of ad hoc justifications we just noted; that does not begin with a certain point in time (say, with the call of Abraham or with Peter's confession or with the Council of Nicaea), nor with any point in time, not even the Incarnation, but with God's triune nature, specifically, with the eternal tradition (*paradosis*) of the divine nature to the Son, which is the primal spring from which all living tradition flows and to which it ultimately refers. In other words, what is needed, and what I shall propose here, is an *analogical* theology of time and tradition, by which I mean a theology that understands all secondary tradition, as it is passed down over time, in light of this primary tradition, which is beyond time. For it is only then, when we are clear about the *primary* meaning of tradition, that we can be clear about its *secondary* meaning in time.

To be sure, this latter sense is *a posteriori* more familiar to us. It is the only kind of tradition of which we, at first, have any experience, including the tradition of the Scriptures, the tradition of the Church's teaching, and the tradition of its saints and their writings. But as fundamental as these things are, they are nevertheless derivative, as are more incidental traditions of local churches, because none of them exists for its own sake. Rather, they—and the whole institution of the Church—exist for the sake of their testimony to the *primary* tradition whereby the Father's eternal nature is brought to light in the Son *and* in its analogical reproduction in the birthing of new sons and daughters of God. In other words, the point of secondary tradition is to conduct us mystagogically into the primary tradition—to the point that, like Christ, we too know, albeit analogically, where we have come from: that we, though first born of flesh and blood, have now been born again from above, begotten by grace in a manner akin to the Son himself (John 1:12–13; 3:3–8). For it is the same divine nature that he eternally receives that he gives to us (2 Pet 1:4).

A further upshot is that it then becomes possible to show progressive skeptics, who would otherwise see the new resourcement as just another case of “backward”-thinking conservatism, just how radical it really is: how this “going back” is really a “going forward”; how the recovery of living tradition is the most vital and progressive thing one can do; indeed, how it is more revolutionary than every secular revolution. For, whereas the latter recognizes no analogy of time and therefore leaves time, in the end, unchanged, caught in the same old cycles of sin and death, divine tradition begins in eternity and flows into time, wonderfully interrupting its fateful cycles and transforming it with a supernatural newness of life (Rom 6:4). As Anne Carpenter puts it, commenting on Charles Péguy, “A revolution which operates by ‘resourcing’ is not a *reiteration* of humanity or tradition, but results in something new, in something more perfect.”<sup>5</sup> But, *nota bene*, for Péguy it is not a revolution that destroys tradition. On the contrary, it is a revolution born from the depths of the tradition in order to bring forth the original freshness that is always already there within it and ready to spring up. As Péguy strikingly puts it:

What we need is a summons to a deeper tradition. A revolution is a summons from a less perfect tradition to a more perfect one, a summons from a less profound tradition to a more profound one; it is a movement of return to a more ancient tradition, a surpassing in depth: namely, a search for the deepest origins. In the literal sense of the word, a “resource.”<sup>6</sup>

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5. See Anne Carpenter, *Nothing Gained Is Eternal: A Theology of Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022), 91.

6. Charles Péguy, *Oeuvres en prose 1898–1908* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1959), 1377; the translation is from Jennifer Newsome Martin’s wonderful article, “Only What Is Rooted Is Living”: A Roman Catholic Theology of Ressourcement,” in *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal*, ed. Darren Sarisky (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 81–100, at 92.

These words go a long way toward the kind of justification that we need: they remind us that the going back of the new renaissance is not simply for the sake of going back to what has been; it is not merely for the sake of the past and its preservation (as important as this, too, may be). Rather, it is for the sake of something new, namely, the transformation of the present, and ultimately for a more divine humanity than the most progressive person can imagine—for inasmuch as it carries the Word within it, like the Mother of God, and thus bears her character, it carries the power to make all things new in the Spirit of her Son, who says, laying down a criterion, as it were, of living tradition: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev 21:5).

But if we are to show how this is possible, we have our work cut out for us. For not only do the foregoing questions touch upon the philosophical question of time; they also raise the massively important question of what tradition means in Christian theology and, of specific concern here, whether the novelty of the Christian tradition amounts to anything more than a lifeless monument to the past, which makes it seem, to any modern person, essentially old. Our intention here, accordingly, is to take up these questions, not just in order to justify the intentions of this new journal, but ultimately in order to show that what appears so old, the same old bimillennial Christian tradition, is not only new but enduringly so, indeed, *newer* than the latest news, which is ever “breaking” (in a parody of the in-breaking of divine agency in the economy of salvation), but is, oddly, so old. But how could this be? How could what is so old be so new, and what is so new be so old?

### A Brief Theology of Time

From a purely immanent standpoint, like that of a flatlander who cannot imagine anything transcendent that could intersect with his two-dimensional flatland, our guiding suggestion would seem paradoxical, even contradictory: for surely what is new is new, and what is old is old, not vice versa. But from the

standpoint of a Christian, who lives at the intersection of time and eternity, it is otherwise. For, firstly, let us recall that, in Christianity, paradoxes are often like veils before the mysteries or, better, like gargoyles guarding them from profane minds who refuse to be led by faith to something deeper than they can imagine. In other words, paradoxes have an apotropaic function, precisely in the manner of the words of Christ to the crowd in John 6. Those who cannot understand them, who regard them as nonsense, will turn away—not because Christ turns them away but because they themselves voluntarily turn away, whereas persons of faith, who would suffer instruction in divine things, even when at first they cannot understand them, are invited to enter in, precisely in order that they may come to understand. Such is the (Augustinian) method of faith as opposed to modern philosophy: it is not about immediately clear and distinct ideas but about the light that shines in the darkness, which (at least initially) cannot comprehend it (John 1:5). And so it is here with regard to the apparent paradox of time. For if one has faith and is prepared to believe what one cannot at first understand, the paradox resolves: at the moment one comes to understand *that there is no such thing as pure linear time* but only (asymptotic) time that stands in analogical relation to eternity and is therefore all the more perfect the more it shares in and exhibits the novelty and originality of eternity.

Before we spell this out any further, however, let us interrogate the ordinary understanding of time, which leads to the foregoing paradox, and ask whether anything like novelty really exists. In other words, is there really anything new in time? The very question seems absurd; it flies in the face of all ordinary reasoning and experience. For surely time proceeds in a linear direction from the past to the present, and thus from what is old to what is new. But can we isolate anything in time from the immensity of the past and say that it is really new? Is it not the necessary effect of what preceded it? Is it not just the extension of the past prolonged into the present, like the accumulated force of a wave suddenly crashing onto

a beach? And even if we assume that time can generate something genuinely new, how new can it really be if the moment it appears it has already passed away, like the sound of a syllable that, as Augustine poignantly put it, passes as soon as it is heard: *Hoc sonat, et transit*.<sup>7</sup>

From such simple questions, it becomes clear that what we ordinarily take to be new may not be very new after all. It may be just as new as yesterday's news, which is to say that it is already old. And yet, inasmuch as we are modern, we devotedly look to the news, for we want to be current and up-to-date, and we grasp at the present as if it could satisfy us, oblivious to the illusion of presence and the fact that all time's novelties are flowing away.<sup>8</sup> Such is the irony of modernity. Following Cassiodorus, from whom the term itself derives, it is supposed to be a new state of affairs—if, in fact, it derives from the Latin word for “today” (*hodiernus* from *hodie*).<sup>9</sup> But it, too, is already old. Indeed, as Hans Robert Jauss has keenly observed, what is modern “cannot in any essential way be distinguished from what will be *démodé* tomorrow,” making it always already, in the moment of its appearance, a risible anachronism.<sup>10</sup> We thus come back inexorably to the wisdom of the old preacher who knew what modern persons, who are

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7. Augustine, *De vera religione* 20.42–43.

8. Again, to quote Augustine, who remains in our view a deeper thinker of time than Heidegger: *Quid hic tenetur? Quid non currit?*—“What is there to hold onto here? What is not running off”—and away—like water? See *Ennarationes in Psalmos* 109.20, in which Augustine is discussing the temporality (and mortality) of the human condition.

9. See Cassiodorus, *De Orthographia* 1241D, where Cassiodorus introduces the term to distinguish “modern” custom from what has been handed down from the ancients: “Erit itaque propositum nostrum, quae competenter modernae consuetudini ab antiquis tradita sunt . . .” See Augusto del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, trans. Carlo Lancellotti (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 3.

10. See Hans Robert Jauss, “Modernity and Literary Tradition,” trans. Christian Thorne, *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 329–64. It should also be noted, adding to the ironies, that the term ‘modern’ is an old one, dating back to the 490s and Gelasius's *Epistolae Pontificum*.



fixated on the news, seem not to know: that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl 1:9).

Such, then, are some of the more obvious problems besetting any immanent conception of time—which is to say, any conception of time that bears no analogical relation to eternity. And let us note that these problems arise even from a purely philosophical consideration of the matter. From a Christian standpoint, however, the problems are even more apparent. For if time is an analogy of eternity, the modern understanding of time is precisely a *fallen* understanding of time—which is to say, a falling away from eternity into merely chronological time, which is as old as Chronos and getting older by the day. In other words, from a chronological standpoint, which is that of a fallen cosmos, the “progress” of time can mean nothing more than a “getting older”; and time’s flowing can mean nothing more than a “flowing away.” At the end of the day, there is, therefore, nothing new about chronological time unless we happen to see time itself in a *new* way—not just in relation to eternity (for even then, however ennobling of time its pedigree may be, it could still be seen as nothing more than a Platonic falling away from eternity) but, more profoundly, as an economy of salvation that is punctuated by real, transformative, in-breaking moments—*kairoi*—which emanate in all temporal directions from the Incarnation of the eternal Word, whose words will never pass away (Matt 24:35) and whose hearing renews chronological time with the freshness of eternity.

But let us anticipate a possible objection: If we have denied that chronological time is ever really new, how can eternity be new if it has always been? Is it not older than all things? To put it more radically still: Is it not older than old, being, in fact, a permanent state in which nothing really happens? Is it not the opposite of time’s flowing, the stasis of an immobile presence lacking all novelty and vitality? And is this not what the German idealists, in one way or another, claimed—to wit, that traditional Christian conceptions of time were vulgar

and that any divine eternity that did not include cosmic time would be empty?

The problem with this view is that it presupposes (in order then somehow to overcome) a dialectical *opposition* between time and eternity, evacuating eternity even of the positive aspects of time (its movement, its dynamism, its vitality, etc.), *eo ipso* making eternity far less interesting even than fallen time—making eternity, in fact, so boring and banal that, for Hegel, it is effectively nothing, an empty cipher, apart from time. From a properly Christian standpoint, however, time is not the opposite of eternity but an *analogy* of it (leaving aside, for now, the more technical question of whether by eternity we mean divine eternity or aeonian time).<sup>11</sup> But if this is so, then what positive value we attribute to time—its movement, its dynamism, its flowing, which are the *sine qua non* of so much of this world’s beauty, not least of music—must not only be true of eternity but true to a more eminent degree than we can imagine. In sum, eternity must be *more* dynamic and ultimately *more* novel and vital and blessed than even the most blessed, unanticipated, and life-giving moment in time.

By the same token, eternity cannot be the hypostatization and absolutization of the present moment, as if we could determine eternity analogically from only one aspect of time—namely, the present—while bracketing out the past and the future. (In this respect at least, Heidegger’s critique of vulgar conceptions of eternity is correct.) For such an eternity would lack even the fullness that time in its own way—in the relation among its modalities of the past, present, and future—possesses. Rather, if we are reasoning analogically, eternity must be *more* than an immobile present, and more, too, therefore, than the *nunc stans* posited by Thomas following Augustine’s understanding of the divine “Today”—at least if

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11. For one of the most sophisticated Christian discussions of these matters, see Hedwig Conrad-Martius’s remarkable work, *Die Zeit* (Munich: Kösel, 1954); and her *Schriften zur Philosophie* (Munich: Kösel, 1964), 2:353–79.

we take this standing to mean merely the negative arresting of movement in a kind of frozen, statuary immobility.<sup>12</sup> For, once again, eternity cannot be something less than time; it must be greater and more dynamic than time. At the very least, it must contain archetypally the fullness of time: past, present, and future.

But if this is so, then eternity cannot be a simple, static presence, even if we are obliged to think of eternity in a way consistent with divine simplicity. For if we believe that God is simply *Trinitarian*, it must be a kind of dynamic presence, indeed, a kind of dynamic self-presence along the lines of Aristotle's thought thinking itself (νόησις νοήσεως).<sup>13</sup> But this picture, too, is incomplete. For if eternity is a kind of self-presence, by reasoning from analogy and *a fortiori* from what has been revealed about the Trinity, it must be radically different from what we moderns, children of Descartes and Rousseau, tend to mean by self-presence. For, from a Trinitarian standpoint, *self-presence* is precisely *self-less*, consisting in the giving away of self, and *self-presence* is none other than the eternal gift ("present") exchange of love. If eternity is a "Today," it is thus a "Today" in the sense of "This day I have begotten you" (Ps 2:7), which is to say that it is the "Today" of the eternal Novelty of the Son's generation, and a "Today," moreover, in which the gift of love that is received by the Son is immediately and completely returned to the Father in the unity of the Spirit, who is common to both. Such, then, from the standpoint of revelation, is the eternal basis and reason for time, which is given in order that, in due time, all who are made to the image (*ad imaginem*) of the Son might receive and return the gift of love that the Son has eternally received from and returned to the Father.

Now, granted, this is to speak of things *sub specie aeternitatis*, from a standpoint we can occupy only in light of

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12. See Augustine, *Enarrat. in Ps.* 102.27; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 10, a. 2 ad 1; *Expos. in VI Phys.* 5.

13. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.9.1074b34.

revelation. But from this standpoint, we can clearly see why it is impossible to understand time apart from eternity and why Heidegger's own project was a monumental failure, as Edith Stein, by the time of her death, had begun to show. For it is not that eternity has no meaning apart from time but that time has no meaning apart from eternity. By the same token, we can see that the more time falls out of its native relation to eternity, the more meaningless, insubstantial, and illusory it becomes. For time then becomes nothing but what is draining away and moving inexorably toward death (*Sein-zum-Tode*), as Heidegger logically concluded after rejecting any notion of eternity.

The moment we see time in relation to eternity, however, and as made for union with it, everything changes. For it then becomes possible to see time not only as having some remote analogical relation to eternity (and therewith a minimal basis of meaning) but as pregnant with new (divine) possibilities. For time, we can then see, is not just a Platonic image of eternity, but *essentially* its Marian bearer. In the words of Edward Young, "Time is Eternity; Pregnant with all eternity can give."<sup>14</sup> That is to say, time is meant to be divinely fruitful, bearing forth new and indeed unheard-of possibilities, as Christ reported to the Baptist: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matt 11:5). Of course, with Mary we may ask how this could be (Luke 1:34), not to mention how Christ's disciples could possibly do even greater things (John 14:12). But when God is received in time by a similar *fiat* of faith, no matter how determined and enchained by fate things may seem, all things are possible (Matt 19:26). For by faith the eternal Logos once again enters time and time receives her king. Then, time and reality (as we know it) *flow* differently, carrying a sovereign power of possibility that transcends the determinations of fallen, chronological time. For whereas chronological time is

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14. *The Poems of Edward Young* (Chiswick, UK: C. Wittingham, 1822), 1:79.

forever running out, eternal time, which is the union of the two, is always flowing over with provision (Luke 6:38). Indeed, not only does it bring dead things to life; it causes time itself to flow in altogether new and surprising ways, which the saints perceive as providence.

Admittedly, this is a very brief sketch of a theology of time. Our point, however, has been to show that novelty is *not* a function of time and never has been; if it were, novelty would mean nothing more than what comes next in a temporal series. Rather, novelty is a function of time's participation even *now* in eternity, in the life of the God who, as Augustine famously said, is so ancient *and so new* (*tam antiqua et tam nova*)—not because God is the first in a temporal series and the last thing to happen within it but because God's eternal life completely transcends the divisions of time, being *at once and quite simply*, however paradoxical it may seem, older than all things and newer than all things. But, given our proximity here to Neoplatonism and in order clearly to distinguish a Christian theology of time from a Neoplatonic one, it should be emphasized that those in time are called not merely to participate through faith in eternity, since this could still leave room for Gnostic spiritualities that have no patience for the world. Rather, more profoundly, the Christian is to participate with Christ in time's redemption and, like the Mother of God, to bring forth (and help others to see) that everlasting newness, "that dearest freshness deep down things," which Hopkins so wonderfully saw.<sup>15</sup>

### The Standard for a New Ressourcement

Now, finally, from this perspective on the nature of time, we can better see what the new ressourcement means and intends by "going back" to the sources. For what a "parched and weary" (Ps 63:1) world needs is precisely the refreshment that comes from the sources that have flown from above, from the One who makes all things new (Wis 7:27; Rev 21:5). To be sure,

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15. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur" and Other Poems (New York: Dover, 1995), 15.

modern persons, precisely to the degree that they are modern, may still wonder how old texts, some thousands of years old, could still be relevant today—if, according to the modern myth of progress, what is chronologically new is bound to be better than what is old. But aside from what experience teaches us about these things (for example, about how older homes are often better built than new ones, or how older persons are usually wiser than young ones, etc.), from the foregoing theology of time we can see why old things, if their source is eternal, can still bring vital refreshment—just as the old Bible and the old sacraments continue to do.

Accordingly, the task of the new renaissance is to recover and channel those vital sources from the past from which new life is ever ready to spring, like the same old Word who springs ever anew from the Father, and thereby *Deo volente* serve God's intention to bring water to a "parched and weary" world and enlighten it with divine teaching. In the marvelous words of Joshua (Jesus), son of Sirach:

As for me, I was like a canal from a river,  
     like a water channel into a garden.  
 I said, "I will water my garden  
     and drench my flower-beds."  
 And lo, my canal became a river,  
     and my river a sea.  
 I will again make instruction shine forth like the dawn,  
     and I will make it clear from far away.  
 I will again pour out teaching like prophecy,  
     and leave it to all future generations.  
 Observe that I have not labored for myself alone,  
     but for all who seek wisdom.<sup>16</sup>

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16. Sir 24:30–34 NRSV-CE. Translations of this verse vary considerably, even (in the case of the Vulgate) with respect to the numbering of the verses. As the Vulgate (in the Douay-Rheims translation) reads, apparently on the basis of an alternate version: "I, wisdom, have poured out rivers. I, like a brook out of a river of a mighty water; I, like a channel of a river, and like an aqueduct, came out of paradise. I said: I will

These, too, of course, are old words, but as the inspired words of personified Wisdom, they have lost none of their power—not, at least, to the true philosophers, the children of wisdom, who still seek her (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:35).<sup>17</sup> As such, they make a fitting standard from the Old Testament to go along with the plain words of Christ at the conclusion of the New: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev 21:5).

As it happens, these same verses from Sirach also make a fitting standard because they are the words with which Thomas Aquinas begins his commentary on Lombard’s *Sentences*. In other words, if this is where Thomas began, we have good reason to follow him—not in order slavishly to repeat what Thomas himself said but to continue the kind of work that he did. But to get Thomas right, let us emphasize, in the spirit of Matthew Levering’s and Thomas Joseph White’s Thomistic ressourcement, that Thomas did not go back just for the sake of going back. His own ressourcement was not motivated by historical curiosity. He went back with purpose: he went back in order to gather, and he gathered in order to think through what he gathered and, ultimately, in order to preach about what he “gathered” (in both senses of the term). In other words, for Thomas ressourcement was a decidedly *systematic* operation and *not* a merely historical one, and it was a systematic operation because it was an *ecclesial* operation: to gather all things into one in Christ, in keeping with Christ’s own instruction: “Gather up the fragments that

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water my garden of plants, and I will water abundantly the fruits of my meadow. And behold my brook became a great river, and my river came near to a sea” (vv. 40–43).

17. In this connection, however, we can only repeat Newman’s asseveration, as a presupposition for any apologetics in the modern world, that Wisdom speaks *only* to her children, who “justify” her (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:35). See “The Usurpation of Reason,” in *John Henry Newman: Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford*, ed. James David Earnest and Gerard Tracey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48: “Divine Wisdom speaks, not to the world, but to her own children, or those who have already been under her teaching and who, knowing her voice, understand her words and are suitable judges of them. These justify her.”

remain that none may be lost” (John 6:12). No doubt, understood in its context, namely, the feeding of the five thousand, this verse signifies what great things God can do with meager offerings: “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish” (John 6:9). For present purposes, however, we might take it to mean (on a more figurative reading) the gathering up of all the fragments of wisdom that have been seeded by the Logos and bear witness to him from age to age, and ultimately (at a more evangelical level) the individuals of the human family who (for whatever reason) have become separated from the Logos and have yet to be gathered back into the body of Christ through the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18).

So, then, let us gather—not aimlessly but with purpose and discretion—like Thomas did and like Antony did, who, like a “wise bee,” gathered what was best from all the holy persons he met.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in the spirit of the same verses from Sirach (in a different translation), let us gather up all the plants of the garden and all the fruits of the meadow that have been watered from above in the hope that what we gather, like the leaves of the tree of life, might be for the healing of the peoples (Rev 22:2). And let us not restrict our going back to any one age—say, that of the Church Fathers or the Scholastics—but seek out and salvage what wisdom we can find in every age.<sup>19</sup>

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18. Athanasius, *Life of Antony* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1979), 32–33.

19. And this must be said against the kind of Romantic patrology that tends to stop with the Church Fathers and can see no good in Scholasticism: it is not enough to go back to the Fathers. By the same token, it is not enough to say, “I am a Thomist or a Scotist.” From a Catholic perspective, as Johann Adam Möhler reminded us, all of this smacks of the divisions of early Protestantism: “I am a Lutheran,” “I am a Calvinist,” etc. See Johann Adam Möhler, *Symbolism, or Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences between Catholics and Protestants as Evidenced by Their Symbolical Writings* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1997), 6: “The relation, namely, wherein the Reformers stand to the religious belief of their followers, is of a very peculiar nature, and totally different from that of Catholic teachers to Catholic doctrine. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, are *the creators* of those religious opinions prevalent among their disciples; while no Catholic dogma can be referred to any theologian as its author.” This is not to deny the different charisms of different orders or the different insights of individual theologians. (One might like to think that even the insights of a Luther or a Calvin could be retained where



For only then can we really say that this is a genuinely Catholic movement: when we are prepared to gather the fruits of the Spirit from any age and wherever they have grown.

But, following Thomas, we can get even more out of the foregoing verses from Sirach, which makes them an even more suitable standard for the new renaissance. For, as Thomas reads them, they refer not just to divine wisdom but more specifically (albeit in veiled language) to wisdom's source in the eternal flowing forth of the Son from the Father:

It is therefore rightly said of the person of the Son, "I, wisdom, have poured out rivers." I take these rivers to be the flowing of an eternal procession, whereby the Son proceeds from the Father and the Holy Spirit from both in an ineffable manner. These rivers were once hidden and in some way confused with the likenesses of creatures, and even in the enigmas of [the Hebrew] Scriptures, so that hardly any of the wise attained the mystery of the Trinity. The Son of God came and in some way poured out the rivers it contains, making known the name of the Trinity, Matt. 28:19: "teach all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit."<sup>20</sup>

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they are not obviously heterodox, such as Luther's emphasis on grace or Calvin's on God's sovereignty—not to mention how much demands to be retained from the writings of Kierkegaard or Bonhoeffer or any number of Protestant saints. A charitable Catholicism would be able to redeem all that is good in them, which is much more than what is wrong with them.) It is to say that all of these orders are analogically ordered to one master—namely, Christ.

20. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis*, proemium: "Recte ergo dicitur ex persona filii: 'ego sapientia effudi flumina.' Flumina ista intelligo fluxus aeternae processionis, qua filius a patre, et spiritus sanctus ab utroque, ineffabili modo procedit. Ista flumina olim occulta et quodammodo confusa erant, tum in similitudinibus creaturarum, tum etiam in aenigmatibus Scripturarum, ita ut vix aliqui sapientes Trinitatis mysterium fide tenerent. Venit filius Dei et inclusa flumina quodammodo effudit, nomen Trinitatis publicando, Matth. ult. 19: 'docete omnes gentes, baptizantes eos in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti.'"

In other words, for Thomas, the verses from Sirach take us all the way back to the mystery of the Trinity, which he explains here not in terms of subsistent relations, as in the *Summa Theologiae*, but in terms of real processions in the likeness of rivers.

Now, this passage would be significant if for no other reason than what it says about Thomas's understanding of the Trinity, for example, whether we understand his doctrine exclusively in terms of subsistent relations or also, as here, in more fluid terms. What is of interest to us here, however, is what it suggests to us about the Trinity as the origin of all tradition, indeed, as itself an eternal tradition, and, as such, as the source of all that we derivatively call Sacred Tradition. For it is from here, from the Trinity—from the eternal novelty of the eternal begetting of the Son from the Father and from the eternal rejoicing of the Spirit who proceeds from them both, as the Gift both received and returned—that all true beginnings begin. And so it is from here, with this beginning in view, that we, too, must begin anew—if our own tradition is not to stagnate but to flow anew and be able effectively to transmit the force of the new life, the eternal life, that flows from the Father to the Son, and to all who believe in him (John 1:12).

Now, perhaps, we can better see what the new ressourcement is all about: it is not about going back for the sake of going back but about going back for the sake of going forward: in order to communicate to all persons who seek wisdom something of the fullness that we have *received* (John 1:16).<sup>21</sup>

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21. Of course, in this respect, the task of the new ressourcement is no different from that of all Christians, all of whom are called to be salt and light and to bring life to the world; and this is critical to keep in mind, lest we think that God needs scholars to accomplish his purposes, when he clearly does not. In fact, if we may infer anything from Scripture, God seems to prefer to make use of the uneducated rather than the educated, the illiterate rather than the literate, the intellectually weak rather than the intellectually strong (1 Cor 1:28), perhaps because the former are not wont to think too highly of themselves or rely on their own perhaps very natural gifts of intelligence, studiousness, etc.

Indeed, from this new perspective, there can be no going forward that does not carry something of the past with it. It is just a question of *what* from the past is being carried forward. And this is why we must go back again and again. In the words of Péguy, who is himself one of the great sources, a veritable “spring” of wisdom: “It is always necessary to begin those works again, those foundations again in time, which are fragments of eternity, and to begin those eternal foundations again, whose source and rule is eternal.”<sup>22</sup> Therein, then, lies the justification for the new *ressourcement* if one is even necessary.

### The Old and New *Ressourcement*: Back to Scripture, the Fathers, and the Liturgy

Having hereby achieved, one may hope, a minimal systematic-theological basis for the new *ressourcement*, let us now go back to the historical question of the relation between this new *ressourcement* and its immediate predecessor, that of the *nouvelle* theologians of the past century. For, without a doubt, they have much in common—so much, in fact, that one might legitimately wonder what is new about the new *ressourcement* or whether it is just a new version of the same thing. For even if it was not fully elaborated, the *nouvelle* theologians also operated with a notion of *living* tradition; they even laid the groundwork for understanding tradition itself in analogical terms, so that tradition, in the first instance, is not even a historical category (as odd as this may sound) but something ontologically proper to God *in himself*, as we have already indicated.

Of course, the new *ressourcement* will never be a simple repetition of past efforts along these lines. Rather, it will be a new searching for vital sources in an attempt to meet the

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And this point is all the more to be pondered given that it was made by Paul, the most educated of the Apostles, who considered his heritage and learning (see 1 Cor 8:2–3) worthless compared to the experiential knowledge of Christ (Phil 3:8–10).

22. Péguy, *Temporal and Eternal*, 90.

varying needs of the time: if one generation needs to hear one thing from one saint, another needs to hear something else from another saint. Nevertheless, *formally*, they would seem to be indistinguishable, which raises the question of whether they differ with regard to *material* objectives. In other words, if the *nouvelle* theologians sought to renew the Church by going back to Scripture, the Fathers, and the liturgy, are these also the basic material objectives of the new ressourcement? For example, do we really need another monograph on enthymemes in Paul? Do we not come to a point when one is no longer doing serious research but just turning over the soil again and again in the hope of finding something new that could—one knows not how—justify another dissertation? But to repeat our guiding question: if Scripture, the Church Fathers, and the variety of liturgical forms have already been researched to the nth degree, what is really new, if anything, about the new ressourcement?

Admittedly, with regard to Scripture, it may be that we are approaching (or have long found ourselves at) a point of diminishing historical-critical returns. But does this mean that we can do without historical-critical scholarship or cease studying Scripture itself? Of course not. On the contrary, the study and research of Scripture is an endless task (and it is tragic that so much that passes for “theology” today is conducted without a thorough grounding in it)—not only because “sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with Sacred Tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation” (*Dei Verbum* §24); or because of its manifold senses (literal-historical, tropological, allegorical, and anagogical), whose interfolding fields lend themselves to an endless harvest of interpretations. Above all, however, it is tragic because the reading of Scripture is sanctifying, to the point of dividing soul and spirit (Heb 4:12) in keeping with the distinction Paul draws between the “soulish” believer and the “spiritual” believer (1 Cor 2:14–15). Finally, we need to go back because errors in translation can be costly, obscuring both the plain as

well as the mystical sense of Scripture.<sup>23</sup> But even if the return to Scripture is an ongoing necessity, is there really anything

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23. Let us simply point out three highly problematic translations, beginning with what Christ says in Luke 17:21: οὐδὲ ἐροῦσιν Ἰδοὺ ὧδε ἢ· Ἐκεῖ ἰδοὺ γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ἐντὸς ὑμῶν ἐστίν. Unfortunately, “ἐντὸς” has consistently been (mis-) translated as “in your midst” or “among you.” Its plain meaning, however, which all the Carmelites from Teresa to Elizabeth of the Trinity grasped (because they experienced it), but which modern translators have been unable to comprehend, is “within.” (Fortunately, most of the revised editions at least include the plain meaning as an alternative reading.) Another example is the modern misreading of Romans 11:36: ὅτι ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν τὰ πάντα. There is no other way to translate εἰς αὐτὸν except as the accusative demands, viz., as “to,” in the sense of “into” or “toward.” Nor can one suppose that it was a mistake needing correction. On the contrary, it indicates something that would have been obvious to any of the Neoplatonists of the time: that all things come from God and are destined to return to God, who is their source *and* their end. The translators of the NAB, however, took the liberty of replacing “to” with “for.” Take, finally, 1 Corinthians 2:14–15, where Paul distinguishes between the ψυχικός and the πνευματικός ἄνθρωπος. Evidently, for Paul it was a major distinction, on which the spiritual life as a genuinely spiritual life hangs, since it recurs in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. The majority of contemporary and even early modern translations, however, translate ψυχικός, which means “soulish,” as “natural” or even “non-Christian,” so that the distinction amounts to that between the unbeliever and the believer. The problem with this seemingly innocent translation choice (“soulish” admittedly sounds awkward in English) is that it misses the entire point: Paul is distinguishing, in light of a common Platonic distinction between the νοῦς (*intellectus*) and δiάνoια (*ratio*), which medievals such as Richard of St. Victor were keen to maintain, between ordinary thinking at the level of the “soul” (which includes even reasoning) and living in noetic union with the Spirit at the level of the spirit, which not even all Christians do. What gets lost in modern translations is thus the fact—or at least the strong probability—that Paul is *not* talking about the basic difference between Christians and non-Christians who have not received the Spirit but about the need for Christians to live at the level of the spirit in order to live in union with the Spirit whom they have received. Hence Paul’s frequent *paraenesis* to walk by the Spirit (Gal 5:16) and to be transformed by the renewal of the *nous* (Rom 12:2). Admittedly, these would seem to be minor errors, but they reveal a much larger problem—namely, the problem of modern prejudices influencing translations of ancient texts, which is all the more problematic inasmuch as it obscures or distorts the meaning of Scripture and what it has to say to us about the depths of our own nature and destiny. For more on this subject, see my *Christ, the Logos of Creation: An Essay in Analogical Metaphysics* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), 284–94.

more of a programmatic nature that needs to be said after the *nouvelle* theologians have underscored the dependence of all theology on Scripture and recovered its traditional fourfold sense?<sup>24</sup>

And what of the liturgy? No doubt we can always, at an individual level, deepen our sense of what the liturgy is about. But do we really need to repeat what the leaders of the liturgical movement, such as Casel, Guardini, and Herwegen, have said? Do we need to be reminded that all the baptized are members of the mystical body of Christ; that they are not spectators but participants in the Eucharistic liturgy; and that, beyond participating in responses and songs and token gestures, they are invited to offer *themselves* with Christ as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1) in order that they might really “be what they receive” and the final meaning of Christ’s offering, the return of all things to the Father (1 Cor 1:24), might be fulfilled? After all, Augustine already told us as much when he told us not to be like Cain, who gave God something but kept himself to himself, but rather to be like Abel, who is a type of Christ.<sup>25</sup> What more really needs to be said about the

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24. To be sure, we might continue to lament the modern divorce of Scripture’s material and spiritual senses, corresponding to the divorce of historical-critical and monastic interpretive methods. We might lament the way that modern historical criticism tends to treat Sacred Scripture as a dead body of historical documents and not as a genuinely living and inspired text that is capable of enlightening and breathing spiritual life into those who read it. We might be horrified to see biblical scholars, who themselves might be spiritually dead, subject the living Word to a continuous autopsy—as if the body of the letter of Scripture were not, in its own way, as glorious as the body of the Word to which it bears witness. And in response to all these things, we might insist on the Christological unity of Scripture’s material and spiritual senses, which are at once so human and at the same time, for those with eyes to see, so divine. But others, such as Origen, Augustine, Dionysius, and, in modern times, the gloriously obscure Hamann, have already said these things. So what more remains to be done other than to follow them in reading Scripture, meditating on it, and praying about it until we, too, by the grace of God, might come to savor with Guigo the Carthusian the sweetness that it contains?

25. See *City of God* 15.7.

meaning of the Eucharistic liturgy and our participation in it that has not already been said better by others, such as by David Fagerberg<sup>26</sup> or Blessed Columba Marmion, who put it thus: “As far as we ourselves are concerned, it is only by uniting ourselves with His sacrifice at the altar that we die with Him. And how *do* we unite ourselves as victims with Christ Jesus? By delivering ourselves up, as He did, to the complete accomplishment of the Divine good pleasure.”<sup>27</sup> And as for the more technical questions of *Liturgiewissenschaft*, have we not by now sufficiently researched the liturgy’s various sources, forms, and rites? If so, then what more of any consequence is there left to do?

And, finally, as for the Church Fathers, do we not by now have, in addition to the multi-volume French edition of *Sources Chrétiennes* and the multi-volume German edition of *Fontes Christiani*, a sufficient number of fine editions in English, most obviously, the venerable *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* series, not to mention Quasten’s *Patrology*, the great *Classics of Western Spirituality* series, and more recently the New City Press edition of all of the works of Augustine, amounting to one hundred and thirty-two separate volumes in English? No doubt, enterprising scholars may yet discover works hidden in some cave or library by hitherto unknown Church Fathers and Mothers, which may yet enrich the Church. But is there anything obvious left to do? Have we not by now done enough to provide what is needed in terms of access to Scripture, the Church Fathers, and liturgical forms? And if we have, then what constitutes the “new” in the new ressourcement? Or is

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26. See, for instance, David Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013); *Consecrating the World: On Mundane Liturgical Theology* (New York: Angelico, 2016); *Liturgical Mysticism* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019); *Liturgical Dogmatics: How Catholic Beliefs Flow from Liturgical Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2021).

27. Columba Marmion, *Christ, the Life of the Soul* (Bethesda, MD: Zaccheus, 2005), 354f. Cf. 374: “Christ gives Himself to us in the measure that we give ourselves to Him, to His Father, to the brethren who are the members of His mystical body.”

it, all things considered, really just a continuation of what the *nouvelle* theologians did?

In some sense, it surely is a continuation. But this in itself is no source of embarrassment, as if everything new had to be new in the sense of utterly original. For among the more radical philosophical points of the new renaissance is that *there is no such thing as pure originality* anyway (even the Father is a pure origin only as the origin of the Son). On the contrary, this is the *proton pseudos* of the modern world: to believe that it is not part of a tradition of thought, even and precisely when it proudly rejects this tradition and claims to begin (following Descartes's fanciful thought experiment) with thought alone. Thus, in response to the *tradition* of modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant, Hamann could more honestly say, echoing the apostle (1 Cor 4:7), "the true genius knows only his dependence."<sup>28</sup>

And so it is here: those of us undertaking the new renaissance recognize our dependence upon tradition, even when we are critically engaged with it, and that reasoning apart from tradition, the conceit of the Enlightenment, is an empty fiction—an *ens rationis*. In going forward, we thus stand unapologetically on the shoulders of others, like children who, standing on the shoulders of their fathers, are able to see much farther than children who, whether due to a fear of heights or willful independence, prefer to walk alone.

But is there then nothing really new about the new renaissance? Other than a broader remit that would include, following Balthasar, the best not just of the Catholic tradition but also of the Orthodox and Protestant traditions, I would argue that the newness of the new renaissance consists, or at least should consist, in a *more radical* philosophical and theological approach to the entire question of tradition, which is able to explain *why* continuing to go back to the sources is justified, *what* tradition is originally all about, *what* makes tradition living as opposed to dead, and *what* from the

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28. See Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, 2:260.



immensity of the tradition actually needs to be recovered. To this end, therefore, I begin with a philosophical justification of tradition, which is the flip side of a radical critique of modern secular reason. Then, in order to put the question of tradition on its properly theological basis, I will propose a formally Trinitarian criterion for *living* tradition. For at the end of the day, the question of tradition is not only a matter of reason and history but of ontology and anthropology, and the authentic measure of any *ressourcement* depends, as strange as this may sound, upon the *original tradition* of the divine nature from the Father to the Son, which is the primary analogate—and hence criterion—of every other.

### Back to Tradition: Without Apologies

Now, in some sense, a philosophical justification for the new *ressourcement* is unnecessary, at least for believers who already understand the importance of tradition on the basis of Scripture and tradition. For as the Apostle says, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor 4:7). But a philosophical justification may nevertheless be useful when confronted with the charge that the new *ressourcement* is just another reactionary movement that is stuck in tradition and cannot think its way forward. Thus far we have already indicated why this is not so and that our going back is precisely for the sake of going forward with greater stature, on the shoulders of others who can help us see, God willing, even farther. But if this is so, then we can do more than justify our undertaking. Following Hamann, the real genius of Königsberg, we can also go on the offensive.<sup>29</sup> For the principles of our defense are at the same time powerful enough to pull down strongholds (2 Cor 10:4), in this case, that of modern philosophical rationalism. To be sure, from a distance, it may very well look imposing, especially under the command of Kant and his critical weaponry. Nevertheless, upon closer, “metacritical” inspection, it turns

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29. For a general introduction to Hamann and his prophetic response to the Enlightenment, see John R. Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann* (Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford, 2009).

out to be built of sand. Indeed, from Hamann's more enlightened perspective, which is able to see through modern illusions, it is a kind of sandcastle, destined to be swept away by the tide.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, a good philosopher could argue that we have underestimated Kant, who, admittedly, stands like a giant among the philosophers of his time and whose reputation dwarfs that of Hamann like Goliath dwarfed David. To make a more compelling case, therefore, we would have to get into the details of Hamann's metacritique, which is condensed in his little *Metacritique concerning the Purism of Reason* (1784).<sup>31</sup> But since we cannot get into the details here, let us briefly consider the kinds of questions that, from a metacritical standpoint, could be posed to modern persons who, inspired by the *tradition* of modern philosophy stemming from Father Descartes and in the name of ostensibly free thinking, have rejected, usually without much serious investigation or consideration, two-thousand years of Christian tradition from the apostolic testimony to today.

For example, if we understand progress as standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us in order perchance to see better and do better than they did, is it reasonable to think that Descartes saw everything better than the scholastics he presumed to reject *tout court* and in a trice? Was his vision really sharp enough to establish all of the sciences apart from all tradition on the basis of what he alone

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30. As Hamann pointed out, "Today's system, which provides the proof of your presuppositions, will be tomorrow's fairytale." See *Sämtliche Werke*, 2:140f. And so it will be, from the standpoint of revelation, for all other systems that are set up against the knowledge of God in Christ, the "great architect and cornerstone of a system that will outlast heaven and earth" (Hamann, 3:23). For Hamann's own summary of his deconstructive authorship in the service of the gospel, see *After Enlightenment*, 224.

31. See *After Enlightenment*, 242–57; John Betz, "Enlightenment Revisited: Hamann as the First and Best Critic of Kant's Philosophy," review of Oswald Bayer, *Vernunft ist Sprache: Hamanns Metakritik Kants*, in *Modern Theology* 20 (2004): 291–301.

could see and verify *for himself*? Is it really possible to begin anew without the usual theological presuppositions: without God (who stands in doubt and has to be proved on “rational” terms laid down by this or that philosopher, which are supposedly less dubious), without revelation (which likewise stands in doubt and has to be measured against modern “rational” standards), and without Sacred Tradition (which likewise has to be measured against poorly defined, but ostensibly rational standards)? And even if this new beginning is thinkable and one happens to be one of Nietzsche’s “last men,” who can think it *sans souci*, that is, without being plunged into the frightful abyss from which Jacobi fled,<sup>32</sup> which Jean Paul foresaw,<sup>33</sup> and which drove Nietzsche’s madman mad,<sup>34</sup> is it possible to begin anew without even the usual *philosophical* presuppositions: without experience, without tradition, and, even without *language*, which Hamann calls “the mother of reason”?<sup>35</sup> And if it is, what then are we thinking about if not nothing? Have we not *eo ipso* arrived, at the very beginning of modern philosophy at its nihilistic end, which today threatens to destroy the whole of Western civilization?

In view of such simple questions, it should be evident that Descartes’s and Kant’s philosophies, inasmuch as they understand reason as something given *apart* from all tradition, are as dubious as all that they doubted—to the point of being incredible, at least if we take them at their word that they not

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32. As Jacobi put it to Fichte in his famous “open letter” in 1799: “I therefore do not see why I, for reasons of good taste, should not be allowed to prefer my ‘philosophy of not-knowing’ to the ‘philosophical knowing of the nothing,’ even it were only *in fugam vacui* [flight from the void].” See Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel “Allwill,”* ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 519.

33. See Jean Paul, “Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, daß kein Gott sei,” in *Siebenkäs in Sämtliche Werke*, Abteilung 1, vol. 2 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987), 270–75.

34. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181–82.

35. See Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel (Wiesbaden, DE: Insel, 1975), 6:108.

only managed to dispense with all tradition but to think independently of it, too. But is this really possible? Should it not have been obvious that there is no thinking in a vacuum and that there can be no progress in thinking that does not occur through a dialectical weighing of authorities? Is the medieval disputation really so passé? Is it not, in fact, the form of all reasoning, as a reasoning in conversation with others? Why, then, the pretense?

Granted, this is precisely what makes modern philosophy “modern” as opposed to ancient or medieval, namely, its anti-traditional presupposition. But this does not make it any truer or saner. On the contrary, it is precisely what makes it so idiotic, in the etymological sense of the term: to imagine that one can think apart from all tradition and even that it is *reasonable* to do so. For the ancients and medievals, this would have been sheer lunacy. They would have understood that philosophy is an inherently dialogical affair and that one learns to think from being in conversation with others, just as one learns to speak by first hearing one’s parents speak. But what if one is a child of the Enlightenment and has been reared to think—to dream—that there is such a thing as purely independent thinking and, to this austere end, has even been encouraged (*sapere aude!*) to dispense with all tradition? It is at this point that, following Hamann, a radical metacritique of secular reason is in order, not just in order to justify thinking in light of tradition, which is our primary concern here, but ultimately in order to save reason, indeed, society itself, from theoretical suicide.

No doubt, the myth of the Enlightenment—that there is such a thing as reasoning apart from tradition—could be sustained for a time. But nothing so vain and illusory could last very long, as Hamann (and Jacobi) prophetically warned. For, to sum up Hamann’s metacritique of Kant, there is simply no such thing as reason apart from tradition. In short, *sine traditio, nulla ratio*. In other words, to turn Kant on his head (as Hamann was wont to do), tradition is the *empirical* condition of the possibility of what we call reason; or again, to

make a metacritical point of Kant's famous formula: just as concepts without intuitions are empty, so too is reason without tradition. And so, from a metacritical standpoint, it is not surprising that, in violently attacking tradition, the *Aufklärer*, ironically, ended up destroying their own first presupposition, namely, reason itself.

This is not to say that one cannot indulge in thought experiments of the modern kind, as frightful and nightmarish as they may be if there is no God who is sought in the darkness beyond all sensory experience. For one is still free to imagine what remains of reason after we have tried to purify it of all experience and tradition. Indeed, however vainly, we might imagine what is left after Descartes's devastating thought experiment and try to see whether we, too, have it in our power to create *ex nihilo*—which is to say, start all over again with our own thinking. Following Kant, we might even take the experiment further, along the lines of modern chemistry or good old alchemy, in order to see whether, as a result of the refining process, some philosopher's stone will be left in the form of transcendental categories that until then had lain hidden, having been mixed up with all the dross of experience and tradition, but that now, at last, "enlightened" souls (eureka!) can see. And *per impossibile*, we might even try to purify reason from language, which Hamann calls reason's "*organon* and criterion."<sup>36</sup>

The trouble, however, as Hamann tried to point out, is that what one finds at the end of such processes is not "pure reason" but no reason at all, inasmuch as reason is nothing apart from tradition. As he puts it in his brilliant little work, *Philological Ideas and Doubts*:

Nothing is in our understanding without having previously been in our senses: just as there is nothing in our entire body that did not first pass through our

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36. Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke* 3:284. See Betz, *After Enlightenment*, 247.

own stomach or that of our parents. The *stamina* and *menstrua* of our reason are therefore, most properly understood, revelations and traditions, which we assimilate as our own, transform into our own humors and powers, and thereby measure up to our vocation partly to reveal and partly to pass on the critical and archontic dignity of a political animal.<sup>37</sup>

Needless to say, Hamann is echoing Aristotle here, as in the Aristotelian dictum *Nihil in intellectu non prius fuerit in sensu*, not to mention the British empiricist tradition he knew well. His point, though, is more profound: not only is there no reason apart from traditions and revelations, which reason receives and processes; for Hamann, our very *dignity* as rational beings consists in the processing of traditions and revelations—in the way that the body processes food, and without which it would starve. This is not to say that reason is nothing but tradition, for children are obviously different from their parents, and the stomach is different from what it processes. Nor is it to deny the importance of critical reflection on tradition, which is what Aquinas himself did. On the contrary, this is one of the things that distinguishes living tradition from blind tradition, which no longer sees (or even tries to understand) its point. It is simply to say that reason is not an independent organ but an organ that is *made for food*, which is to say, for traditions and revelations, in order that our ability to reason, by digesting them, might in turn be nourished by them.<sup>38</sup>

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37. Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, 3:260.

38. Nota bene: This is not to say that all revelations and traditions are equal—if one considers, for starters, the different religious traditions and post-Christian claims to revelation from Islam to Mormonism, not to mention the claims of political parties that take on the status of revelations. And this is why Hamann speaks of the “critical and archontic dignity” of the human being as a political animal, which is to say, of the need for critical and, above all, spiritual discernment. But do we not find ourselves in a circular movement here between reason and tradition such that, on the one hand, there is no reason apart from tradition,

In any case, standing on Hamann's shoulders, who saw that reason is as dependent as it is autonomous and that tradition and reason are fundamentally correlated, we can now see why the Church does not need to be embarrassed about going back to the tradition in order to think again from it. It is *rather* that modern secular reason and the modern states dubiously founded upon it stand in need of justification for presuming that there is such a thing as pure reason (never mind the issue of sin) and that this vanity is a sufficient basis for society. All of which, given the terminal condition of all pure rationalisms, calls for a new kind of politics after the Enlightenment—a “metacritical politics”<sup>39</sup> that does not, in the name of a fanatical secularism, set itself thoughtlessly against tradition (since to do so, we now see, would be to strike at reason's own vital roots), but digests it and processes it, drawing what is good, true, and beautiful out of it, for the nutrition and health of the body politic.

### The Dangers of Traditionalism and Progressivism

But now that, following Hamann, we have philosophically justified the new *ressourcement*, we need to be acutely aware of the danger that our commitment to tradition might be confused with what, for lack of a better term, we might call *traditionalism*. Needless to say, by “traditionalism,” I do not mean tradition *per se*, much less Sacred Tradition, which I mean to defend. I mean, rather, what is indicated by the concluding “-ism,” which tends to absolutize whatever noun precedes it, leaving no room for any critical evaluation, as in the case of communism or capitalism. But it is not easy to

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but that, on the other hand, tradition cannot be processed without at least a semi-autonomous reason? Indeed, this is the case. And it raises perplexing questions about the relationship between the two and how the reason that is formed by tradition could be a competent judge of it, all of which demands further elaboration. But we might begin to explain it on analogy to the way that children discern what has been given to them by their parents.

39. See Betz, *After Enlightenment*, 258–90.

distinguish tradition from traditionalism, just as it is hard to detect an incipient disease. So, let us begin with the more obvious danger of *progressivism*, to which traditionalism is diametrically opposed.

Of course, by progressivism, I do not mean that progress is necessarily bad, any more than, by traditionalism, I mean that tradition is necessarily bad. Rather, by progressivism, I mean the notion that progress is always good and, therefore, trumps any notion of truth, which is said to “change with the times.” Now, the danger of this kind of thinking goes without saying: it is corrosive of Sacred Tradition; it plays fast and loose with norms of any kind; and it is the harbinger of nihilism, which threatens to destroy not only the Church but all human culture (since culture can endure only as long as there is respect for received wisdom). It would be bad enough that it makes a mockery of logic, dissolving truth into the convulsive flux of history. What is worse, it can admit no truth but that of the self-declared Anti-Christ, namely, Nietzsche’s will to power, which in modern Western societies amounts to the will of the majority—than which nothing greater, nor more plastic, can be conceived, being constantly subject to the *apophthegmata* of powerbrokers and celebrities who are typically given more credit than Christ and all the saints. In any event, it entails as a matter of *principle* that the Church is always *behind* the times, which are the real standard. Inevitably, therefore, to the extent that one is a progressive, one will end up following the *Zeitgeist* instead of the real *Geist*, or, quite possibly (and more darkly), the plans and purposes of the “god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4), who masquerades under the semblance of some good (2 Cor 11:14), usually in the name of freedom or order, each of which is used to justify something evil: for instance, the unquestioned “right” to unlimited individual wealth, no matter how poor the rest of the world may be; or the unlimited “right” to abortion, no matter how cruel and unnecessary such practices may be; or, in the case of ethno-fascist regimes, the tendency in the name of order and the “people” to demonize



minorities, mistreat immigrants, and suppress political dissent, no matter how legitimate such dissent may be.

But as dangerous as progressivism may be, traditionalism is just as dangerous, and in some ways more so, because unlike progressivism, which is easy to recognize from afar, for Catholics and anyone belonging to an established confession, traditionalism is closer to home and therefore more deceptive. In other words, it can look like tradition but is really a moribund form of it. But how can we tell? Perhaps the easiest way to tell is when one does not sense the love and power of the Holy Spirit flowing through the forms and persons that are supposed to convey the tradition: as when the Gospel is preached without inspiration and is therefore never really heard; when the liturgy has become a routine and no one is really changed, much less deified, through it; when the laity have come to think—to dream—that the benefits of membership in the Church (forgiveness of sins, the reception of the sacraments, the hope of eternal life) do not come with a cost and do not require discipleship but merely attendance at Mass and the fulfillment of their Sunday “obligation,” which the clergy like to remind them they have. But often these reminders, which send the wrong message, threaten to turn the faith back into a kind of dreary legalism and serve to burden more than inspire them to come again.

But these are just impressions, and impressions can be deceiving. So, again, what is traditionalism, and how can we identify it? Following Péguy, it is what happens when the mystery of the Church turns into a kind of machinery that, lacking the oil of the Spirit, eventually comes to a grinding halt. But how does this happen? For his part, Péguy had specific concerns about the Church in his time, especially about the Church’s involvement in the Dreyfus affair, which, in his eyes, cost the Church in France its credibility. But the basic lines of his critique are nevertheless generally applicable: traditionalism is what happens when the Church loses its sense of mission and immures itself in its own traditions as if these were an end in themselves. It is what happens when the

Church comes to glory in itself—even in the greatness of the “Catholic intellectual tradition”—rather than seeing its traditions as life-giving and itself as a massive rescue operation in need of constant mobilization.

To be sure, the Church is the assembly of those “called out” of the world, in the etymological sense of *ecclesia*, and so there is something to be said for the so-called “Benedict Option,” but this is a presupposition, not a conclusion. For the point of the Church is not to form some kind of holy club, least of all a self-righteous club, but rather to be sent out, as is suggested by the (admittedly garbled) etymology of the word “Mass” from the Latin of the dismissal, *Ite, missa est*.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the Mass has an evangelical purpose apart from which it cannot be understood: we are called out of the world to be nourished and equipped (by the hearing and preaching of the Word, by the sacraments, and by fellowship) *in order* to be sent back out into the world to share the Gospel, engage in the ministry of reconciliation, and pass on to others the newness of spiritual life that Christ died to give.

But if this is the point of the Christian tradition, to communicate the newness of life in Christ, which is to say, to communicate the *primary* tradition that flows from the Father to the Son to all who, upon hearing the Gospel, are prepared to receive him, then traditionalism is what happens when the tradition has, tragically, lost sight of its point and become pointless—whether due to a lack of attention, persecution, or just the usual cares of the world and the lure of wealth (Matt 13:18–22). It is like a mechanical rotary motion that, instead of building up energy to be released, just turns drearily and endlessly in on itself. Or, to use another metaphor: if the point of the Christian tradition is progressively and expansively to communicate the newness of life in Christ—like a sun

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40. As Péguy puts it in *Temporal and Eternal*, 104: “The Rule [of the Church] was not against the world, nor what avoided the world; on the contrary, in a certain sense the Rule, if one may use the expression, is what moved toward the World to nourish it.”

bursting with energy—to the point that the whole world is irradiated with the light of Christ and one sees mysteriously bright-eyed saints on every street corner, then traditionalism is what happens when gravity takes over, the tradition starts to implode, and, finally, the lights go out.

In sum, traditionalism is what happens when tradition no longer moves forward in keeping with its purpose—in the famous words of Pius X—“to renew all things in Christ” (*in-staurare omnia in Christo*) and thereby hasten the coming of that most Catholic of days when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). It is what happens when secondary traditions are no longer seen in analogical relation to the primary tradition and, by a tragic inversion of priorities, have become *more important* than, and possibly obstructive of, the primary tradition they are meant to convey.<sup>41</sup> In other words, traditionalism is secondary tradition that has forgotten that it is secondary; that it was instituted *not* primarily in order to preserve secondary traditions, be they those of Augustine or Aquinas or the writings of any other saint (as wonderful as their writings may be), but in order to pass on the *primary* tradition of the divine nature from the Father to the Son. But if this is so, then it means not merely talking about the Trinity (as one does or does not on Trinity Sunday) but really communicating the vital life of

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41. A case in point is the discipline (not doctrine) of priestly celibacy. Paul clearly recommends this discipline in view of the eschaton but does not command it (1 Cor 7:25), not wishing to impose any kind of restraint (v. 35). When such a discipline becomes more important than the Church’s ability to fulfill its mission or what Christ explicitly commands or desires (would Christ insist on it, for example, at the expense of the Church’s unity?); or when one gets excited about the least change in clerical dress but is not concerned about sharing the Gospel, the plight of the poor, or the salvation of one’s neighbor. Of course, this is not to say that secondary tradition is entirely fungible, much less that the plain teachings of Scripture and tradition are fungible. On the contrary, the Church is obliged to defend them, however narrow they may seem (Matt 7:13–14), and one must show all due respect for previous traditions, which, if they were officially instituted, were instituted, we ought to assume, for a very good reason. It is simply a question of discerning priorities in a way that is consistent with the primary tradition.

the Trinity so that the tradition of the divine nature from the Father to the Son, which, stupendously, has been handed on to us at such great cost in Christ, is *really* received and that those who receive the divine nature, which Christ came to give us, are *truly* born again through his Spirit as sons and daughters of the Father. That, then, is the positive meaning of tradition, which bears remembering lest the tradition, which is meant to radiate outward like a sun, become like a dwarf star that has collapsed on itself, emits little light, and finally dies.

In this respect, as a sober warning, we would do well to recall the fate of Israel, which similarly missed the point of its election. To be sure, what Israel was given was holy, but Israel did not see that its Law and divinely instituted traditions were not given for Israel alone, much less for the sake of its own cultural identity, but for something incomparably greater—to wit, that through *its* Messiah it might become a “light to the nations” and salvation might “reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 42:6; 49:6; 51:4; 60:3), as its own prophetic books, especially Isaiah, intone. But the point of recalling Israel’s failure is not to say that the Church is any better. On the contrary, our point here is that the Church is subject to the same temptation: proudly to assume that it possesses the fullness of the truth for itself and to forget that it must kenotically go forth from itself, even die to itself, for the sake of the world’s redemption.<sup>42</sup>

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42. Such is the kenotic ecclesiology of Erich Przywara and, following Przywara, of Rahner and Balthasar. See Przywara, *Vier Predigten über das Abendland* (Einsiedeln, CH: Johannes, 1948); *Idee Europa* (Nuremberg: Glock und Lutz, 1955). For the best study of Przywara’s ecclesiology, which focuses largely on Przywara’s ecclesiology in light of his metaphysical commitment to the *analogia entis* and his corresponding understanding of the magisterium, see Aaron Pidel, *Church of the Ever-Greater God: The Ecclesiology of Erich Przywara* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020). Cf. Rahner, “Dienend besorgte Kirche”:

The Church . . . would have to be a Church that is not about itself, but about the people, about all people. This was said at the Second Vatican Council and, since then, has been sufficiently repeated. But this requirement is far from really determining the attitude of Church-going Christians and the Church itself. A social group, which is under pressure but does not want to give itself up, is

But what would it mean for the Church to die to itself and exist kenotically like its Lord? What would it mean for the Church to let go of its own “form of godliness”—as it must if it is to have anything more than a “*form* of godliness” (2 Tim 3:5)?

### Przywara’s Kenotic Ecclesiology

Following the late Przywara, who advocated a decidedly kenotic ecclesiology, and thus an ever *humbler* Church to match the Church’s faith in Christ, who humbled himself unto death on a Cross (Phil 2:7–8), it would require that the Church itself, and not just her individual members, follow the Beatitudes.<sup>43</sup> Concretely, it would require the Church to stop glorying in itself, however proud one may be of the great “Catholic intellectual tradition,” and recognize with Mary, its archetype, its

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unavoidably subject to the great temptation to think above all of itself and its continued existence. It is the same with us. If the Church cares for people, which it, thank God, naturally does to some extent . . . such care is nevertheless always strangely thought of and lived as an apology for the Church itself, and all-too easily becomes just a means to an end. It is precisely those who hold office in the Church, and they above all, and the clergy in general, who suffer from an ecclesiological introversion. They think of the Church and not of people; they are concerned that the Church be free, not people. And so it came to the point, for example, during the time of National Socialism that it thought more about the existence of the Church and its institutions than about the fate of the Jews. That may be understandable, but it was not very Christian or very Church-like if one has understood the true essence of the Church.

See Karl Rahner, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 24 (Freiburg: Herder, 2011), 526. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions: On the Church in this Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993).

43. Or is the Church itself, as an institution, somehow exempt from them? Is it so rich that it need not be poor? Is it so righteous that it need not beg God for righteousness? After all, the Church possesses the sacraments; they even work *ex opere operato*. So what then could it lack? And who would dare criticize it? Therein lies the temptation of traditionalism: to say in one way or another what Israel said, “We are the descendants of Abraham” (John 8:33), and to presume to escape the judgment of Christ, who said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth” (Matt 23:27).

spiritual poverty—the recognition of which has always been the soil of its growth and greatness anyway. It would mean that the Church should publicly confess and show genuine sorrow over its sins rather than covering them up and hiding behind its holiness—as if its holiness were a presupposition and not a gift that could be lost. It would mean demonstrating meekness and lowliness instead of pomp and circumstance. It would mean actually hungering and thirsting for righteousness rather than presuming already to possess it. In sum, it would require the Church to recognize, with something more than detached insouciance, that it is not in *fact* (as distinguished from its essence) one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. For though it is essentially one, it is visibly divided; though it is essentially holy, it is obviously sinful; though it is essentially catholic, its sphere of influence has visibly diminished—to the point of being utterly irrelevant to the affairs of individuals and nations. And though it is essentially apostolic, this is so far from characteristic of the Church today that the notion of a Catholic becoming a missionary or sharing the Gospel with his or her neighbor or inviting his or her non-Christian neighbor to Mass is almost unheard of. All of which is surely cause for grief, mourning, and repentance. And this is not to mention the scandals of the clergy that have turned thousands, if not millions, of people away from Christ and his Church. But was there any serious mourning? Were there any serious calls for repentance? Did anyone ever call for sackcloth and ashes? Did we not, for the most part, just carry on as usual as if nothing happened, as if the Church could not be as sick as her members and in need of strong medicines? Are we so certain that the Church is holy and that the gates of hell shall not prevail against her that we think she cannot grievously err in her morals and tempt God, precisely the way that Israel did and for which it was, at times, abandoned to its enemies?

A generation ago, the time was right for the Church to take stock of its treasures and to be reminded of the glories of its tradition, as is exemplified by Balthasar's marvelous multi-volume work *The Glory of the Lord*. But that time is

not now. For that matter, let us not forget that the glory of which Balthasar speaks is always a *kenotic* glory: it is never a glorying in oneself. So what, then, is the Church today to do? Following Przywara, we might say that the Church at large (and not just its individual members) needs to stop carrying on as usual, take stock of its moribund condition, and recognize that it, too, needs the Physician in order that, from something like a deathbed confession, God might heal it and renew it—and renew it not just for its own sake but for the life of the world. For—and this too must be kept in mind, and if necessary repeated *ad nauseum* to the extent that the Church is self-centered and self-absorbed—the Gospel does *not* say that God gave the Son because he so loved the Church but because he so loved *the world*.

Needless to say, I do not mean that God does not love the Church: As we routinely say—no doubt too proleptically, without fear and trembling, without a hint of the eschatology that alone justifies the typology—she is his Bride. But this does not mean that God is always happy with her any more than God was always pleased with Israel—certainly not if she is not fulfilling the purpose of her institution: which is not to keep Christ locked up in tabernacles of gold but to communicate him to the world; what is more, to make *living, moving tabernacles, temples* of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19), in order like Mary, *Notre Dame*, to bear Christ to a world in desperate need of him.<sup>44</sup> Thus, encouraging the Church to remember its mission and renew its apostolate, Przywara writes,

Christ not just in the sacristy, in the tabernacle, in the stony church . . . but Christ in the middle of the cities

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44. Why, then, after receiving Christ in the Eucharist do we continue to genuflect before Christ in the tabernacle? This is not to dispute doing so at the beginning of the Mass, in which case it is fitting, but if we do so again after having received Christ, is this not a sign that we have missed the entire point of the Eucharistic liturgy: that we are now the tabernacles—indeed, that we ourselves are dwellings of God, as Christ himself says (John 14:20–23)? Do we not see that the physical temple and the golden tabernacle within it is less important than the living temple?

and in the streets and in all the bustling of the whole world today. . . . No repristinated Christ, no Christ simply of original Christianity, no Christ simply of the Middle Ages, no Christ simply of the Counter-Reformation, no Christ simply of the nineteenth [or twentieth] century, but “Christ today.”<sup>45</sup>

We cannot unpack all that Przywara is trying to say here. His basic point, though, is that ecclesial movements that try to establish the Church’s identity by going back to a particular age of the Church are also missing the point—whether those of Protestants trying to go back to an undeveloped and essentially ahistorical Church; or of Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglicans trying to reestablish the Church by going back to the Fathers; or “traditionalist” Latin-rite Catholics trying to go back to the Church of the Middle Ages or the Council of Trent. For the identity of the Church is not bound up with any one of them. This is not to call the Church’s past forms and traditions into question; on the contrary, there is something valuable to be retained in each of them, inasmuch as they were inspired. It is simply to say that no one age or particular rite defines the Church. What defines the Church, rather, is her end (*finis*), as the word ‘definition’ would suggest. And her end is her witness and service to Christ unto the end of a divine cosmos (*theios kosmos*) in which God is, finally, “all in all.” As Przywara puts it,

Truly this is the point, that Christ be all in all, that we, the disciples and the people, kneel before him and follow him eye to eye, heart to heart. But this Christ is God and man, wholly God and wholly man, and therefore claims everything human for himself and incorporates it into himself, who is not just the Christ of the gospel, but the Christ of all humanity, of the whole of history, of the entire world, and as such

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45. Erich Przywara, *Vier Predigten über das Abendland*, with a foreword by Hans Urs von Balthasar (Einsiedeln, CH: Johannes, 1948), 42f.



truly the Christ of the genuinely whole Church, which called for and initiated a true Christianization of the whole of life and all its forms.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, for Przywara, the task of the Church is to bring about the whole Christ, the *totus Christus*, Head and body—and not an invisible body but a visible body that is as incarnate and real as the body of Christ himself, leaving no sector of life that has not, in one way or another, been assimilated into this ultimate reality.<sup>47</sup>

But if the Church is to serve this glorious end, of which the *sacrum imperium* was only a passing type, what must it do? For Przywara, one thing is clear: the Church must give up all conceitedness and self-centeredness, indeed it must be prepared to lose itself and die to itself if it is to find its destiny (Matt 10:39; 16:25).<sup>48</sup> But this is to say nothing other than that it must follow the way of its Lord. As Przywara put it in

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46. Przywara, 43.

47. And therein, we might add, following Przywara, lies the *particula veri* of the Middle Ages and the Holy Roman Empire, which the Reformation—with its radical interiorization and subsequent separation of an invisible Church from a visible State—ultimately betrayed: the truth that the Church is *not* in its essence a monastic preserve or a *Gemeinde* but ultimately a royal kingdom. But, of course, this kingdom, this Holy Empire, announced by Christ is also *not* of this world, and so the more worldly the Church became, especially during the Renaissance, the more it compromised its true destiny.

48. But if the Church gives up the form of godliness, does this not mean that the Church ceases to be the Church? No, no more than the Son of God ceases to be the Son of God in leaving behind the prerogatives of divinity. Rather, precisely in letting go of the form of godliness, it shows itself to be the Church, in the way that God shows who he really is in the Son's self-emptying love. Indeed, it is precisely in this paradoxical way, by letting go of itself, that the Church becomes itself, in fulfillment of the *logion*, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt 10:39). Needless to say, this does not mean that the Church is called to give up its claim to the truth; rather, it means that its claim to represent the truth of Christ requires the Church to give up the form of godliness and all the trappings thereof—all conceitedness and condescension, all pomposity and sanctimony, in short, all self-righteousness—which have kept the world from seeing the humility of Christ in it, and its own *desperate* need for the forgiveness and mercy of Christ.

a little work cited by Pope Francis in 2016, the Church must not be afraid to go “outside the gate” (Heb 13:12ff.) of its own preserve, “befriend sinners” (Matt 11:19), become “the refuse of the world” (1 Cor 4:13), and “wash the ‘dirty feet’ of a ‘dirty world’ on [its] knees” (John 13:1–14).<sup>49</sup>

### Beyond Traditionalism and Progressivism

From this perspective, we can better see the danger of what we have termed traditionalism, which, to be clear, has nothing to do with a proper love of the Church’s tradition or a defense of its teachings. Rather, I mean what happens to the Church when it becomes involuted, when its tradition has become an end in itself rather than a means of fulfilling its mission; when it becomes a reason to go on perpetual retreat—behind the gates, into the libraries!—rather than an inspiration to go out and bring Christ to the world.<sup>50</sup> Traditionalism is what happens when one confuses primary tradition with secondary tradition; looks backward without also looking forward; and, as an ironic result, mortifies the very tradition one reveres—namely, by turning it into a thing of the past that is fit to be put in a museum or on the shelves. By contrast, *living* tradition

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49. Przywara, *Idee Europa*, 3. For further discussion, see John R. Betz, “Pope Francis, Erich Przywara, and the Idea of Europe,” *First Things*, May 12, 2016.

50. As Congar observes, speaking of what he calls the twin temptations of Pharisaism and the Synagogue, whereas the former turns formal observances or means into ends, the latter refuses “to accept any progress in the development of forms by which we celebrate God’s work.” See Congar, *True and False Reform*, 133. That is to say, both “slow down or stop development and impede the source or the seed from bearing its proper fruit”; they forestall the real end, which Christ himself has in view: “The *tota redempta* Civitas—the whole redeemed city, that is to say, ourselves who have become, even though we are many, a single body in Christ”; “the unity of *all* in *one*, and the unity of God becoming truly all in all” (Congar, 123, 122). Cf. 126: “The city of redeemed souls is itself the temple of God (cf. Rev 21:22). Every soul who responds with a personal act of faith to the preaching of the apostles, sent out and dispersed from Jerusalem by the Spirit’s breath at Pentecost, has become Jerusalem, the temple of God, a living stone of the body of Christ, a new and definitive tabernacle of God.”

lives to communicate the primary tradition to new persons in new times and in new places, especially to the captives, the poor, and the brokenhearted, for, like its head, the Church is anointed and consecrated to this end (cf. Luke 4:18). In sum, whereas traditionalism, however inadvertently, immobilizes the tradition and quenches the Spirit that inspired it, living tradition, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, carries it forward.

But it is precisely at this point, having identified the danger of traditionalism, that we need to be especially wary of the opposing danger of progressivism, lest a genuine progress of the living tradition become a progressivist hijacking of the tradition or what Cyril O'Regan has termed a metaleptic transformation of the tradition.<sup>51</sup> The dangers here are indeed great, to the point of potentially subverting the whole tradition in the name of "perfecting" it (whether as regards its doctrines or morals).

But does it need perfecting? Could there be anything more perfect than Christ, whom the Church already proclaims to the world? And has the Church not already given birth to countless saints who have been conformed to Christ and perfected in him? For what kind of "progress" are we supposed to be looking if not the multiplication of saints and the eschatological transformation of the universe? Is there anything essential missing in the Church's teaching as regards this end? If not, then can we be talking about anything more than adjustments in ecclesial practice that will make the Church more unified, more holy, more catholic, and more apostolic, as its essence demands? Needless to say, we cannot take up all these questions here. We pose them simply to put us on guard against the kind of progressivism that is always discontent

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51. For Cyril O'Regan's penetrating diagnosis, as a modern Irenaeus, of the metaleptic transformations in modern theology, see *inter alia*, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1994); *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2001); *The Anatomy of Misremembering: Von Balthasar's Response to Philosophical Modernity* (New York: Crossroad, 2014).

with tradition—usually because it has never bothered to discover all that the tradition already contains—in the Scriptures, the sacraments, and the writings of the saints—and for which it therefore shows no gratitude or respect.

But even if we must be cautious with respect to “progress,” it cannot be denied that the tradition progresses. For if there had never been any progress *of the tradition*, we would never have had a Nicene Creed or a doctrine of the hypostatic union or a sufficiently robust defense of icons and so on, all of which are examples of what we today recognize as a legitimate development of the tradition. The critical question then becomes: How can we tell the difference between an authentic progression of the tradition in step with the Holy Spirit and a heterodox departure from it?

For starters, we would do well to consult Newman, who has considered the matter in depth and provided us with a handy rule of discernment in his seven “notes.”<sup>52</sup> But can they stand up to scrutiny? For his part, David Bentley Hart thinks not and points out various weaknesses in Newman’s chain of reasoning.<sup>53</sup> Of course, in Newman’s defense, it must be said that he is thinking in terms of accumulated probabilities and not making an apodictic argument, and so his notes have to be considered *together*, like strands of a cable, and not one by one. Indeed, it is only together that they have any indexical strength. But Hart nevertheless raises legitimate questions—for example, about Newman’s metaphors and whether, evaluated individually, they work in Newman’s favor.<sup>54</sup> Of still

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52. John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, with a foreword by Ian Ker (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

53. See David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2022). For a good review, see Philipp Rosemann’s review in the *Irish Theological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2022): 370–73.

54. For instance, if the Catholic Church is like a tree, we know that trees need to be pruned (like the vine of John 15); we also know that trees do not grow beyond the trunk in any linear way, but take different paths, which could legitimately be taken by Protestants to justify their own traditions. Furthermore, if the Catholic Church is the original tree

greater concern is the fact that those we routinely identify as heretics (such as Arius, Asterius, and Eunomius) were in some sense the traditionalists, at least so long as Nicene orthodoxy had not yet been defined, and those whom we now regard as great saints (such as Athanasius and the Cappadocians) were in some sense “progressives.” The question of the development of doctrine is, therefore, a tricky one indeed, and Hart poses serious questions about how to think about the development of doctrine—for example, whether it develops as “logically” and consistently and inevitably (like a shoot from a seed) as we would like to believe.

Hart’s basic concern, however, is not so much to criticize Newman—much less to question legitimate doctrinal development—as to address all too settled and comfortable notions of tradition on the part of “traditionalists,” who forget that tradition is complicated; that, in the thick of doctrinal debate, a victory for one truth may be gained at the expense of another (as can easily happen in Christological controversies, where what is at issue is nothing less than *totus homo et totus Deus*); that, in the rapid advance of the tradition, some things that the Spirit may have inspired may be obscured or even forgotten;<sup>55</sup>

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“whose boughs extend over all the earth,” is it that easy to determine which Protestant branches “have not the life of the root, but lie and whither each in its own place?” (Newman, *Essay*, 265). We might like to think that the “mainline” Protestant denominations are dead branches (and we might not be wrong), but is it not possible that, in some other branches, however distant from the trunk, the life of the Spirit may be flowing, and flowers may be blooming? For that matter, how sure are we that we are not withering and that the trunk itself is not rotting—the trunk on which the whole tree depends? Can we be sure we know where the tradition is living and where it is dying? Finally, if doctrine is said to develop like a river, do rivers not wander and sometimes pool up, even forming swamps, before they find their way (if they do) to the sea? If this is remotely the case, then how do we know that we are not in a place where the tradition has pooled up? How do we know that we are in the living stream and not living—God forbid—in a swamp?

55. For example, just consider how much of the apostolic tradition has been forgotten and culpably ignored with respect to the experience of the ‘baptism in the Spirit’ (which, in the early Church, was more often contemporaneous with sacramental Confirmation but nowadays is usually experienced after it, if at all) and the spiritual gifts that Paul

and, finally, that tradition is not an end in itself but an index to an eschatological horizon. But since Hart makes so much of this last point, and since his apocalyptic language could be taken to undermine what has *already* been given to the Church, let us note that this end is not open-ended but definitive, having been revealed as established from eternity in Christ (1 Cor 15:28) and that the God of the end is also the God of the beginning, who started the Church and has promised to remain with it to the end. In other words, we need to see the end not in competition with the beginning but as its consummation. But sorting all of this out in the interim, in the analogical interval between the beginning and the end, is no easy task. What is needed, therefore, in order to do justice to this entire troubled question, though I can only sketch it out here, is an *analogical theology of tradition*, which can correlate tradition with progress without forestalling the latter or betraying the former.

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discusses in 1 Corinthians 12. Paul explicitly says that he does not want us to be ignorant of them (1 Cor 12:1). He even says that he wants all to speak in tongues and, even more, that all would prophesy, since the one who speaks in tongues edifies himself, speaking mysteries to God, but the one who prophesies builds up the Church (1 Cor 14:5). In practice, however, the Church has tended to neglect these gifts, which were given for its own benefit, usually out of fear that they could be abused or counterfeited—and not always without reason, “for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1; cf. 2 Pet 2:1). But the fear of false prophets and spurious inspirations is no excuse for ignoring real spiritual gifts that Christ came to give (cf. Eph 4:7), much less keeping others in the dark about them. Indeed, the apostle’s teaching is clear: its motive is not to quench the Spirit (or spiritual gifts) but to test everything and hold fast to what is good (1 Thess 5:19–21). Sadly, however, the Church for the most part continues to ignore the apostle’s teaching, perhaps more culpably than Luther ignored the teaching of James (and to think that Aquinas had the last word on the subject when he straightaway identified the spiritual gifts with the messianic attributes described in Isaiah 11). As a result, the Church has been left ignorant and thus has forsaken great graces and blessings. For more on these topics, see Francis Martin, *Baptism in the Spirit: Reflections on a Contemporary Grace in Light of the Catholic Tradition* (Petersham, MA: Saint Bede’s, 1998), and the sadly neglected work of Francis MacNutt, *The Healing Reawakening: Reclaiming Our Lost Inheritance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2005).

But how? Following the lines of Przywara's analogical metaphysics, the most obvious way to do so is to refer tradition and progress, like the past and the future, back to their common source in God. For, from the standpoint of eternity, the two are ultimately one. Indeed, from this analogical perspective, we could say that true tradition is progressive, and true progress is traditional, in keeping with Cusanus's notion of a *coincidentia oppositorum*. In practice, this means that whereas true progress looks backward in fidelity to the divine tradition from which it springs (2 Thess 2:15), true tradition looks forward to, and constantly strains toward, the goal of a divine cosmos (Phil 3:13; 1 Cor 15:28). But there is a yet higher way to show how they go together, which has to do with the primary tradition—namely, to see that the eternal procession of the Son from the Father is at once an eternal tradition and an eternal progression. In what follows, I shall therefore try to bear this out.

First, though, let us review the corresponding dangers of traditionalism and progressivism, each of which is the mirror image of the other. Whereas a naïve progressivism, heedless of tradition and moral norms, leaps recklessly into the future in a way that breaks the bonds of all analogy with tradition, a fearful traditionalism does not move at all; and to this extent—*nota bene*—it fails to be traditional, inasmuch as tradition implies the positive transmission of what has been handed down in new times and new places. Precisely in the name of *tradition and progress*, any new ressourcement will therefore have to navigate *between* traditionalism and progressivism as between Scylla and Charybdis. And this will require courage—precisely in Aristotle's sense of the virtue as a mean between fearfulness and recklessness. But the avoiding of these extremes is not without passion. On the contrary, it is positively full of passionate intensity, seeking in the name of the living Catholic tradition to combine genuine opposites, both what is true in traditionalism and what is true in progressivism—namely, by looking backward in gratitude and reverence for Scripture and tradition while also looking

forward to the kingdom that is not of this world and of which the Church itself is a poor substitute and simulacrum. Moreover, the new ressourcement must navigate this middle way in an attempt to follow Jesus himself, who eludes easy categorization, just as he passed through the crowd (cf. Luke 4:30), being both radically traditional and radically progressive in the proper sense of these terms.<sup>56</sup>

So, in advance of potential criticisms that may come from the right or the left, let us emphasize that the Catholic Church, in its essence, transcends the polarities of what in the world we call “right” and “left,” being at once radically traditional and radically progressive (if by “radical” we understand the deepest and truest intuitions, respectively, of traditionalism and progressivism). When we are accused of being traditionalist, we can say that we are simply “holding fast to the traditions that we were taught” (2 Thess 2:15); when we are accused of being “progressive,” we can say that we are simply “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Phil 3:13). But how can we make sense of this? How, by what possible criterion, can we responsibly hold such things together? How can we make sense of a faith that is, paradoxically, both radically traditional and radically progressive—so radical, in fact, that traditionalists turn out to be not traditional enough and progressives turn out to be not progressive enough? Put differently, in a way that intensifies the paradox, how could it be that the traditionalists turn out to

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56. In some respects, he was utterly traditional (“not one jot nor tittle will pass away from the law”), and in other respects he was revolutionary (dining with sinners, picking corn on the sabbath, challenging the “traditions of men”). On the one hand, he maintained the highest moral standards (not just “sin no more” but “be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect”); on the other hand, he was utterly forgiving of sins (“not just seven times, but seventy times seven”). In this respect—given that most persons tend to fall to the right or the left, *eo ipso* deviating from the *one* thing necessary, Christ truly was *not* of this world. We might add that it is precisely such an incomprehensible unity of opposites that makes him, metaphysically and phenomenologically speaking, the absolute manifestation of the one God.



be progressive (and forgetful of their true origin) and the progressives turn out to be, ever so curiously, behind the times?

### A Paradoxical Mandate

The simple answer to this last question is that traditionalists do not go all the way back to God, specifically, to the immanent Trinity, in their thinking about tradition but begin thinking about tradition at some very late point in human history, say, with the history of Israel, or their preferred moment in ecclesial history, whether it be the Church of the New Testament or the Church of the patristic or medieval era. If they were truly radical, however, they would begin with the handing over (the *paradosis*) of the divine nature to the Son and see in *this* tradition the origin and end of all tradition, which immediately relativizes all other traditions as the criterion of their authenticity.<sup>57</sup> In other words, from this radical standpoint, historical-ecclesial tradition is authentic *to the extent* that it communicates this *original* tradition, inspiring souls with the love that the Father has for them (in the Son), which, in turn, leads them to offer themselves back to the Father (with the Son), thereby fulfilling the ultimate meaning of the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.

By contrast, progressives do not go far enough, all the way to the end of a divine humanity, but stop woefully short in some imagined end, which is usually more human than divine. In short, neither the traditionalists nor the progressives are radical enough. If they were, they would think all the way back to the divine beginning and all the way forward to the divine-human end. Needless to say, this is an all too brief answer, but from this perspective, we can better see what the new ressourcement is all about: it is about going all the way back to the Father's tradition of the divine nature to the Son, which is received in proportion to the capacity of one's faith,

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57. It even radicalizes the entire philosophical question of the One and the many. For while there are many traditions in the world, there is, at the end of the day, only one Most Secret and Most Holy tradition, to which Christ is the key.

in order to leap with Idithun all the way forward to the end of a divine humanity in Christ.<sup>58</sup>

In no way, therefore, should the new ressourcement be mistaken for an attempt to halt the pilgrimage of the Church by exchanging the portable tent of meeting for an immobile fortress. It is rather, in view of its eschatological orientation toward the *jüngste Tag*, the most forward-thinking of all possible movements, compared to which all the usual progressive movements are downright passé and destined to pass away, in keeping with 2 Peter 3:12. And let us note that it was similar with the ressourcement movements of the past. Far from being reactionary movements, they were (if anything) *pro-gressive* movements, though not in the contemporary sense of the term “progressive.” And this is precisely why it is hard to categorize them. It is also why many are inclined to be suspicious of such *resourceful reformers*.

Take, for instance, Erasmus, who dedicated himself like no other Catholic of his time to the recovery of Scripture and the tradition of the Church Fathers. Yet no one would consider him a backward traditionalist. On the contrary, he was a genuine reformer like his friend Saint Thomas More and arguably did more than anyone else to try to save the Church from impending schism. Yet since the Reformation, he has been spurned by fellow Catholics as a crypto-Protestant who “laid the egg that Luther hatched.” Or take the more recent *nouvelle* theologians. Like Erasmus, they were not just custodians of the tradition. Rather, their intention in going back to the sources was precisely to bring new life to the Church and an abundance of resources for its mission in the world. In other

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58. See Kevin Grove, *Augustine on Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), for a wonderful discussion and interpretation of Augustine’s reading of the figure of Idithun in the *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, who moves us to “leap” with the “leaping psalmist” as fellow members of the one body of Christ (87); then we will not get stuck in ourselves but be able to leap toward our end in Christ (87–88), and ultimately in the Trinity (197f.).

words, their point in going back was to go forward in order to address the needs of the Church and the world in the present.<sup>59</sup>

The most obvious example in this regard is Henri de Lubac, who wanted to go back to Augustine in order to reclaim a teaching that the world still desperately needs to hear: that there is no natural order that is not, however paradoxically, ordered to the supernatural. In other words, there is no such thing as the “secular” in the modern sense of the word. On the contrary, as John Milbank has shown, the notion of a purely secular order is a pure fiction, which, to the extent that it is believed, deprives modern persons of the knowledge of their supernatural destiny.<sup>60</sup> All of which goes to say that de Lubac’s recovery of this essentially Augustinian teaching—and plentiful texts from Aquinas to support it—has been highly relevant to the Church in the modern world. And the intention of the new *ressourcement* is similar: it, too, is about going back in order to go *forward*, for only then can we speak of a *living* rather than a dead tradition.

Here, then, we have our purpose, however paradoxical it may be: our aim is *to go back for the sake of going forward*. By the same token, we have also clarified what we mean by

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59. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,” *Communio* 24 (1997): 351, where he expresses the concern as follows:

Is the concrete form of this return really a construal of the past from the highest powers of the present (as Nietzsche demanded)? Is it really being proposed and motivated from an insight into what the offer of this hour is and what the law of the present is calling us to? Or does it perhaps possess traits that seem so similar to a kind of ‘flight from the times’ that a return to the past might be confused with an abdication of our responsibility to the present? our return to the past is not everywhere what it should be: an overcoming from strength. All too often it is a partial acknowledgment that we are no longer up to it.

The posing of these questions suffices to show that the old *ressourcement* did not see itself as a reactionary movement but, on the contrary, as something *for the times*.

60. No one has understood this aspect of de Lubac’s work better than John Milbank. See *The Suspended Middle*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014); and, of course, his magnum opus, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

tradition. For what we mean by tradition is not something to be kept for its own sake, as if the goal of tradition were simply the maintenance of past forms and ideas (i.e., “We are Catholic, and that is just what Catholics believe and do”), wise though such maintenance often is, but something *vital* that is to be treasured in order *to be passed on for the life of the world*.

**The Scope of a New and Even More Catholic Ressourcement**  
 Now, finally, we have a formal criterion for *living* tradition: it is not something the Church is meant to keep for itself but something to be passed on for the life of the world. But what exactly are we passing on? The bimillennial Christian tradition is immense. Before we set out, therefore, we need to ask ourselves: To *what* in the immensity of the past do we need to go back? For starters, we would do well to return to Scripture and popularize its devotional reading like never before, carrying on the tradition of *lectio divina* with the help of Guigo the Carthusian,<sup>61</sup> who could help bring about the *ecclesia contemplativa* that Bonaventure longed to see.<sup>62</sup>

But what, then, of the rest of the tradition? Here things get far more difficult because, compared to Scripture, which is a clearly defined canon, the tradition is immense and ongoing.

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61. See Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks: A Letter on the Contemplative Life*, trans. with an introduction by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1981). For, let us be honest and take to heart a legitimate Protestant criticism: the reading of Scripture at Mass is not enough. Few are able to remember what was heard. And, in any case, given the hurried pace of today’s Mass, there is simply not enough time to meditate upon, much less come to savor in contemplation, what it contains. There is no ordinary way to discover the riches of Scripture except by devotional reading, which was as important to Erasmus’s ressourcement as it should be today. So let us, in this new ressourcement, *hasten back to the sources, above all the Scriptures*, in order that a renewed Catholic emphasis on the devotional reading of Scripture could serve the purposes of a new *ecumenism*, spearheaded by (if one might dare to imagine it) *ecumenical* Bible studies. See, for example, Benedict XVI’s apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* §46.

62. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Theology of History in St. Bonaventure* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan, 1971).

So, again, what defines it? By tradition, do we mean *only* the teachings collected in Denzinger? Does it include *all* the writings of the saints? Does it include *all* the Church Fathers and the Scholastics, or are some more traditional than others and, if so, why? For example, no one would dispute the inclusion of Aquinas, but what about later Dominicans such as that “vast and subtle thinker” Eckhart?<sup>63</sup> Is he traditional enough? And if not, and if we would have to qualify some of his more daring and questionable statements, then must we not include the great Dominican Johannes Tauler, who clarified Eckhart’s teachings in a manner wholly consistent with orthodoxy and whose own sermons are, spiritually speaking, profounder than anything in Aquinas? Obviously, we must include the great Carmelites from Teresa of Avila to John of the Cross to, more recently, Thérèse of Lisieux. But why is so little attention given to Elizabeth of the Trinity, who seems marvelously to have digested and summarized the wisdom of them all and deserves post haste to be declared a doctor of the Church?

Or by tradition, do we mean, more broadly, the entire Catholic intellectual tradition, including all of its artistic and literary treasures? Does it include, more broadly still, everything we might appreciate in the Protestant tradition? No doubt, a Catholic may recoil from much in Luther, but can any sensible Catholic fail to appreciate some of Luther’s points or admire some of his more beautiful writings—for instance, what he says at the conclusion of *On the Freedom of a Christian*: “A Christian does not live within himself, but in Christ and his neighbor; in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. Through faith, he rises above himself into God; from God, he descends once again below himself through love, and yet remains always in God and divine love.”<sup>64</sup> To what

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63. See Charles Kingsley’s preface to *The History and Life of the Reverend Doctor John Tauler with Twenty-Five of His Sermons*, ed. Susannah Winkworth (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000), 15.

64. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, ed. and trans. Tryn-tje Helfferich (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2013), 41.

here could one possibly object? Might a new ressourcement, then, look anew at Luther, but now with more charitable eyes, which—*nota bene*—are always more discerning, in the way that Paul exhorted the Church in Thessalonica, with regard to prophets, to “prove all things and hold fast to what is good” (1 Thess 5:21)? And what, to speak only of the Lutheran tradition, of the musical offerings of Bach or the prophetic witness of someone like Hamann or Kierkegaard or, more recently, Bonhoeffer? And what of the great Anglican William Law, who was an inspiration to the Wesleys? Might a Catholic ressourcement be so charitable as to include them among its sources? And, finally, though one could go on, must not the new ressourcement include all of the riches of Orthodox spirituality, from the great hesychast tradition to the great saints of modern-day Athos, such as Silouan and his disciple Elder Sophrony?

As all of this would suggest, my own view is that a new, more radical, and even more Catholic ressourcement should be even more adventurous and ecumenical in its return to the sources than the previous ressourcement, confident that in the end all things good, true, and beautiful in one way or another bear witness to Christ.<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, it will go searching for *all* the seeds of the Logos, taking its cues from the Logos’s own command to “gather up *all* the remaining fragments that none may be lost” (John 6:12). But, having widened the scope of any return to the sources, how is one to decide which sources are to be prioritized? For time is short. Here again the question arises: What is guiding our ressourcement? Are our investigations bound to be as haphazard and desultory as research in the humanities at any modern university? Or is there some kind of *standard* guiding them?

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65. For more on the need for a “more expansive” ressourcement, see Grant Kaplan’s important recent article, “Enhancing Ressourcement: Johann Adam Möhler’s Retrieval of Anselm,” *Theological Studies* 84, no. 2 (June 2023): 312–36.

### The Original Tradition as a Criterion of Living Tradition

To answer this question, I would suggest that we return to the distinction we have already drawn between primary and secondary tradition and do something untraditional, which is actually *more* traditional. Let us stop thinking of tradition as, in the first instance, a monumental collection of texts to be preserved for posterity. Needless to say, since these texts include the Gospels themselves, I do not mean that these things are unimportant. On the contrary, there would be no Christian tradition without them. They are its material basis. Nor do I mean that the tradition stretching from the apostles to the present is unimportant. On the contrary, according to *Dei Verbum*, Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture “are like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God . . . until she is brought finally to see Him as He is, face to face” (*Dei Verbum* §7)—though distinguishing Scripture from tradition can be misleading inasmuch as Scripture itself is part of Sacred Tradition and not something that could be isolated from it, since it is Sacred Tradition that has given us the canon of Scripture. And yet, as radical as this may sound, for Catholic theology, *neither* is the primary sense of tradition. Rather, both Scripture and tradition depend upon a more primary sense of tradition, a common wellspring (*DV* §9), from which their own analogical meaning derives, according to what is traditionally known as a *pros hen (ad unum)* or *attributive* analogy.<sup>66</sup>

But what is tradition if not something handed down from one generation to another? And what do we mean by the Catholic tradition if not the transmission of Scripture, conciliar teachings, papal documents (including constitutions, decrees, bulls, letters, encyclicals, and exhortations), and the writings of various saints, prophets, and theologians? Needless to

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66. Take, for instance, the term “Notre Dame.” When some people hear these words, they think of a university or perhaps its football team. Properly speaking, however, in the first instance, it refers to Our Lady, who is the primary analogate from whom all these other meanings derive. Likewise, by tradition, I do not mean, in the first instance, patristic tradition or Scholastic tradition or, for that matter, the creeds.

say, from what has already been said about living tradition, I mean something active, as the word *traditio* from *tradere* would suggest. For, strictly speaking, a tradition that is not actively passed on to others is not tradition. But, following Balthasar, I mean something much more fundamental and radical—namely, the actual tradition of the Son of God in the sense of John 3:16. As Balthasar puts it, in an essay that I take to be of great significance to any new ressourcement because it takes us all the way back to the radical origin of the Christian faith: “God the Father so loved the world that he handed over his only Son, whom—as Paul puts it—he did not spare for our sake. Everything Christian about Christianity rests upon this original tradition.”<sup>67</sup>

But, following Balthasar and Congar, we can go back even further because the Father’s tradition of the Son to us in time is predicated upon the *eternal* tradition of the Father to the Son, who commits himself entirely to the Son in begetting him. As Congar puts it, summarizing the original meaning and sequence of tradition, prior to all that is usually understood by tradition: “God . . . the Father, the absolute Origin, the uncreated Principle, [is] the primordial Source, not only of all things visible and invisible, but of the very divinity of the Son and the Spirit, by procession. God (the Father) then gives the Son to the world; he *delivers* him to the world.”<sup>68</sup>

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67. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Tradition,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 5, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2014), 362.

68. See Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2016), 10. Cf. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 268. Unfortunately, Congar does not really develop this primary understanding of tradition or fill out the analogy between the primary and the secondary meanings; for example, he does not emphasize the fact that secondary tradition is authentic *to the extent that* it communicates the force of the primary tradition. He merely takes the primary as a logical point of departure for the secondary. We would like to say more: that the secondary tradition is *living* to the extent that the primary tradition, while eternal and transcendent, is active within it, which is to say that Christ is really communicated in the birthing of sons and daughters of God. Where this is not happening, tradition is, quite simply, no longer living but a mere carrying on as usual.



This, then, is the *primary* sense of tradition: the Father gives the whole of his nature to the Son and, through the Son, to us, in order that through the Son, we might share in all that the Father has given to the Son and, in him, become participants of the divine nature. But to put it this way is still much too general, and it is a pity that most discussions of deification never get past generalizations to this effect, which make Christianity scarcely distinguishable from Platonism. For the truth of deification is not, in the final analysis, a *general* participation in the divine nature, but a participation, more specifically, in the divine life that eternally proceeds from the Father to the Son—and to all *to the extent* that they are conformed to the Son, who is the eternal object of the Father’s pleasure.<sup>69</sup> In other words, to be deified is to be a perfect *recipient* of the original tradition that flows from the Father to the Son. As Balthasar strikingly puts it, “[John] tells us that we can enter into God’s primordial tradition, where the temporal present, future, and past have no place: ‘But to all who received him . . . he gave power to become children of God; . . . born . . . of God.’”<sup>70</sup>

Such, then, is the end of tradition, its very point and goal, to which all of the scriptures and all that we commonly call the Catholic tradition is a means: to be born again of God into eternal life *as* the Son is eternally born from the Father.<sup>71</sup> And it is to this primary tradition, therefore, that anything worthy of being called part of the Catholic tradition will (implicitly or explicitly) refer. As Balthasar wonderfully puts it: “Could it not be the case after all, then, that the bimillennial Christian tradition was a dwelling in the presence of its origin and, so, an ever-renewed attempt to bear witness to its mystery? Might

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69. For a wonderful reading of the Trinitarian taxis as the pattern of the Christian life, see Boyd Taylor Coolman, “In Whom I Am Well Pleased: Hugh of St. Victor’s Trinitarian Aesthetics,” *Pro Ecclesia* 23, no. 3 (2014): 331–54.

70. Balthasar, “Tradition,” 362.

71. See Betz, *Christ, the Logos of Creation*, especially chapters 4 and 6.

the truth of man's being not lie in the springing forth with the Son from the inexhaustible, groundless wellspring of love in a moment that is an ever-fresh 'now'?"<sup>72</sup> In other words, what originates the Catholic tradition is its testimony to the original tradition from which the Catholic tradition flows. But, *nota bene*, as the foregoing quote from Balthasar would suggest, the original tradition is not just the source of the Catholic tradition but the wellspring of our own humanity, which is brought into being in order that all of us might one day spring forth from the Father *as* the Son springs forth, from an inexhaustible wellspring of love.

Here, I submit, we have the most radical possible basis for a theology of tradition since tradition is ultimately grounded not in time but in eternity. Indeed, it is so radical that it calls for a radical revision of ontology, our understanding of being, itself. For it is not that things exist and then are passed on. It is not even that God exists and *then* communicates himself. For the very Being of God is *nothing other than an eternal tradition*. This is no doubt a striking way to put it, but it is nevertheless fundamental to Christian theology, which is the most traditional of all conceivable theologies. For if the Father is not the Father before the Son (as is only logical), then the Father does not exist except in giving himself to the Son, who, as the Logos, brings the Father to light: as light from light.

At the same time, having found our way back to Nicaea, we have fortuitously arrived at the most radical possible response to modern secular critiques of tradition. Contrary to the old Gnostic myth that lies behind secular modernity—to wit, that enlightenment comes about by declaring one's independence from tradition—we can now see that enlightenment comes by way of tradition. This is true not just because there is no human reason apart from tradition along the lines of our metacritique of modern transcendentalism but because *Ratio* itself (i.e., the Logos) is *Traditio*. For *the* Logos, far from being an independent principle, is none other than the total tradition

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72. Balthasar, "Tradition," 362.

of the divine nature from the Father to the Son, who *is* this tradition. Thus, not only is there (epistemologically speaking) no human reason apart from tradition; neither is there (ontologically speaking) anything whatsoever apart from tradition. It is ontologically basic. To speak otherwise, as modernity does, is to speak of enlightenment without light being transmitted, which is, of course, absurd. But myths can last a long time, and such has been the myth of modernity: that we can be enlightened apart from the light, the Logos, of the Father.

### Living and Dead Tradition

We have now provided the most radical possible justification for the new ressourcement. Our ultimate aim, however, is not so much to justify thinking from tradition as to provide an analogical criterion for living (as opposed to dead or dying) tradition, which we have now done by referring all tradition back to its origin in the Father's tradition of life, light, and love to the Son. For it should now be evident that tradition will be *living* to the extent that the power of the original flows through it, which is to say that eternal life is generated in souls that receive it, who hereby become bearers of the same tradition, which they are empowered by the Spirit to pass on—ultimately so that all human beings might come to share in the fullness of what the Father has given to the Son. A *dead* or dying tradition, by contrast, is one through which the original tradition no longer flows and no newness of life is communicated, which is to say that everything just goes on as usual without effect (like a *Confiteor* without a confession, a *Gloria* without a sense of God's glory, a *sursum corda* without a lifting of hearts, or a sacramental communion without spiritual communion).<sup>73</sup>

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73. To be sure, even dead pools of water *can* become living and salutary, as with the pool of Bethesda, but this depends upon two conditions: the recognition that one is blind, lame, and paralyzed (since the tradition is only communicated to those who are needy), and the waters being stirred by some messenger, some grace, at the proper time (John 5:3–4), lest they stagnate and become stinking parodies of the original.

It is imperative, therefore, to keep in mind the difference between the Father's tradition of the divine nature to the Son, which is the archetype of the Son's traditioning and surrendering of himself to us, and derivative traditions, even our own Catholic tradition, lest we forget what our own tradition is really all about. If we do not, we run the risk of becoming a dead tradition, like a vine whose branches have dried up and are fit to be thrown into the fire (John 15:6). And this can happen, *nota bene*, even when we are in the business of retrieving and defending the Catholic tradition. Indeed, there is a real danger that we could become no better than the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who considered themselves to be the guardians of a Sacred Tradition but whom our Lord called "blind guides" and even "children of hell" (Matt 23:15–16). All of this raises a rather harrowing question: What would Christ say to us today who speak in the name of the Catholic tradition? Are we authentically transmitting the *original* tradition, or are we transmitting something less—something more derivative that does not have the vital power to transform souls because there is no Spirit and life flowing through it? Are we communicating the fullness of life in the Spirit, which flows more powerfully than water from a ruptured dam, or are we communicating, in effect, only a trickle of water that could barely fill a thimble, much less satisfy parched souls who are dying of thirst? Even more provocatively: How can we be sure that we are not inhibiting the flow of the original tradition with what Balthasar calls "false tradition"? No doubt, this is a disturbing question that immediately put us on the defensive. But it must be posed if we are to stand the test, since it was originally posed not by Protestants but by Christ himself, who clearly condemns some traditions as merely of human origin and even as nullifying (ἀκυροῦντες) the word of God (Mark 7:13). Can we then say, without further ado, that all our traditions are exempt from such a challenge? But if we accept the challenge, what, then, would qualify as false traditions? And how can we distinguish them from authentic tradition?

Fortunately, on the basis of what Christ himself tells us and the fundamental distinction we have drawn between primary and secondary tradition, we can be fairly certain in saying that authentic tradition, and any true development of the tradition, will continue to communicate new life in Christ in keeping with Christ's explicit intention: "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). And what is this new life? It is the same life (and the same love) that the Son eternally receives from the Father. Accordingly, to the extent that secondary tradition conveys this primary tradition, it may be regarded as a *genuine development* of the tradition; to the extent that it does not, it may be regarded as imperfect or—to the degree that it obscures or distorts the original communication—even false.

Now, admittedly, what I am saying could sound tragically Protestant, as though every subsequent century after the time of the apostles must be a further falling away from the purity of the beginning—as though we are destined to find ourselves, simply as a result of the passage of time, at an ever-greater distance from the original tradition. What I am saying, however, is just the opposite. For while it is true that the original tradition can get frustrated and dammed up, such that one no longer feels its transforming power, over time the original tradition can *also* flow with greater power and effect—in the way that a spring over time can grow into a mighty river, which has the depth and the breadth to carry all who keep sailing upon it to the sea. And so it is, we may hope, with our Catholic tradition.

To be sure, our tradition is old, two thousand years old, and that alone is often enough for modern persons to ignore it—in the same way that modern persons tend to ignore the elderly. But, as Augustine said of God's beauty, which is so old and yet so new, so it is with the Catholic Church, which has never ceased to carry within it the *novelty* of eternal life. For at any moment, in the midst of the Church, in a flash (ἐξαίφνης), a saint can be born—as happened, most famously, to Paul (Acts 9:3) but also to countless, nameless others for

whom the heavens broke and the fire of the Spirit arrived just as suddenly as on the day of Pentecost. And it can happen to us too—perhaps during the most ordinary reading of Scripture or the most ordinary reception of the Eucharist—that the original tradition is communicated with such force that the Son, who springs eternally from the Father, suddenly springs and rushes to life in us, and we, too, really cry out, “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15).

**Conclusion: “And lo, my canal became a river,  
and my river a sea”**

But the question posed to us today is not whether the tradition *can* communicate new life but whether we are doing all that we can to ensure that it does. Or are we just carrying on as usual—with yet another Mass, yet another homily, yet another baptism, yet another confirmation, etc.? Granted, we believe that grace is effective in the sacraments, even in an otherwise dead church, simply by virtue of the work worked (*ex opere operato*). But is “carrying on” the same as a living tradition? If this “carrying on” is not conveying life and changing hearts, is it not a sign that the tradition is no longer fed from its primal springs and is beginning to die? And if it is, how can we help to renew the Church so that it can do more than maintain itself and actually do what it is supposed to do—namely, bring life to the world? To be sure, we know that renewal is a matter of grace and not of human origin. But if God would wish to renew his Church and provide us with the grace to do so, what might we do? In conclusion, let me summarize what I have argued and propose that we bear in mind as we go back to the sources.

In sum, I have suggested, following Hamann, that we can get much more radical about tradition—so radical, in fact, that we no longer need to be defensive about being traditional, however anti-traditional modern secular society may become. On the contrary, it is secular modernity that should be on the defensive, like the gates of hell, since there is no reason (not even any secular reason) apart from tradition. In other

words, modern secular persons, to the degree that they are militantly secular and believe in something called pure reason or purely secular space, are defending pure fictions and are therefore not yet fit for the real conflict of traditions and their interpretation—and all the more unfit for not seeing that such thinking will ultimately destroy the whole of Western culture, at precisely that point when there is no tradition left to destroy. Would it not be more reasonable, in view of such a nihilistic destiny, to turn back to the tradition that claims to be “from above” and to the one at its center who claimed to be “from above” (John 8:23) and who promised, moreover, to guide those who believe in him into all the truth (John 16:13)? This would be a reasonable course correction in the aftermath of the Enlightenment.

At the same time, I have suggested that we need to get theologically radical in our thinking about tradition—namely, by going all the way back to the Father and to the original tradition of the divine nature from the Father to the Son, which is the primary analogate of all tradition. For unless we do, we will never really understand the beginning or the end of tradition, that is, what it is about (*viz.*, the communication of divine life) and for what reason it is given (*viz.*, that all who receive it might share in the eternal life that flows from the Father to the Son). Instead, the Church will gradually degrade into the same old carrying-on, which is tradition’s parody, forcing the overflowing life of the original tradition (if it is no longer being communicated and meets with stubborn resistance) to find other channels, new channels that are ready to receive it. For “just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it” (Isa 55:10–11; *cf.* Matt 3:9).

If, then, we would dare to be part of the flowing of the divine tradition, let us remember what it is all about. Let us

remember that the point of the Catholic tradition is not to be content with itself and its forms but rather to communicate the life of the original tradition through them. For the tradition is ultimately not about the Church Fathers or the Scholastics or even Scripture and the sacraments. Rather, as radical as this may sound, *all* of these things are the traditional means to the end of the communication of the original tradition—the eternal life—that proceeds from the Father to the Son and through the Son to us. Then, to the extent that we ourselves have received this life and feel the burden to share it, we might be able to determine the extent of the vitality of all the secondary sources and what is worth recovering and what is not.

So, to return to our standard from Sirach, let us ask of the texts we read: Does it flow like a canal from a mighty river? Will it water the garden and drench the flowerbeds? Will it provide instruction, shining like the dawn, to future generations? For such is the measure of our “going back.” In sum, let us do whatever we can to *potentiate* the tradition in order that the original tradition might flow more powerfully through it—not just so that the riverbed of the Church does not dry up but, more boldly, in order that the original tradition might overflow with new charisms, new orders, and new lay movements. For the goal of the new ressourcement, like that of the old, is not just to renew the Church, but through the renewal of the Church to renew the world—in fulfillment of the old prophecy: “And lo, my canal became a river, and my river a sea” (Sir 24:31).