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DT 501 – Fundamental Theology and Protology

“The Meaning of Tradition: Chapter IV – The Monuments or Witnesses of Tradition”
A Précis

Chapter IV of Yves Congar’s *The Meaning of Tradition*, entitled “The Monuments or Witnesses of Tradition” endeavors to set forth the main visible ways by which tradition is expressed in the Catholic Church. It then examines the relationship to each of these monuments of tradition to the Sacred Tradition itself.

The Congar offers four witnesses of tradition in the Church: Sacred Scripture (if the scope of the word tradition is broadened), Magisterial Texts, the liturgy, the Fathers of the Church, and “the practice and spontaneous gestures by which the faith is expressed.” Notably, while Congar lists the final item as a witness to the tradition, he does not further discuss it within this chapter. He begins by quickly addressing Sacred Scripture and says that a complete treatment of this subject would be outside the scope of his current effort. He notes that tradition, as it is usually understood, is something other than Scripture, so his focus will be on the remaining three witnesses.

The first witness of tradition that Congar treats at any length is Magisterial texts, which he identifies as next in importance to Scripture. Congar offers a few challenges with looking to magisterial documents as a witness to tradition. First of all, there is no complete collection of every magisterial document available. He offers a few collections that provide excerpts of documents for quick access, e.g., *Denzinger*, but reminds that even such sources have two important limitations: they are incomplete, lacking not only all universal content, but also episcopal decisions, which are certainly magisterial albeit not universal and they often lack context that would be necessary to interpret them properly. Hence, they risk reducing the complexity of theology and dogma into “legal propositions.” He also notes the risk of losing the analogy of faith in a forest of isolated propositions. One more caveat that Congar offers is the need to understand a hierarchy of documents and witnesses. He notes that formalizing this has been attempted on several occasions through the development of “*theological criteriology*.” Finally, Congar lists the witnesses of tradition that he plans to treat as his primary subject matter beyond Scripture and Magisterial Texts.

Congar then moves on to discuss the liturgy as a witness of tradition. He breaks up his discussion of liturgy into three aspects: liturgy as a way to transmit the faith by a method that is, in itself, catechetical; liturgy as a means to convey something in the tradition that is not strictly set forth in Scripture; and liturgy as an interpreter of the Scriptures that “really brings home their meaning.” To the first, Congar observes that the liturgy does not so much simply teach or bring a matter of faith to the attention of the faithful, but “it is celebrated, realized, rendered present and communicated...as a reality.” As an example, he offers the Eucharist. Prior to the creation of the feast of Corpus Christi, the liturgy did not explicitly teach about the Eucharist; rather, it steeped the participants in the liturgy in Eucharistic theology more profoundly and directly. Furthermore, unlike definitions, which inherently limit realities to confine them to human language, actions in

liturgy “create a synthesis” and “communicate [a] *whole* reality.” In short, as “*the Church’s language*...there is no better way to of acquiring the mind of the Church.”

Next, Congar treats the liturgy as a means to convey truths, which, while not explicitly set forth in scripture, are part of the deposit of faith. Similar to the previous discussion, Congar notes that this unique ability of the liturgy is found in its ability to immerse a person or people in these truths rather than simply define them. He offers, as an example of this, the communion of saints that is implied in the various liturgical expressions of the Church.

To conclude his use of the liturgy as a witness to tradition, Congar suggests that it serves also as an interpreter of the scriptures that “really brings home their meaning.” By this, Congar means that, by the ubiquitous presence of scripture within the liturgies of the Church, she expresses their meanings in ways that would be impossible through pure intellectual exercises. The liturgy frequently links scriptures in ways that would not otherwise seem apparent, and, through these links and the selections of Scriptural texts for a given day, it can uniquely express and explain the “main elements of the Christian mystery” as it is found even in the Old Testament “like recurring themes in God’s plan.” He also notes that the liturgy maintains a consistent tradition with the expressions found in the history of the Church as it is expressed in her art going back the early Christian period. In short, “the liturgy is truly the holy ark containing sacred tradition at its most intense.”

Leaving the liturgy behind, Congar focuses on the Fathers of the Church as a witness to tradition. First, he offers some insight on understanding who the Fathers are and who they are not. He notes that several great minds who taught and preached in the early Christian period, even those who exercised immense influence on the Church’s thought, cannot be called “Father.” He offers Tertullian as an example of this argument who, owing to his final consent to Montanism, loses his claim to the title. Congar differentiates “Fathers” from “ecclesiastical writers,” the latter being of mere historical significance and the former having doctrinal authority. In effect, The Fathers can be simply defined as those “the Church herself recognizes as such.” Congar goes on discuss the end of the Patristic Age in the East and West and suggest some reasons for it drawing to a close. He sets the boundaries at AD 636 in the West and AD 749 in the East. Congar lists some of the more prolific and recognized Fathers of the Church. Finally, Congar offers two warnings to proper interpret and use the Fathers as a witness to the tradition of the Church. First, the Patristic Period must not be viewed as the only time the Spirit was at work to give interpretation to the Church. The Holy Spirit remains present and active up to the current day. Second, everything asserted by the Fathers cannot be appropriated as expressions of the tradition; rather, it is only when the Fathers are unanimous on a subject that it is to be so understood.

In the final section of this chapter, Congar examines the relationship between the witnesses to the tradition and the tradition itself. His thesis on this matter is that tradition transcends any given witness to it—and even all of them. They are instead the “means of reaching” and “identifying” the tradition. He offers several examples of the pitfalls of failing to recognize this distinction: the Gallicans, the Jansenists, and, more recently, Ignatius Döllinger, the reaction of Protestant movements to the Marian doctrines formally defined in the last 200 years. To resolve this challenge, Congar reminds the reader, “tradition is not limited to the documents.” The realities expressed by the documents that represent these witnesses can be accurately interpreted, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, by the Magisterium, and the Church can, as the need arises,

formally express that which was not so previously. That is not to say the Church or the Magisterium has autonomy from the deposit of faith, but rather she “is not tied within the strict limits of the testimony contained in the monuments of her tradition.” To so limit the Church would fail to include “the believing Church, the teaching Church, and the Holy Spirit who supports and enlightens them,” and so to limit the Church to something far smaller than she essentially is. Finally, Congar offers a warning against using this idea to ignore the importance of the texts entirely in favor of novel ideas; instead, Congar reasserts the primacy of the New Testament and the importance of the rest of the monuments of tradition in their appropriate hierarchy beneath it.

Thus in Chapter IV of *The Meaning of Tradition*, Congar identifies the ways in which tradition is expressed within and to the Church including Sacred Scripture, Magisterial Texts, the liturgy, and the Fathers of the Church. He reflects on the relationship of each of these to the tradition itself as well as the limitations and common errors in applying them. Finally, he asserts the relationship of these witnesses to the tradition to the Church, the Magisterium, and the Church herself, noting that they must guide the living believing Church, but the Church cannot be strictly tied to the documentary text expressing these witnesses.