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Tradition and Traditions

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Tradition (*paradosis, traditio*) is one of those terms which, through being too rich in meanings, runs the risk of finally having none. This is not only due to a secularization which has depreciated so many words of the theological vocabulary— “spirituality,” “mystic,” “communion”— detaching them from their Christian context in order to make of them the current coin of profane language. If the word “tradition” has suffered the same fate, this has happened all the more easily because even in the language of theology itself this term sometimes remains somewhat vague. In fact, if one tries to avoid mutilation of the idea of tradition by eliminating some of the meanings which it can comprise and attempts to keep them all, one is reduced to definitions which embrace too many things at a time and which no longer capture what constitutes the real meaning of “Tradition.”

As soon as precision is desired, the over-abundant content has to be broken up and a group of narrow concepts created, the sum of which is far from expressing that living reality called the Tradition of the Church. A reading of the erudite

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work of Fr. A. Deneffe, *Der Traditionsbegriff*,¹ raises the question of whether tradition is capable of being expressed in concepts, or indeed whether, as with all that is “life,” it “overflows the intelligence” and would have to be described rather than defined. There are, in fact, in the works of some theologians of the romantic epoch, such as Mohler in Germany or Khomiakov in Russia, beautiful pages of description, in which tradition appears as a catholic plenitude and cannot be distinguished from the unity, the catholicity (Khomiakov’s *sobornost’*), the apostolicity, or the consciousness of the Church, which possesses the immediate certitude of revealed truth.

Faced with these descriptions, faithful in their general outline to the image of Tradition in the patristic writings of the first centuries, one is anxious to recognize the quality of *pleroma* which belongs to the tradition of the Church, but all the same one cannot renounce the necessity of drawing distinctions, which is imposed on all dogmatic theology. To distinguish does not always mean to separate, nor even to oppose. In opposing Tradition to Holy Scripture as two sources of

¹ In the collection *Miinllerische Beitrage z/ir Theologie* 18 (Miinster, 1931).

Revelation, the polemicists of the Counter Reformation put themselves from the start on the same ground as their Protestant adversaries, having tacitly recognized in Tradition a reality other than that of Scripture. Instead of being the very *hypothesis*² of the sacred books— their fundamental coherence due to the living breath passing through them, transforming their letter into “a unique body of truth”, Tradition would appear as something added, as an external principle in relation to Scripture. Henceforth, patristic texts which attributed a character of *pleroma* to the Holy Scripture³ became incomprehensible, while the Protestant doctrine of the “sufficiency of Scripture” received a negative meaning, by the exclusion of all that is “tradition.” The defenders of Tradition saw themselves obliged to prove the necessity of

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uniting two juxtaposed realities, each of which remained insufficient alone. Hence a series of false problems, like that of the primacy of Scripture or of Tradition, of their respective authority, of the total or partial difference of their content, *etc.* How is the necessity of knowing Scripture in the Tradition to be proved? How is their unity, which was ignored in separating them, to be found again? If the two are “fulness,” there can be no question of two *pleromas* opposed to one another, but of two modalities of one and the same fulness of Revelation communicated to the Church. A distinction which separates or divides is never perfect nor sufficiently radical: it does not allow one to discern, in its purity, the difference of the unknown term which it opposes to another that is supposed to be known. Separation is at the same time more and less than a distinction: it juxtaposes two objects detached from one another, but in order to do this it must first of all lend to one the characteristics of the other. In the present case, in seeking to juxtapose Scripture and Tradition as two independent sources of Revelation, Tradition is inevitably endowed with qualities which belong to Scripture: it becomes the ensemble of “other writings” or of unwritten “other words,” that is, all that the Church can add to the Scripture on the horizontal plane of her history. Thus we find on the one hand Scripture or the Scriptural canon and on the other hand the Tradition of the Church, which in its turn can be divided into several sources of Revelation or *loci theologici* of unequal value: acts of ecumenical or local councils, writings of the Fathers, canonical prescriptions, liturgy, iconography, devotional practices, *etc.* But can this still be called “Tradition”? Would it not be more exact to say, with the theologians of the Council of Trent, “the traditions”? This plural well expresses what is meant when, having separated Scripture and Tradition instead of distinguishing them, the latter is projected onto the written or oral testimonies which are added to the Holy Scripture, accompanying or following it. Just as “time projected in space” presents an obstacle to the intuition of Bergsonian “duration,” so too this projection of the qualitative notion of Tradition into the quantitative domain of

² The expression is from 51. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, I, 15-20.

³ See the article of Fr. L. Bouyer, “The Fathers of the Church on Tradition and Scripture,” *Eastern Churches Quarterly* 7 (1947), special number on Scripture and Traditio

“traditions” disguises rather than reveals its real character, for Tradition is free of all determinations which, in situating it historically, limit it.

An advance is made towards a purer notion of Tradition if this term is reserved to designate solely the oral transmission of the truths of faith. The separation between Tradition and Scripture still subsists, but instead of isolating two sources of Revelation, one opposes two modes of transmitting it: oral preaching and writing. It is then necessary to put in one category the preaching of the apostles and of their successors, as well as all preaching of the faith performed by a living teaching authority, and in another category the Holy Scripture and all other written expressions of the revealed Truth (these latter differing in the degree of their authority recognized by the Church). This approach affirms the primacy of Tradition over Scripture, since the oral transmission of the apostles’ preaching preceded its recording in written form in the canon of the New Testament. It even might be said: the Church could dispense with the Scriptures, but she could not exist without Tradition. This is right only up to a certain point: it is true that the Church always possesses the revealed Truth, which she makes manifest by preaching and which equally well could have remained oral and passed from mouth to mouth, without ever having been fixed by writing.⁴ But however much the separability of Scripture and Tradition is affirmed, they have not yet been radically distinguished: we remain on the surface, opposing books written with ink to discourses uttered with the living voice. In both cases it is a question of the word that is preached: “the preaching of the faith” here serves as a common foundation which qualifies the opposition between the two. But is not that to attribute to Tradition something which still makes it akin to Scripture? Is it not possible to go further in search of the pure notion of Tradition?

Among the variety of meanings that can be noted in the Fathers of the first centuries, Tradition sometimes receives that of a teaching kept secret, not divulged, lest the mystery

be profaned by the uninitiate.⁵ This is clearly expressed by St. Basil in the distinction which he makes between *dogma* [and] *kérygma*.⁶ “Dogma” here has a sense contrary to that given to this term today: far from being a doctrinal definition loudly proclaimed by the Church, it is a “teaching (*didaskalia*), unpublished and secret, that our fathers kept in silence, free from disquiet and curiosity, well knowing that in being silent one safeguards the sacred character of the mysteries.”⁷ On the other hand the *kérygma* (which means “preaching” in the language of the

⁴ St. Irenaeus envisages this possibility: *Adversus haereses* III, 4, 1.

⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI, 61.

⁶ St. Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 27; P.G. 32, cols. 188A-193A.

⁷ *Ibid.* cols. 188C-189A.

New Testament) is always an open proclamation, whether it be a doctrinal definition,⁸ the official prescription of an observance,⁹ a canonical act,¹⁰ or public prayers of the Church.¹¹ Although they call to mind the *doctrina arcana* of the Gnostics, who also laid claim to a hidden apostolic tradition,¹² the unwritten and secret traditions of which St. Basil speaks differ from it notably. First, the examples that he gives in the passage that we have mentioned show that St. Basil's expressions relating to the "mysteries" do not concern an esoteric circle of a few perfect men in the interior of the Christian community, but rather the ensemble of the faithful participating in the sacramental life of the Church, who are here opposed to the "uninitiate"—those whom a progressive catechism must prepare for the sacraments of initiation. Secondly, the secret tradition (*dogma*) can be declared publicly and thus become "preaching" (*kérygma*) when a necessity (for example the struggle against a heresy) obliges the Church to make its pro-

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nouncement.¹³ So, if the traditions received from the apostles remain unwritten and subject to the discipline of secrecy, if the faithful did not always know their mysterious meaning.¹⁴ This is due to the wise economy of the Church, which surrenders its mysteries only to the extent that their open declaration becomes indispensable. One is here faced with one of the antinomies of the Gospel: On the one hand one must not give what is holy to the dogs, nor cast pearls before swine (Matt. 7:6). On the other hand "nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known" (Matt. 10:26; Luke 12:2). The "traditions guarded in silence and in mystery," that St. Basil opposes to oral preaching in public, make one think of the words that were told "in the dark," "whispered," but which will be spoken "in the light," "upon the housetops" (Matt. 10:27; Luke 12:3).

This is no longer an opposition between the *agrapha* and the *eggrapha*, oral preaching and written preaching. The distinction between Tradition and Scripture here penetrates further into the heart of the matter, placing on one side that which is kept in secret and which, for this reason, must not be recorded in writing, and on the other all that is the subject of preaching and

⁸ St. Basil (*Ep.* 51; P.G. 32, Col 392C) calls *homoousios* "the great declaration of piety (*to mega tēs eusebeias kérygma*) which has made manifest the doctrine (*dogma*) of salvation." Cf. *Ep.* 125; P.G. 32, col. 548B.

⁹ *Homilia de ieiunio*, P.G. 31, Col 185C.

¹⁰ *Ep.* 251; P.G. 32, Col 933B.

¹¹ *Ep.* 155; P.G. 32, col. 612C.

¹² Ptolemy, *Letter to Flora* 7:9.

¹³ The example of *homoousios* is typical in this sense. The economy of St. Basil on the subject of the Divinity of the Holy Spirit is explained not only by a pedagogue's care, but also by this conception of the secret tradition.

¹⁴ St. Basil, *De spiritu sancto* 27; P.G. 32, cols. 189C-192A.

which, once having been publicly declared, can henceforth be ranged on the side of the “Scriptures” (*Graphai*). Did not Basil himself judge it opportune to reveal in writing the secret of several “traditions,” thus transforming them into *kérygmata*?¹⁵ This new distinction puts the accent on the secret character of Tradition, by thus opposing a hidden fund of oral teachings, received from the apostles, to that which the Church offers for the knowledge of all; hence it immerses “preaching” in a sea of apostolic traditions, which could not be set aside or underestimated without injury to the Gospel. Even more, if one did this “one would transform the teaching that is

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preached (to *kérygma*) into a simple name,” devoid of meaning.¹⁶ The several examples of these traditions offered by St. Basil all relate to the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church (sign of the Cross, baptismal rites, blessing of oil, eucharistic epiclesis, the custom of turning towards the east during prayer and that of remaining standing on Sunday and during the period of Pentecost etc.) If these “unwritten customs” (*ta agrapha tôn ethôn*), these “mysteries of the Church” (*agrapha tês Ekklesias mystéria*), so numerous that one could not expound them in the course of a whole day,¹⁷ are necessary for understanding the truth of the Scripture (and in general the true meaning of all “preaching”), it is clear that the secret traditions point to the “mysterical character” of Christian knowledge. In fact, the revealed truth is not a dead letter but a living Word: it can be attained only in the Church, through initiation by the “mysteries” or sacraments¹⁸ into the “mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints” (Col 1:26) .

The unwritten traditions or mysteries of the Church, mentioned by St. Basil, constitute then the boundary with Tradition properly so-called, and they give glimpses of some of its features. In effect, there is participation in the revealed mystery through the fact of sacramental initiation. It is a new knowledge, a “gnosis of God” (*gnosis Theou*) that one receives as grace; and this gift of gnosis is conferred in a “tradition” which is, for St. Basil, the confession of the Trinity at the time of baptism: a sacred formula which leads us into light.¹⁹ Here the horizontal line of the “traditions” received from the mouth of the Lord and transmitted by the apostles and their successors crosses with the vertical, with *Tradition*— the communication of the Holy Spirit, which opens to members of the Church an infinite perspective of

¹⁵ *Ibid.* cols. 192A-193A.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* col. 188AB.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* cols. 188A, 192C-193A.

¹⁸ On the identification of these two terms and on the “mysterical” meaning of the sacraments in the writers of the first centuries, see Dom Odo Casel, *Das christliche Kultusmysterium* (Regensburg, 1932) p. 105 ff.

¹⁹ St. Basil, *De Spiritu sancto* 10; P.G. 32, col. 113B.

mystery in each word of the revealed Truth. Thus, starting from traditions such as St. Basil presents to us, it is necessary to go further and admit Tradition, which is distinguished from them. In fact, if one stops at the boundary of the unwritten and secret traditions, without making the last distinction, one will still remain on the horizontal plane of the *paradoseis*, where Tradition appears to us as “projected into the realm of the Scriptures.” It is true that it would be impossible to separate these secret traditions from the Scriptures or, more generally, from “preaching,” but one could always oppose them as words spoken in secret or guarded in silence and words declared publicly. The fact is that the final distinction has not yet been made so long as there remains a last element which links Tradition with Scripture, with the word which serves as a basis for opposing hidden traditions to open preaching. In order to isolate the pure notion of Tradition, in order to strip it of all that is its projection on the horizontal line of the Church, it is necessary to go beyond the opposition of secret words and words preached aloud, placing “the traditions” and “preaching” together rather than in opposition. The two have this in common, that, secret or not, they are nonetheless expressed by word. They always imply a verbal expression, whether it is a question of words properly so-called, pronounced or written, or whether of the dumb language which is addressed to the understanding by visual manifestation (iconography, ritual gestures, etc.) Taken in this general sense, the word is not uniquely an external sign used to designate a concept, but above all a content which is defined intelligibly and declared in assuming a body, in being incorporated in articulate discourse or in any other form of external expression. If such is the nature of the word, nothing of what is revealed and makes itself known can remain foreign to it. Whether it be the Scriptures, preaching, or the “apostles’ traditions guarded in silence,” the same word *logos*; or *logia* can equally be applied to all that constitutes expression of the revealed Truth. In fact, this word ceaselessly recurs in patristic literature to designate equally the Holy

Scripture and the Symbols of faith. Thus, St. John Cassian says on the subject of the symbol of Antioch: “It is the abridged word (*breviatum verbum*) that the Lord has given... contracting into a few words the faith of His two Testaments, in order for it to contain in a brief way the meaning of all the Scriptures.”²⁰ If one next considers that the Scriptures are not a collection of words about God, but the Word of God (*logos tou Theou*), one will understand why, above all since Origen, there has been a desire to identify the presence of the divine Logos in the writings of the two Testaments with the incarnation of the Word, by which the Scriptures were “accomplished.” Well

²⁰ “Hoc est ergo breviatum verbum quod fecit Dominus... fidem scilicet duplicis Testamenti sui in pauca colligens, et sensum omnium Scripturarum in brevia concludens.” *De incarnatione* VI, 3; P.L. 50, Col 149A. The “breviatum verbum” is an allusion to Rom. 9:27, which in its turn quotes Is. 10:22. Cf. 51. Augustine, *De symbolo* 1; P.L. 40, Col 628; and St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* V, 12; P.G. 33, Col 521AB.

before Origen, St. Ignatius of Antioch refused to see in the Scriptures merely an historical document— “archives”— and to justify the Gospel by the texts of the Old Testament, declaring: “For me, my archives are Jesus Christ; my inviolable archives are His Cross and His Death and His Resurrection, and the Faith which comes from Him... He is the Door of the Father, by which enter in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the prophets, and the apostles, and the Church.”²¹ If by the fact of the incarnation of the Word the Scriptures are not archives of the Truth but its living body, the Scriptures can be possessed only within the Church, which is the unique body of Christ. Once again one returns to the idea of the sufficiency of Scripture. But here there is nothing negative: it does not exclude, but assumes the Church, with its sacraments, institutions and teachings transmitted by the apostles. Nor does this sufficiency, this *pleroma* of the Scripture, exclude any other expressions of the same Truth which the Church could produce (just as the fulness of Christ, the Head of the Church, does not exclude the Church, the complement of His glorious humanity). One knows that the defenders of the holy images founded the possibility of Christian icono-

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graphy on the fact of the incarnation of the Word: icons, just as well as the Scriptures, are expressions of the inexpressible, and have become possible thanks to the revelation of God which was accomplished in the incarnation of the Son. The same holds good for the dogmatic definitions, the exegesis, the liturgy— for all in the Church of Christ that participates in the same fulness of the Word as is contained by the Scriptures, without thereby being limited or reduced. In this “totalitarian” quality of the incarnate Word, all that expresses the revealed Truth thus is related to Scripture and, if all were in fact to become “scripture,” the world itself could not contain the books that should be written (John 21:25).

But since expression of the transcendent mystery has become possible by the fact of the incarnation of the Word, since all that expresses it becomes in some way “scripture” alongside the Holy Scripture, the question arises as to where finally is that Tradition which we have sought by detaching progressively its pure notion from all that can relate it to scriptural reality?

As we have said, it is not to be sought on the horizontal lines of the “traditions” which, just as much as the Scripture, are determined by the Word. If again we wished to oppose it to all that belongs to the reality of the Word, it would be necessary to say that the Tradition is Silence. “He who possesses in truth the word of Jesus can hear even its silence (*tês hēsychias akouein*),” says St. Ignatius of Antioch.²² As far as I know, this text has never been used in the numerous studies which quote patristic passages on Tradition in abundance, always the same passages, known by everyone, but with never a warning that texts in which the word “tradition” is not

²¹ Philadelphians 8:2, 9:1.

²² Ephesians 15:2.

expressly mentioned can be more eloquent than many others. The faculty of hearing the silence of Jesus, attributed by St. Ignatius to those who in truth possess His word, echoes the reiterated appeal of Christ to His hearers: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." The words of Revelation have

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then a margin of silence which cannot be picked up by the ears of those who are outside. St. Basil moves in the same direction when he says, in his passage on the traditions: "There is also a form of silence, namely the obscurity used by the Scripture, which is intended in order to make it difficult to gain understanding of the teachings, for the profit of readers."²³ This silence of the Scriptures could not be detached from them: it is transmitted by the Church with the words of Revelation as the very condition of their reception. If it could be opposed to words (always on the horizontal plane, where they express the revealed Truth), this silence which accompanies words implies no kind of insufficiency or lack of fulness of Revelation, nor the necessity of adding to it anything whatever. It signifies that the revealed mystery, to be truly received as fulness, demands a conversion towards the vertical plane, in order that one may be able to "comprehend with all saints" not only what is the "breadth and length" of Revelation, but also its "depth" and its "height" (Eph 3:18) .

At the point which we have reached, we can no longer oppose Scripture and Tradition, nor juxtapose them as two distinct realities. We must, however, distinguish them, the better to seize their indivisible unity, which lends to the Revelation given to the Church its character of fulness. If the Scriptures and all that the Church can produce in words written or pronounced, in images or in symbols liturgical or otherwise, represent the differing modes of expression of the Truth, Tradition is the *unique mode* of receiving it. We say specifically *unique mode* and not *uniform mode*, for to Tradition in its pure notion there belongs nothing formal. It does not impose on human consciousness formal guarantees of the truths of faith, but gives access to the discovery of their inner evidence. It is not the content of Revelation, but the light that reveals it; it is not the word, but the living breath which makes the words heard at the same time as the silence from which it came;²⁴ it is not the Truth, but a com-

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munication of the Spirit of Truth, outside which the Truth cannot be received. "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (I Cor 12:3). The pure notion of Tradition can then be defined by saying that it is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, communicating to each member of the Body of Christ the faculty of hearing, of receiving, of knowing the Truth in the Light which belongs to it, and not according to the natural light of human reason. This is true

²³ De *spiritu sancto* 27; P.G. 32, Col 189BC.

²⁴ Cf. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Magnesians* 8:2.

gnosis, owed to an action of the divine Light (*Phôtismos tês gnôseôs tês doxês tou Theou*, 2Cor 4:6), the unique Tradition, independent of all “philosophy,” independent of all that lives “according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (Col 2: 8). This freedom from every condition of nature, every contingency of history, is the first characteristic of the vertical line of Tradition; it is inherent in Christian gnosis: “You will know the Truth, and the Truth will make you free” (John 8:32). One cannot know the Truth nor understand the words of Revelation without having received the Holy Spirit, “and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2Cor 3:17).²⁵ This freedom of the children of God, opposed to the slavery of the sons of this world, is expressed by the “freeness” (*parrhêsia*) with which those can address God who know Him whom they worship, for they worship the Father “in Spirit and Truth” (John 4:23,24).

Wishing to distinguish Tradition from Scripture, we have sought to strip the notion of all that could make it akin to scriptural reality. We have had to distinguish it from the “traditions,” ranking these latter, together with the Scriptures and all expressions of the Truth, on the same horizontal line, where we have found no other name for designating Tradition than that of Silence. When therefore Tradition has been detached from all that could receive its projection on the horizontal plane, it is necessary to enter another dimension in order to reach the conclusion of our analysis. Contrary to

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analyses such as philosophy since Plato and Aristotle conceives them, which end in dissolving the concrete by resolving it into general ideas or conceptions, our analysis leads us finally towards the Truth and the Spirit, the Word and the Holy Spirit, two Persons distinct but indissolubly united, whose twofold economy, while founding the Church, conditions at the same time the indissoluble and distinct character of Scripture and of Tradition.

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The culmination of our analysis— Incarnate Word and Holy Spirit in the Church, as the twofold condition of the fulness of the Revelation— will serve us as a turntable from which to set forth now on the way of synthesis and to assign to Tradition the place which belongs to it in the concrete realities of ecclesiastical life. It will first of all be necessary to establish a double reciprocity in the economy of the two divine Persons sent by the Father. On the one hand, it is by the Holy Spirit that the Word is made incarnate of the Virgin Mary. On the other hand, it is by the Word, following His incarnation and work of redemption, that the Holy Spirit descends on the members of the Church at Pentecost. In the first case, the Holy Spirit comes first, but with a view to the incarnation, in order that the Virgin may be able to conceive the Son of God, come to be made Man. The role of the Holy Spirit here, then, is functional: He is the power of the

²⁵ See St. Basil's interpretation of this text, *De spirilu sanflo* 20; P.G. 32, cols. 164C-165C.

incarnation, the virtual condition of the reception of the Word. In the second case, it is the Son who comes first, for He sends the Holy Spirit who comes from the Father; but it is the Holy Spirit who plays the principal role: It is He who is the aim, for He is communicated to the members of the Body of Christ in order to deify them by grace. So here the role of the Incarnate Word is, in its turn, functional in relation to the Spirit: it is the form, so to speak, the “canon” of sanctification, a formal condition of the reception of the Holy Spirit.

The true and holy Tradition, according to Filaret of

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Moscow, “does not consist uniquely in visible and verbal transmission of teachings, rules, institutions and rites: it is at the same time an invisible and actual communication of grace and of sanctification.”²⁶ If it is necessary to distinguish what is transmitted (the oral and written traditions) and the unique mode according to which this transmission is received in the Holy Spirit (Tradition as the principle of Christian knowledge), it will nonetheless be impossible to separate these two points; hence the ambivalence of the term “tradition,” which designates simultaneously the horizontal line and the vertical line of the Truth possessed by the Church. Every transmission of a truth of faith implies then a communication of the grace of the Holy Spirit. In fact, outside of the Spirit “who spoke by the prophets,” that which is transmitted cannot be recognized by the Church as word of truth— word akin to the sacred books inspired by God and, together with the Holy Scriptures, “recapitulated” by the Incarnate Word. This wind of Pentecostal fire, communication of the Spirit of Truth proceeding from the Father and sent by the Son, actualizes the supreme faculty of the Church: the consciousness of revealed Truth, the possibility of judging and of discerning between true and false in the Light of the Holy Spirit: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). If the Paraclete is the unique Criterion of the Truth revealed by the Incarnate Word, He is also the principle of the incarnation, for the same Holy Spirit by whom the Virgin Mary received the faculty of becoming Mother of God, acts as function of the Word as a power for expressing the Truth in intelligible definitions or sensible images and symbols— documents of the faith which the Church will have to judge as to whether or not they belong to its Tradition.

These considerations are necessary to enable us to find again, in concrete cases, the relationship between Tradition and the revealed Truth, received and expressed by the Church. As we have seen, Tradition in its primary notion is not the

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revealed content, but the unique mode of receiving Revelation, a faculty owed to the Holy Spirit, who renders the Church capable of knowing the Incarnate Word in His relationship with the Father (supreme gnosis which is, for the Fathers of the first centuries, Theology in the proper

²⁶ Quoted by Fr. G. Florovsky, *The Ways of Russian Theology* (In Russian; Paris, 1937) p. 178.

meaning of the word) as well as the mysteries of the divine economy, from the creation of heaven and earth of Genesis to the new heaven and new earth of the Apocalypse. Recapitulated by the incarnation of the 'Word, the history of the divine economy makes itself known by the Scriptures, in the recapitulation of the two Testaments by the same Word. But this unity of the Scriptures can be recognized only in the Tradition, in the Light of the Holy Spirit communicated to the members of the unique Body of Christ. The books of the Old Testament, composed over a period of several centuries, written by different authors who have often brought together and fused different religious traditions, have only an accidental, mechanical unity for the eyes of the historian of religions. Their unity with the writings of the New Testament will appear to him factitious and artificial. But a son of the Church will be able to recognize the unity of inspiration and the unique object of the faith in these heteroclitic writings, woven by the same Spirit who, after having spoken by the prophets, preceded the Word in rendering the Virgin Mary apt to serve as means for the incarnation of God.

It is only in the Church that one is able to recognize in full consciousness the unity of inspiration of the sacred books, because the Church alone possesses the Tradition— the knowledge in the Holy Spirit of the Incarnate Word. The fact that the canon of the writings of the New Testament was formed relatively late, with some hesitations, shows us that the Tradition is in no way automatic: it is the condition of the Church having an infallible consciousness, but it is not a mechanism which will infallibly make known the Truth outside and above the consciousness of individuals, outside all deliberation and all judgment. In fact, if Tradition is a faculty of judging in the Light of the Holy Spirit, it obliges those who wish to know the Truth in the Tradition to make incessant efforts: one does not remain in the Tradi-

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tion by a certain historical inertia, by keeping, as a "tradition received from the Fathers" all that which, by force of habit, flatters a certain devout sensibility. On the contrary, it is by substituting this sort of "traditions" for the Tradition of the Holy Spirit living in the Church that one runs the most risk of finding oneself finally outside the Body of Christ. It must not be thought that the conservative attitude alone is salutary, nor that heretics are always "innovators." If the Church, after having established the canon of Scripture, preserves it in the Tradition, this preservation is not static and inert, but dynamic and conscious— in the Holy Spirit, who purifies anew "the words of the Lord... words that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times" (Ps. 12:6). If that were lacking, the Church would have conserved only a dead text, witness of an ended epoch, and not the living and vivifying Word, perfect expression of the Revelation which it possesses independently of the existence of old discordant manuscripts or of new "critical editions" of the Bible.

One can say that Tradition represents the critical spirit of the Church. But, contrary to the "critical spirit" of human science, the critical judgment of the Church is made acute by the Holy Spirit. It has then quite a different principle: that of the undiminished fulness of Revelation. Thus the Church, which will have to correct the inevitable alterations of the sacred texts (that certain

“traditionalists” wish to preserve at any price, sometimes attributing a mystical meaning to stupid mistakes of copyists), will be able at the same time to recognize in some late interpolations (for example, in the *comma* of the “three that bear record in heaven” in the first epistle of St. John) an authentic expression of the revealed Truth. Naturally authenticity here has a meaning quite other than it has in the historical disciplines.²⁷

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Not only the Scriptures, but also the oral traditions received from the apostles have been conserved only by virtue of the Tradition— the Light which reveals their true meaning and their significance, essential for the Church. Here more than elsewhere Tradition exercises its critical action, showing above all its negative and exclusive aspect: it rejects the “godless and silly myths” (I Tim. 4:7) piously received by all those whose “traditionalism” consists in accepting with unlimited credulity all that is insinuated into the life of the Church to remain there by force of habit.²⁸ In the epoch in which the oral traditions coming from the apostles began to be fixed in writing, the true and the false traditions crystalized together in numerous apocrypha, several of which circulate under the names of the apostles or other saints. “We are not ignorant” says Origen,²⁹ “that many of these secret writings have been composed by impious men, from among those who make their iniquity sound loudest, and that some of these fictions are used by the Hypythiani, others by the disciples of Basilides. We must therefore pay attention, in order not to receive all the apocrypha which circulate under the names of saints, for some have been composed by the Jews, perhaps to destroy the truth of our Scriptures and to establish false teachings. But on the other hand we must not reject as a whole all that is useful for throwing light on our Scriptures. It is a mark of greatness of spirit to hear and to apply these words of the Scripture: ‘test everything; hold fast what is good’ (1Thess 5:21).” Since the deeds and the words that the memory of the Church has kept since apostolic times “in silence free of disquiet and of curiosity”³⁰ have been divulged in writings of heterodox origin, these apocrypha, though separated from the scriptural canon, should nonetheless not be totally rejected. The Church knows how to extract from them some elements suitable for completing or for illustrating events

²⁷ Origen, in his homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews, after having expressed his views on the source of this epistle, of which the teaching is Pauline but the style and composition denote an author other than St. Paul, adds this: “If, then, some church considers this epistle as written by St. Paul, let it be honored also for that. For it is not by chance that the ancients have transmitted it under the name of Paul. But who wrote the epistle? God knows the truth.” Fragment quoted by Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI, 25; P.G. 20, col. 584C.

²⁸ In our days still, the literature of the *Synaxaria* and the *Leimonaria* offer similar examples, not to mention liturgical monstrosities which, for certain people, also receive a “traditional” and sacred character.

²⁹ *Commentary on Matthew* 28; P.G. 13, Col 1637.

³⁰ St. Basil, *De spirilu sancto* 27; P.G. 32, col. 188.

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the Scriptures are silent but which Tradition recognizes as true. Further, amplifications having an apocryphal source serve to color the liturgical texts and the iconography of some feasts. Thus one uses apocryphal sources, with judgment and moderation, to the extent to which they may represent corrupted apostolic traditions. Recreated by the Tradition, these elements, purified and made legitimate, return to the Church as its own property. This judgment will be necessary each time that the Church has to deal with writings claiming to belong to the apostolic tradition. She will reject them, or she will receive them, without necessarily posing the question of their authenticity on the historical plane, but considering above all their content in the light of Tradition.

Sometimes a considerable labor of clarification and adaptation will be necessary, in order that a pseudepigraphic work finally may be utilized by the Church as a witness of her Tradition. Thus St. Maximus the Confessor had to make his commentary on the *Corpus Dionysiacum* in order to uncover the orthodox meaning of these theological writings, which were circulating in monophysite circles under the pseudonym of St. Dionysius the Areopagite, adopted by their author or compiler. Without belonging to the “apostolic tradition” properly so-called, the Dionysian corpus belongs to the “patristic tradition,” which continues that of the apostles and of their disciples.³¹ The same could be said of some other writings of this kind. As for the oral traditions claiming apostolic authority, above all in so far as concerns customs and institutions, the judgment of the Church will take into account not only their meaning but also the universality of their usage.

Let us note that the formal criterion of traditions which was expressed by St. Vincent of Lerins—*Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*— can only be applied in full to

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those apostolic traditions which were orally transmitted during two or three centuries. The New Testament Scriptures already escape from this rule, for they were neither “always,” nor “everywhere,” nor “received by all,” before the definitive establishment of the scriptural canon. Whatever may be said by those who forget the primary significance of Tradition, wishing to substitute for it a “rule of faith,” the formula of St. Vincent is even less applicable to the dogmatic definitions of the Ommch. It is enough to recall that the term *homoousios* was anything but

³¹ It would be as false to deny the traditional character of the work of “Dionysius,” by basing oneself on the fact of its non-apostolic origin, as to wish to attribute it to the convert of St. Paul, on the pretext that these writings were received by the Church under the title of St. Dionysius the Areopagite. Both these attitudes would equally reveal a lack of true consciousness of the Tradition.

“traditional.” With a few exceptions,³² it was never used anywhere or by anyone except by the Valentinian gnostics and the heretic Paul of Samosata. The Church has transformed it into “words that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times” in the crucible of the Holy Spirit and of the free consciousness of those who judge within the Tradition, allowing themselves to be seduced by no habitual form, by no natural inclination of flesh and blood, which often takes the form of an unconsidered and obscure devotion.

The dynamism of Tradition allows of no inertia either in the habitual forms of piety or in the dogmatic expressions that are repeated mechanically like magic recipes of Truth, guaranteed by the authority of the Church. To preserve the “dogmatic tradition” does not mean to be attached to doc-

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trinal formulas: to be within the Tradition is to keep the living Truth in the Light of the Holy Spirit; or rather, it is to be kept in the Truth by the vivifying power of Tradition. But this power, like all that comes from the Spirit, preserves by a ceaseless renewing.

3

“To renew” does not mean to replace ancient expressions of the Truth by new ones, more explicit and theologically better elaborated. If that were so, we should have to recognize that the erudite Christianity of theology professors represents a considerable progress in relation to the “primitive” faith of the disciples and the apostles. In our days there is much talk of “theological development,” often without taking account of the extent to which this expression (which has become almost a commonplace) can be ambiguous. In fact, it implies, among some modern authors, an evolutionary conception of the history of Christian dogma. Attempts are made to interpret in the sense of “dogmatic progress” this passage of St. Gregory of Nazianzus: “The Old Testament manifested clearly the Father and obscurely the Son. The New Testament manifested the Son, but gave only indications of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Nowadays, the

³² Before Nicaea, the term *homoousios* is found in a fragment of the commentary of Origen on the Epistle to the Hebrews, quoted by St. Pamphilus the Martyr (P.G. 14, Col 1308), in the *Apology for Origen* of the same Pamphilus, translated by Rufinus (P.G. 17, cols. 580-581), and in the anonymous dialogue *On True Faith in God* falsely attributed to Origen (ed. W. H. van de Sande Bakhuyzen [Leipzig, 1901]). According to Athanasius, St. Dionysius of Alexandria was accused, about 259-261, of not recognizing that Christ is consubstantial with God; Dionysius is said to have replied that he avoided the word *homoousios*, which is not in Scripture, but recognized the orthodox meaning of this expression (St. Athanasius, *De sententia Dionysii* 18; P.G. 25, Col 505). The treatise *On Faith* where one finds the expression in the Nicene sense (P.G. 10, Col 1128) does not belong to St. Gregory of Neocaesarea; it is a Post-Nicene writing, probably of the end of the fourth century. Thus, the examples of the term among orthodox writers before Nicaea are for the most part uncertain: one cannot trust the translation of Rufinus. In any case the use of this term is very restricted and has an accidental character.

Spirit is among us and shows Himself in all His splendor. It would not have been prudent, before recognizing the divinity of the Father, openly to preach the divinity of the Son, and as long as that of the Son had not been accepted, to impose the Holy Spirit, if I dare so express myself.”³³ But “the Spirit is among us” since the day of Pentecost and, with Him, the light of Tradition, i.e., not only what has been transmitted (as a sacred and inert “deposit” would have been) but also the very force of transmission conferred on the Church and Accompanying all that is transmitted, as the unique mode of receiving and possessing the Revelation. However, the unique mode of having the Revelation in the

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Holy Spirit is to have it in fulness, and it is thus that the Church knows the Truth in the Tradition. If there was an increase in knowledge of the divine mysteries, a progressive revelation, “light coming little by little,” before the coming of the Holy Spirit, it is otherwise for the Church. If one can still speak of development, it is not knowledge of Revelation in the Church which progresses or is developed with each dogmatic definition. If one were to embrace the whole account of doctrinal history from its beginnings down to our own day, by reading the *Enchiridion* of Denzinger or the fifty in-folio volumes of Mansi, the knowledge that one would thus have of the mystery of the Trinity would be no more perfect than was that of a Father of the fourth century who speaks of the *homoousios*, nor than that of an Ante-Nicene Father who does not yet speak of it, nor than that of a St. Paul, to whom even the term “Trinity” remains as yet foreign. At every moment of its history the Church gives to its members the faculty of knowing the Truth in a fulness that the world cannot contain. It is this mode of knowing the living Truth in the Tradition that the Church defends in creating new dogmatic definitions.

“To know in fulness” does not mean “to have the fulness of knowledge”; this belongs only to the world to come. If St. Paul says that he now knows “in part” (I Cor 13:12) this *ek merous* does not exclude the fulness *in which* he knows. It is not later dogmatic development that will suppress the “knowledge in part” of St. Paul, but the eschatological actualization of the fulness in which, confusedly but surely, Christians here below know the mysteries of Revelation. The knowledge *ek merous* will not be suppressed because it was false, but because its role was merely to make us adhere to the fulness which surpasses every human faculty of knowledge. Hence it is in the light of the fulness that one knows “in part,” and it is always through this fulness that the Church judges whether or not the partial knowledge expressed in this or that doctrine belongs to Tradition. Any theological doctrine which pretends to be a perfect explanation of the revealed mystery will inevitably appear to be false: by the very fact of pretending to the fulness of knowl-

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edge it will set itself in opposition to the fulness in which the Truth is known in part. A doctrine is

³³ Or. 31 (*Theologica* 5), 2iS; P.G. 36, Col 161C.

traitor to Tradition when it seeks to take its place: gnosticism offers a striking example of an attempt to substitute for dynamic fulness, given to the Church as the condition of true knowledge, a kind of static fulness of a “revealed doctrine.” On the other hand, a dogma defined by the Church, in the form of partial knowledge, each time opens anew an access towards the fulness outside of which the revealed Truth can be neither known nor confessed. As an expression of truth, a dogma of faith belongs to Tradition, without all the same constituting one of its “parts.” It is a means, an intelligible instrument, which makes for adherence to the Tradition of the Church: it is a witness of Tradition, its external limit or, rather, the narrow door which leads to knowledge of Truth in the Tradition. Within the circle of dogma, the knowledge of the revealed mystery that a member of the Church will be able to attain— the degree of Christian “gnosis”— will vary in proportion to the spiritual measure of each. This knowledge of the Truth in the Tradition thus will be able to increase in a person, in company with his increase in sanctification (Col 1:10): a Christian will be more perfect in knowledge at the age of his spiritual maturity. But would one dare to speak, against all the evidence, of a collective progress in the knowledge of the Christian mystery, a progress which would be due to a “dogmatic development” of the Church? Would this development have started in “gospel infancy” to end today— after a “patristic youth” and a “scholastic maturity” in the sad senility of the manuals of theology? Or indeed should this metaphor (false, like so many others) give place to a vision of the Church like that which is to be found in the Shepherd of Hermas, where the Church appears in the features of a woman young and old at the same time, bringing together all ages in the “measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph 4:13)?

Returning to the text of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, so often misinterpreted, we shall see that the dogmatic development in question is in no way determined by an inner neces-

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sity, which would effect a progressive increase in the Church of the knowledge of revealed Truth. Far from being a kind of organic evolution, the history of dogma depends above all on the conscious attitude of the Church in face of historical reality, in which she has to work for the salvation of men. If Gregory spoke of a progressive revelation of the Trinity before Pentecost, it is in order to insist on the fact that the Church, in her economy in relation to the external world, must follow the example of the divine pedagogy. In formulating these dogmas (cf. *kérygma* in St. Basil, see page 145 above), it must conform to the necessities of a given moment, “not unveiling all things without delay and without discernment, and nonetheless keeping nothing hidden until the end. For the one would be imprudent and the other impious. The one would risk wounding those without, and the other separating us from our own brothers.”³⁴

³⁴ *Ibid.* c. 27; P.G. 36, Col 164B. It is known that Gregory of Nazianzus reproached his friend St. Basil for excess of prudence with regard to the open proclamation of the Divinity of the Holy Spirit, a truth which had the character of traditional evidence for members of the Church, but which exacted a moderation in economy with regard to the

In replying to the lack of understanding of the external world, incapable of receiving Revelation— in resisting the attempts of the “debater of this age” (1Cor 1:20) who, in the womb of the Church itself, seeks to understand the Truth “according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (Col 2:8)— the Church finds herself obliged to express her faith in the form of dogmatic definitions, in order to defend it against the thrust of heresies. Imposed by the necessity of the struggle, dogmas once formulated by the Church become for the faithful a “rule of faith” which remains firm forever, setting the boundary between orthodoxy and heresy, between knowledge within the Tradition and knowledge determined by natural factors. Always confronted with new difficulties to overcome, with new obstacles of thought to remove, the Church will always have to defend her dogmas. Her theologians will have the constant task of expounding and inter-

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preting them anew according to the intellectual demands of the milieu or of the epoch. In critical moments of the struggle for the integrity of the faith, the Church will have to proclaim new dogmatic definitions, which will mark new stages in this struggle, which will last until all arrive at “the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph 4:13). Having to struggle against new heresies, the Church never abandons her ancient dogmatic positions in order to replace them by new definitions. These stages are never surpassed by an evolution; and, far from being relegated to the archives of history, they preserve the quality of an ever actual present, in the living light of the Tradition. Thus one can speak of dogmatic development only in a very limited sense: in formulating a new dogma the Church takes as her point of departure already existing dogmas, which constitute a rule of faith that she has in common with her adversaries. Thus, the dogma of Chalcedon makes use of that of Nicaea and speaks of the Son consubstantial with the Father in His divinity, to say afterwards that He is also consubstantial with us in His humanity; against the monothelites, who in principle admitted the dogma of Chalcedon, the Fathers of the Sixth Council will again take up its formulae on the two natures, in order to affirm the two wills and the two energies of Christ; the Byzantine councils of the fourteenth century, in proclaiming the dogma on the divine Energies, will refer, among other things, to the definitions of the Sixth Council, etc. In each case one can speak of a “dogmatic development” to the extent that the Church extends the rule of faith while remaining, in her new definitions, in conformity with the dogmas already received by all. If the rule of faith develops as the teaching authority of the Church adds to it new acts having dogmatic authority, this development, which is subject to an “economy” and presupposes a knowledge of Truth in the Tradition, is not an augmentation of Tradition. This is clear if one is willing to take into account all that has been said concerning the primordial notion of Tradition. It is the abuse of the term “tradition” (in the singular and without an adjective to qualify it and determine it) by authors who see only its

Pneumatomachoi, whom it was necessary to bring into the unity of the faith.

projection on the horizontal plane of the Church— the plane of the “traditions” (in the plural or with a qualification which defines them)— and above all a vexatious habit of designating by this term the Church’s ordinary teaching authority which have allowed such frequent talk to be heard about a “development” or an “enriching” of tradition. The theologians of the Seventh Council distinguish clearly between the “Tradition of the Holy Spirit” and the divinely inspired “teaching (*didaskalia*) of our Holy Fathers.”³⁵ They were able to define the new dogma “with all rigour and justice” because they considered themselves to be in the same Tradition which allowed the Fathers of past centuries to produce new expressions of the Truth whenever they had to reply to the necessities of the moment.

There exists an interdependence between the “Tradition of the Catholic Church” (= the faculty of knowing the Truth in the Holy Spirit) and the “teaching of the Fathers” (= the rule of faith kept by the Church). One cannot belong to the Tradition while contradicting the dogmas, just as one cannot make use of the dogmatic formulas received in order to oppose a formal “orthodoxy” to every new expression of the Truth that the life of the Church may produce. The first attitude is that of revolutionary innovators, of false prophets who sin against the expressed Truth, against the Incarnate Word, in the name of the Spirit to which they lay claim. The second is that of the conservative formalists, pharisees of the Church who, in the name of the habitual expressions of Truth, run the risk of sinning against the Spirit of Truth.

In distinguishing the Tradition in which the Church knows the Truth from the “dogmatic tradition” which she

establishes by her teaching authority and which she preserves, we find again the same relationship as we have been able to establish between Tradition and Scripture: one can neither confound them nor separate them without depriving them of the character of fulness that they possess together. Like Scripture, dogmas *live* in the Tradition, with this difference that the scriptural canon forms a determinate body which excludes all possibility of further increase, while the “dogmatic tradition,” though keeping its stability as the “rule of faith” from which nothing can be cut off, can be increased by receiving, to the extent that may be necessary, new expressions of revealed Truth, formulated by the Church. The ensemble of the dogmas which

³⁵ H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum* no. 302: *Tên basilikên hôsper erchomenoi tribon, epakolouthountes têi Theêgorôi didaskaliâi tôn hagiôn paterôn hêmôn, kai têi paradosei tês katholikês ekklesias. Tou gar en autêi akêsantos hagiou pneumatos einai tauten ginôskomen. Horizomen syn akribeiâi pasêi kai emmeleiâi...*, “walking, so to speak, on the royal road, following the divinely inspired teaching of our Holy Fathers as well as the Tradition of the catholic Church (for we know that it belongs to the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the Church), we define in all rigor and justice...”.

the Church possesses and transmits is not a body constituted once and for all, but neither has it the incomplete character of a doctrine “in process of becoming.” At every moment of its historical existence, the Church formulates the Truth of the faith in its dogmas, which always express a fulness to which one adheres intellectually in the light of the Tradition, while never being able to make it definitively explicit. A truth which would allow itself to be made fully explicit would not have the quality of living fulness which belongs to Revelation: “fulness” and “rational explicitness” mutually exclude one another. However, if the mystery revealed by Christ and known in the Holy Spirit cannot be made explicit, it does not remain inexpressible. Since “the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily” in Christ (Col 2:9), this fulness of the divine Word Incarnate will be expressed as much in the Scriptures as in the “abridged word” of the symbols of faith³⁶ or of other dogmatic definitions. This fulness of the Truth that they express without making explicit, allows the dogmas of the Church to be akin to the Holy Scriptures. It is for this reason that the Pope St. Gregory the Great brought together in the same veneration the dogmas of the first four Councils and the four Gospels.³⁷

All that we have said of the “dogmatic tradition” can be applied to other expressions of the Christian mystery that

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the Church produces in the Tradition, conferring on them equally the presence of the “fulness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1 :23). Just like the “divinely inspired *didascalía*” of the Church, the iconographic tradition also receives its full meaning and its intimate coherence with other documents of the faith (Scripture, dogmas, liturgy) in the Tradition of the Holy Spirit. Just as much as dogmatic definitions, it has been possible for the icons of Christ to be compared to Holy Scriptures, to receive the same veneration, since iconography sets forth in colors what the word announces in written letters.³⁸ Dogmas are addressed to the intelligence, they are

³⁶ See above at n. 20.

³⁷ *Epistolarum liber I, ep. 25*; P.L. 77, col. 613.

³⁸ “We prescribe the veneration of the holy icon of Our Lord Jesus Christ, rendering to it the same honor as to the Books of the Holy Gospels. For just as by the letters of these latter we all come to salvation, so by the action of the colors in images, all— learned as well as ignorant— equally find their profit in what is within reach of all. In effect, just as the word is set forth by letters, painting sets forth and represents the same things by colors. Hence, if someone does not venerate the icon of Christ the Savior, may be he unable to see His face at the second coming...” (Denzinger, no. 337). If we cite here the third canon of the anti-Photian Synod (869-870), whose acts have been rejected by the Church (not only in the East but also in the West, as shown by F. Dvornik, *The Photian Schism* [London, 1948], pp. 176-177 *et passim*), it is because this text gives a beautiful example of the rapprochement current between the Holy Scriptures and iconography, united in the same Tradition of the Church. Cf. the sequel to the text quoted, on icons of the Mother of God, of angels, and of the saints (Denzinger, *loc. cit.*).

intelligible expressions of the reality which surpasses our mode of understanding. Icons impinge on our consciousness by means of the outer senses, presenting to us the same suprasensible reality in “esthetic” expressions (in the proper sense of the word *aisthetikos*— that which can be perceived by the senses). But the intelligible element does not remain foreign to iconography: in looking at an icon one discovers in it a “logical” structure, a dogmatic content which has determined its composition. This does not mean that icons are a kind of hieroglyph or sacred rebus, translating dogmas into a language of conventional signs. If the intelligibility which penetrates these sensible images is identical with that of the dogmas of the Church, it is that the two “traditions”— dogmatic and iconographic— coincide in so far as they express, each by its proper means, the same revealed reality.

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Although it transcends the intelligence and the senses, Christian Revelation does not exclude them: on the contrary, it assumes them and transforms them by the light of the Holy Spirit, in the Tradition which is the unique mode of receiving the revealed Truth, of recognizing it in its scriptural, dogmatic, iconographic and other expressions and also of expressing it anew.