



Tradition

ISSUE TWO: TRADITION





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Owning the Future: Between Genealogy and Tradition

TERENCE SWEENEY

One may not expect to find a reflection on the future within a collection on the nature of tradition. The conceptual and narrative framework of tradition seems oriented to the past. However, if tradition is central to theological reflection and to the shape our lives, then tradition must have a word for the future. It must be able to speak of the future; otherwise, Christians will leave the future to others. To see this, I want to indicate a lacuna in Alasdair MacIntyre's *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. MacIntyre, a prominent Catholic philosopher, advocates for a narrative account of ethics which allows for the shared cultivation of virtue. In this text, he sets up an argument between three modes of thinking about ethics and history: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition. For MacIntyre, the superiority of any one of these versions of moral enquiry depends on its capacity for narrative. To determine if one view can prevail over the other entails considering their relative capacity to offer a narrative of the human condition. Ascertaining the superior narrative requires that we determine "which [narrative] is able to include its rivals within it, not only to retell their stories as episodes within its story, but to tell the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes." Tradition, as MacIntyre shows, can do just that. Christian tradition narrates the human community better than either the naïve encyclopedic version (liberal modernity) or the more astute genealogical approach.

In a Christ-forgetting world, Christians need to counteract rival versions of human flourishing to create the conditions for evangelization. This necessitates better accounts of history, including out-narrating genealogical thinking. This is not simple, considering genealogies' analyses of the contingencies and power dynamics operative in history. Genealogy unmasks practices in which dominant discourses present themselves as inevitable. It enables rich considerations of origins, events, ruptures, and transgressions in history. Despite my admiration for genealogy, MacIntyre shows the narrative superiority of Christian tradition regarding the past. And yet, this is an insufficient victory. If MacIntyre told Nietzsche how tradition can out-narrate genealogy, I think Nietzsche would scoff. The heart of genealogical thinking was never about the past: it is about the future. If tradition "wins" the past, genealogical thinking is quite happy to take second place, as long as it wins the future. MacIntyre does not offer a full enough account of tradition because his narrative remains overly situated in the past. If our work is to out-narrate genealogical inquiry, then we must find a way for tradition to articulate a better version of the future. In what follows, I will try to do just that. This requires considering why Nietzsche thinks genealogy is about the future, while studying the relative strength of his vision to learn from it. Tradition can prevail only if it learns from the intellectual traditions it prevails over. I will then indicate why tradition offers a superior account of the future in its capacity to foster new beginnings and in its openness to the God who comes.

History Is for the Future

In 1873, Friedrich Nietzsche began his *Untimely Meditations*. They were untimely because they were written against his time, written for the future that they were meant to prophesy and construct. His second meditation, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, seems to offer a narrative of the past in such a way as to claim a dominant account of moral inquiry (*à la* MacIntyre). But if we think the

Untimely Meditations is about offering a “correct” version of the past, we miss the force of Nietzsche’s work. We transpose it into the fact-checking mode of thought that he so loathed. Such a mode of historical thought stands “guard over history to see that nothing comes out of it except more history, and certainly no real events!” For Nietzsche, the goal of the great is to craft such events, to ensure that history is not simply “one damn thing after another.” Liberal modernity—the modernity of the bourgeois purchaser of encyclopedias—offers the false veneer of newness, but only in the sense of prefabricated and so pre-determined newness. This enables “people to have some new thing to chatter about for a while, and then something newer still, and in the meantime go on doing what they have always done.” For such a progressivism, the future is here already precisely because the future—as difference—is never allowed to happen. As determined, the future is just the past with a new outfit.

Christian ethics is thus an ethics not of development or even of habits but of conversion—the moment of beginning in each life. What tradition carries and enables is the possibility of this conversion, this turning towards the future and to the God who comes.

Nietzsche wants a future that is not determined. He sees history as helpful for this because history (rightly understood) teaches us that the past was contingent. What *is* was once only *possible*. In contrast, whiggish moderns and Hegelians see history as a determinate unfolding. Nothing, it turns out, was ever possible. Since nothing *was* possible, nothing about the future *is* possible either. Genealogical thinking disrupts this sense of the past to show the networks of contingencies that lead what *might* have been to *actually* be. This is particularly the case with examples of human greatness. The Nietzschean learns from the past that “the greatness that once existed was in any event once *possible* and may thus be possible again.” By discovering the possibilities of the past, Nietzsche hopes to reestablish possibility for the future.

In disclosing the contingency of the past, genealogical thinking “re-possibilizes” the future. For Nietzsche, this means action in the form of overcoming is possible. The point of history is to reveal the greatness in the great while overlooking the muddling mediocrity of dwarves who stand between the great. What history allows us to see is the “great fighters *against history*... against the blind power of the actual.” These are the men who “bothered little with the ‘thus it is’ so as to follow ‘thus it shall be’ with a more cheerful pride.” Seeing the future as the open temporality of possibility, these great figures *made* history by transforming the future. This is the ground of Nietzsche’s core claim: “*Only he who constructs the future has a right to judge the past.*” Those who forge the future by their dynamic creating are the only ones who can truly judge the past.

Transforming the future transforms the past. History is of use inasmuch as it reminds us that another moment of greatness *may yet be* and that my task is to perform this great work. Nietzsche’s response to MacIntyre will be structured by his basic claim that even if tradition can out-narrate the genealogical, it is the genealogical which reorients us to the future, and the future will transform the past. Nietzsche rejects the progressive or Hegelian visions of history for their overdetermination of the past and so determination of the future. The point of genealogical thinking is to think the past as contingent and so restore the future as undetermined, as the space of possibility. In the third essay in *Untimely Meditations*, he explains that this is what allows for “the favorable conditions under which those great men can come into existence.” The goal of history as educative is to create “the conditions for the production of genius.” History is made by the great, by those who overcome their time by making a different future.

Tradition Is Futural

Can tradition offer a more compelling vision of the future, one that reestablishes possibility beyond the production of commodified difference in progressive or encyclopedic history but also surpasses the Nietzschean *Übermensch*? Tradition is grounded in the past. Looking to the past, receiving from the past, we hand on the past to the future. The future is, in part, determined by the past, in that what has been believed and done is what is to be believed and done. This seemingly leaves us with the choice between Nietzschean dynamism and traditional stasis. Even if tradition takes work and active reception, what is received as deposit is what is and will always be. We cannot, then, out-narrate Nietzsche when it comes to the future. However, this is to misread the nature of Christianity. Christian tradition is fundamentally about the future, has a more dynamic possibilizing force for the future, and is the only tradition that allows for the future not only to come from us but also to come from the future. In short, in McIntyrean terms, tradition provides a better “narration” of the future on Nietzschean grounds while also transcending Nietzsche.

Importantly, the past matters for both the genealogist and the Christian traditionalist. For the genealogical thinker, the past matters because it enables the dynamic creation of the future. Why does the past matter for the Christian traditionalist? The past matters as an expression of our fidelity to an event and a person. There is, then, a sense that the work of tradition is the work of memory. We want to hold in intimacy the event of Jesus’ presence on earth. This fidelity is expressed in a commitment to hand on faithfully what has been handed on about the event of Christ. The *depositum fidei* is a sacred and saving trust. Sacred because it is holy and the task of receiving it is sanctifying; saving because what is handed on is both the news of our salvation and the source of our salvation (particularly the sacraments). This fidelity structures the form of life that is Christianity, which manifests in the plurality of Christian lives. Fidelity forms a community. It is the rock of the community as guided by the apostolic constitution of the Church.

Tradition, in this sense, is deeply rooted in the past. But is this its exclusive temporal dimension? No, because fidelity is *for the future*. The task of tradition is not merely to receive but to hand on. Further, what we receive is what shapes our *expectation*. Consider the Apostles gazing up on the Ascension. They are told, “[T]his same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). The task of tradition is to keep in our memory—and so in the heart of our being—the remembrance of this same Jesus and how He ascended. For it is how He ascended that this same Jesus will descend again. Our memory is an expectation for the future; tradition is fidelity to the future.

The word for this faithful expectation is *hope*. Tradition—if it is not to be malformed into a rigid attachment to a particular past—must be suffused with hope. Theological tradition is impossible without hope. Nietzsche tells the young man, “Draw about yourself the fence of a great and comprehensive hope, of a hope-filled striving.” His genealogical work is meant to be an overcoming of despair, which is the sense that what has been will ever be. For the Christian, tradition is marked by a similar hope. The Apostle Peter writes, “We have the firm prophetic word: whereunto you do well to attend, as to a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawns, and the day star arises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19). The prophetic word that we carry is the light that prepares us for the day star. This hope guarantees for us that the sordidness of the past will not forever mar the future.

Even if Christian tradition is futural because eschatological, can it provide a counter-narrative to equal Nietzschean genealogy’s vision of the future? For Nietzsche, the disadvantage of history arises when its orientation towards the past makes the newness of the future impossible. Too much history for a man

forms the “great and ever greater pressure of what is past,” the weight of which “pushes him down or bends him sideways.” Nietzsche sees Christian tradition as just such a weight. A stultifying past that necessitates what the future has is all the past gives to the present.

However, Christian tradition—while faithful to its Founder and its work of handing on the deposit of faith—is about beginnings. Augustine writes of God’s intention in creating humans, “So that beginnings would be, humans were created.” This principle—what Hannah Arendt calls *natality*—is a core claim of any robust Christian anthropology. While Nietzsche might see such beginnings as features of the vanishingly rare *Übermenschen*, Augustine sees this radical inbreaking of the new in each person and her deeds. Each of us can overcome the old man and put on the new. Our natality images God’s newness. God declares in delight, “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19). God is the God of newness, man the creature of beginnings. Christian ethics is thus an ethics not of development or even of habits but of *conversion*—the moment of beginning in each life. What tradition carries and enables is the possibility of this conversion, this turning towards the future and to the God who comes.

In *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche wisely claims that the goodness of a culture and education depends on its “production of the philosopher, the artist, and the saint.” For this is the ever-present hope of the Nietzschean future: that the great man will arise. If this is the measure, then I submit that Christian tradition—ever ancient, ever new—most certainly is the seedbed of the future. If it can be said that no one can fully anticipate the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, then certainly it can be said that no one could have anticipated St. Francis, or St. Dominic, who was described as “stupefyingly free.” Consider the wide diversity of the saints, their startling newness, their world-transforming presence. Who could have anticipated Augustine preaching in Hippo, Francis Xavier evangelizing in Japan, Dorothy Day advocating in the bowery, Mother Teresa nurturing in the gutters of Calcutta? Who could anticipate the quiet saints of family life, small parishes, and forgotten monasteries? Nietzsche, so captivated by the great man, cannot see the stupefying originality of the saints whom none of us have even heard of, nor of the saints that are yet to be. To paraphrase MacIntyre, to live in the Christian tradition is to promote many new, doubtless very different, St. Benedicts. These saints of the future, these new beginnings, are testimonies of the future focus of tradition.

This is echoed in art and philosophy. Christian creativity, rich in tradition and originality, is the source of musicians from Prudentius to Arvo Pärt, artists from Fra Angelico to George Roualt, and writers from Chaucer to Marilynne Robinson. Our philosophy stretches from the clarity of Thomas to the rich enigmas of Pascal, from the boldness of Catherine dialoguing with God to the fortitude of philosopher-martyr Edith Stein. And as the Christian tradition enters the fullness of its global reality, the whole world sends up saints, philosophers, and artists faithful to a tradition that opens up a future beyond any of our expectations. Yes, Nietzsche, draw about yourself a great and comprehensive hope! Draw about yourself the tradition of Christianity!

Christ Is Coming

Christian tradition is futural and can provide a vision for the future that at the very least rivals the Nietzschean vision. Beyond these two claims is the truth that only the Christian tradition allows the future to come to us instead of coming from us. Nietzsche’s great hope is that the future is open to possibility; however, Nietzsche insists that the future is forged by us from the present. He tells the young and the great to “form within yourself an image to which the future shall correspond.” The *Übermensch* is to be “the architect of the future.” The future always comes from us.

Christian tradition holds this view to some extent as well; we have the work of forming a culture that

raises saints out of our hope-filled fidelity. But the Christian tradition is centered on hope as our memory of the future. To be a Christian is to live in the season of Advent, to await the future that comes. What comes—the Advent we hope for—is not constructed by us. It is neither grown from the soil of the past nor forged in the moment of the present. It is the truly futural because it alone comes from the future. Nietzsche, who so dearly wanted to clear the future of determination, ends up substituting determinism with self-determinism. This still means that the future is determined. There is, then, a genealogical connection between Nietzsche's hope for an undetermined history and his later doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same. The diversity and freedom of the future, if it always comes from us, ends with us being not particularly diverse.

Beyond any determination of the future, Christ tells us that we know neither the hour nor the day, and that eye has not seen, nor ear heard. Why is this so important? Because for the Christian the future is not made by us. It is beyond determination, overdeterminate in the richness of the dynamizing possibility of the God for whom all things are possible. The future does not simply arise from the past, nor the present as it does for Nietzsche (and the encyclopedists, Hegelians, Marxists, and Progressives). Each denies a future that is wholly futural, that comes from God to us. The Christian alone allows the future to be the future, and so lives in hope. Nietzschean hope is constructed just as his future is constructed. It ends up being despair in the form of his *amor fati*. Nietzsche helps us restore our sense of the futural nature of tradition, reminds us that the test of our fidelity is its raising up of saints, artists, and philosophers, and reconnects tradition to the startling newness of God. But beyond Nietzschean genealogy, we find that Christian tradition is the openness in our life to the God who comes. Christian tradition—rooted in the past—holds open the space for the future. This is the space of prayer, of hope, of fidelity, of saintly deeds, and of a vigil that prays, “Come, Lord Jesus!”

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The Idea of Tradition in Del Noce

CARLO LANCELOTTI

On several occasions in the course of his reflections on the history of ideas, Augusto Del Noce (1910–1989) brings up the concept of “tradition” as key to understanding the fundamental conflict playing itself out in contemporary history. As is his intellectual habit, he deliberately goes beyond a purely phenomenological or sociological analysis and strives to understand the proper philosophical significance of this term. He argues that the concept “tradition” is fully meaningful only within a certain “metaphysical context” and quickly becomes ideological if it is separated from it. In what follows, I will review the main Del Nocean theses about the meaning of tradition and some of their implications.

1. Tradition is from the “past” but about the “eternal”

First of all, Del Noce emphasizes that there is an easy way to misunderstand the word “tradition”: by taking it simply in its etymological sense, without observing that from a philosophical perspective the etymology is in fact “rather ambiguous.” The word tradition means “handing down” but one can hand down both good and bad things. Clearly, “we cannot attribute ‘value’ based on tradition. It is clear that nothing ‘has value’ only because it has been handed down, since, for instance, the rituals of black masses or the most evil arts are also handed down and taught.” From this elementary observation Del Noce concludes that “it is completely evident that ‘value’ is the foundation of tradition and not the other way around. However, the formula ‘traditional values’ has the following meaning: there exist absolute and supra-historical values which ‘therefore’ must be ‘handed down.’ There exists an ‘order’ which is unchangeable, even for God Himself.”^[1] If there were no permanent values, there would be nothing to hand down, and each generation would be forced to define its own values based on historical circumstances. So, the philosophical presupposition implicit in the concept of tradition is that some values are not just historically conditioned. Tradition is “not the preservation of a past, but the recognition of an order of eternal and metaphysical values, which therefore must be handed down and transmitted from one generation to the next.”^[2] The content of tradition comes *from* the past but concerns the *eternal*, the unchangeable. Reducing tradition to the handing down of a past falls into *traditionalism*.

2. Tradition presupposes the “metaphysics of being”

Thus, the idea of tradition is tied to what Del Noce calls “Platonism” because “it is impossible to speak of ‘tradition’ without making reference to the thesis that ‘truth in itself’ and ‘good in itself’ are absolute, eternal, etc.”^[3] This thesis, in turn, is tied to the idea of a universal rationality, the Platonic *Logos*. Tradition properly understood is inseparable from “the essential metaphysical principle ... which says that everything that participates necessarily in universal principles, which are the eternal and immutable essences contained in the permanent actuality of the divine intellect. ... The primacy of contemplation, the primacy of the immutable, and the reality of an eternal order are equivalent affirmations.”^[4] So, in metaphysical terms, “[t]raditional spirit means affirming the primacy of being, the primacy of the unchangeable, the primacy of intellectual intuition, or affirming the ontological value of the principle of non-contradiction.”^[5] Del Noce opposes this “metaphysics of being” to the “metaphysics of becoming” which in the modern age found its classical expression in Hegel, and which also shaped the thought of Marx and his successors up to our day. According to this second view, there

is no “given” order of being because truth is the “result” of the dialectical process of history, and morality consists in serving such process. Therefore, the very concept of “tradition” makes no sense, since it presupposes a

metaphysical-theological conception of an objective order of being, such that morality consists in respecting it. According to this view, there is, in brief, a universal and eternal reason, higher than man, which provides the foundation for the hierarchy and the absoluteness of values. Therefore, values cannot be reduced to any psychological and sociological explanation ... Participating in this order is regarded as the foundation of man’s autonomy and dignity.[6]

Participating in this order is also the foundation of the possibility of a form of authority which is liberating (because “the affirmation of the super-human is what frees man from dependence on other men”[7]) and not repressive.

In order to be handed down, a value must be eternal, must “transcend” social, economic, and cultural circumstances; but by this very fact, that same value cannot ever be “exhausted” by the historically-conditioned ways in which it is expressed by the thinkers of any historical period.

3. Tradition involves historical formulations of meta-historical truths

Del Noce’s observation that the content of tradition is necessarily meta-historical has a very important consequence: tradition cannot ever be entirely reduced to the specific formulation given to it by a particular historical age. This is probably the most profound aspect of the Del Nocean reflection on tradition, though it may seem, at first, paradoxical. In order to be handed down, a value must be eternal, must “transcend” social, economic, and cultural circumstances; but by this very fact, that same value cannot ever be “exhausted” by the historically-conditioned ways in which it is expressed by the thinkers of any historical period. To be genuine, tradition must be “old” and “new” at the same time. Every generation faces new circumstances, and thus needs to rediscover anew what is handed down from the past and make it its own by discovering what Del Noce calls new “virtualities” of tradition, meaning aspects that went unnoticed by our predecessors because they faced different questions. In order to continue, tradition must “react” to the new historical questions we face so that we can verify its truth yet again.[8]

To explain this dynamic of tradition, Del Noce refers to Plato’s idea of ἀνάμνησις (anamnesis):

The meta-historical and super-human nature of the truth implies that its fixity includes the aspect of being ulterior to every possible way of expressing it, and thus of being inexhaustibly capable of expressing itself in yet-to-be-defined forms. However, this statement must be purified of all subjectivist aspects: it is the same identical truth which, because of its transcendence, is reached through an ascesis of conscience which necessarily has a historical character: it is a “personal perspective.” This type of rediscovery recalls the Platonic theory of anamnesis. It is a knowledge that man has forgotten, even though somehow he still possesses it obscurely. Such knowledge is reawakened, not without great difficulty and effort, in the presence of the sensitive world. This theory stops being a myth if one understands the meaning of “sensitive world” in the more general sense, which includes the world of history.[9]

As he says elsewhere, “An idea needs to be distinguished from the formula in which it is expressed,”[10]

because “metaphysical truth simultaneously reveals and hides itself in the sensible formula that expresses it, which is simply an occasion for anamnesis ... When neo-positivism looks at the sensible formula, it has every right to declare it meaningless.”[11] Therefore, a tradition cannot ever be “fixed” in a “treatise,” in a closed set of propositions. To do so inevitably leads to forms of rationalism and ultimately to the betrayal of the tradition itself, by denying its power to address and judge new historical circumstances. In the history of thought, Del Noce says, the question of explicating the “virtualities” of tradition and of freeing eternal truths from their contingent historical formulations was the focal point of the work of John Henry Newman. Del Noce considered a thorough examination of this question essential to arrive at an adequate (non-relativistic) redefinition of “liberalism” in the political sphere.[12]

4. Tradition is tied to the religious dimension

This awareness of the “transcendence” of the truth also explains why there exists a necessary link between tradition and religion in the broadest sense, as the discovery of the mysteriousness of reality. Genuine traditional thought recognizes that the truth remains “obscure.”

The meta-historicity of the truth and its obscurity establish the connection between tradition and the sacred. It is the affirmation of the eternal within man, of the locus where the foundation of the human order and the foundation of being coincide; hence, “authority.” At the same time, obscurely, so that authority must be realized as discipline in order to eliminate the elements of deceit which prevent the intuition of the truth (where the word intuition is used according to its etymology, in which “intueri” means “to see.” The visual metaphor indicates that truth is not man’s doing). The need to explain this obscurity is the reason why philosophy according to the traditional spirit is inseparable from the idea of a fall, of an original sin.[13]

Conversely, the “metaphysics of becoming” is tied to *rationalism*, to the denial of transcendence and the affirmation of the “normality” of the human condition, which in Del Noce’s view is the original option which in the long run led to modern atheism.[14]

5. Revolution as the negation of tradition

According to Del Noce, the negation of the idea of tradition is the modern idea of *revolution*, as found in particular in Marxism. It is important to emphasize that for Del Noce what makes Marx a paradigmatic thinker is not his social-historical analyses but the fact that he grasps perfectly the philosophical significance of the idea of revolution, and its opposition to the idea of tradition. “At the theoretical level Marxism draws its significance from being the most radical negation, simultaneously and inseparably, of original sin and of the principle of non-contradiction, the affirmation of the primacy of being over becoming, which is the foundation of classical metaphysics and of the idea of tradition. Every revolutionary negation of traditional value depends on this initial negation.”[15] Thus, for Marx, “revolution means radical liberation from authority, but such a rejection implies also the rejection of tradition, and the rejection of tradition implies the rejection of metaphysical-religious thought.”[16]

It is important to observe that Marx’s philosophy has been the paradigm of other forms of revolutionary thought that have marked culture over the last two centuries. In particular, the revolutionary idea is very much present in what Del Noce describes as the “affluent” or “technological” or “permissive” society of the modern West. Even if this society rejects the specifically Marxist form of (class-based) revolution, its proposal “pushes to the limit the idea of total revolution, if revolution means a radical break with tradition.”[17] Starting in the mid-1950s

renewal was understood as liberation from the constraints and ideals of tradition, which were regarded as invalid precisely because they belonged to the past; ... Therefore, man was cut off from

the past and at the same time deprived of any tension toward the future (in order to be “new” he had to conform to a world that kept changing at a faster and faster rate, but without any interior change; in short, the technological world). He was reduced to pure present—and was peculiarly celebrated as “creative freedom” because of this liberation. Nothing was handed down to him (tradition derives from *tradere*), he had nothing to hand down ... At this point, man’s freedom thus understood reduces to man’s fragmentation. He can derive his vitality only from “novelty.” Novelty derives its value only from the fact that it “denies” and inebriates man, thus giving him a refreshing feeling of being alive.[18]

The most characteristic expression of this “renewal” was the (appropriately named) sexual revolution, which was explicitly anti-traditional, because “the idea of family is inseparable from the idea of tradition, from a heritage of truth that we must *tradere, hand on* ... [but] if we separate the idea of tradition from that of an objective order, it must necessarily appear to be ‘the past,’ what has been ‘surpassed,’ ‘the dead trying to suffocate the living,’ what must be negated in order to find psychological balance.”[19]

6. Nationalism as an incorrect idea of tradition

One last aspect of the Del Nocean reflection on tradition that deserves to be mentioned is the relation between tradition and nationalism. Del Noce believes that nationalism captures a truth, namely, that “the reality of the *nation*, as man’s relationship to his tradition and history, cannot be deduced from the *economic*, as relationship between *man and nature*.”[20] Every human society ultimately formulates a collective narrative which cannot be reduced to material-economic factors and which always includes assumptions and values of a “religious” nature. However, nationalism typically tends to put these values at the service of the preservation of the nation. Thus “people speak of ‘national tradition,’ inverting the correct order and subordinating the ‘traditional spirit’ to the philosophical position most opposed to it, namely pragmatism ... In this way, values are not respected—even if they are said to be supreme—inasmuch as they are considered only from the perspective of their civilizing function.”[21] As a result, in many historical situations “the relationship between tradition and religion ... was turned upside down, in the sense that it was not the latter that provided the foundation of the former, but rather it was the preservation of the former that implied that of the latter.”[22] In this sense, nationalism “harbors an intrinsic contradiction”: “it presents itself as traditionalism, as an effort to perpetuate a heritage, such heritage being legitimated in most cases by referring to transcendent values, even though then there is the tendency to regard them only as functional to the legitimization of a heritage (which is why nationalism can be viewed as the final outcome of an incorrect idea of tradition).”[23]

7. Conclusion

Hopefully this synthetic review has achieved its main goal: to illustrate how in Del Noce’s view the concept of tradition, despite its apparent simplicity, sits at the intersection of several foundational philosophical questions. This makes it both important and easy to misunderstand. Of course, appealing to tradition has been a recurring feature of most “conservative” responses to the modern world. This is not surprising, considering to what extent modernity has defined itself in terms of the idea of revolution which, as we have seen, can be viewed as the exact antithesis of the idea of tradition. However, one cannot simply oppose revolution and tradition as the preservation of the past, or even the reality of the nation as the repository of values. Contemporary history has demonstrated that even the strongest national traditions crumble unless they are continually “verified” in the life of the people, and Del Noce’s analysis shows that this verification is of an essentially religious nature. Under the onslaught of secular modernity, only a *present* experience of the sacred (of the “eternal”) makes it possible to grasp the content of tradition and vivify it, while mere repetition of formulas is just a

different way of letting tradition die.

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[1] Augusto Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity* (from now on *TCM*) (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 57.

[2] *Ibid.*, 179.

[3] *Ibid.*, 104.

[4] Augusto Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization* (from now on *TAS*) (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 241.

[5] *TCM*, 196.

[6] *Ibid.*, 139.

[7] *Ibid.*, 196.

[8] Augusto Del Noce, *The Problem of Atheism* (from now on *TPA*) (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 59–60.

[9] *TCM*, 196–97.

[10] *Ibid.*, 146.

[11] *TAS*, 142.

[12] *TPA*, 59.

[13] *TCM*, 197.

[14] *TPA*, 289ff.

[15] *TCM*, 57–58.

[16] *Ibid.*, 217.

[17] *TAS*, 155.

[18] *TCM*, 113.

[19] *TCM*, 161.

[20] *TPA*, 118.

[21] *TCM*, 196.

[22] *Ibid.*, 238–39.

[23] *TAS*, 101.

“A Time to Plant”: Traditions in the Home

MARUŠKA HEALY

At the end of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, a group of young boys grieves over the death of their friend. They feel sad and abandoned. Alyosha Karamazov encourages them:

You must know that there is nothing higher, or stronger, or sounder, or more useful afterwards in life, than some good memory, especially a memory from childhood, from the parental home. You hear a lot said about your education, yet some such beautiful, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man stores up many such memories to take into life, then he is saved for his whole life. And even if only one good memory remains with us in our hearts, that alone may serve some day for our salvation.

Alyosha's words touch the hearts of the boys and give them a sense of hope. They share memories of something good and beautiful with their friend who died too soon. Suddenly they are no longer afraid of life. They carry on. If a memory of one single beautiful moment in life can be so powerful, how formative and “salvific” can an entire treasure trove of memories be! Meaningful experiences which are repeated intentionally and lived for the sake of being handed on become traditions.

It is primarily in the family that traditions find fertile ground. These habitual actions and customs create a certain family culture. They are predictable moments of gladness that children can look forward to, anticipate, and prepare for. Whether it is traditions centered on the life of prayer and liturgical celebration, or creative ways of spending time as a family together, traditions transform our everyday experiences into moments of joy. It is in these moments that we witness a glimpse of hope for our broken world. It is in these moments that we realize what it truly means to be human, to live and to love, and to return what was given to us.

An adult has the immediate responsibility to teach and form the child and to hand down traditions to the next generation. But it is through a child that an adult is daily reminded to do so and that he is invited to a deeper understanding of reality.

I recall with gratitude the many memories and traditions that have shaped my life. I was born and raised in Czechoslovakia. Despite the atheistic Communist government in charge, I remember my home country being permeated with a truly Catholic culture. Towns and villages in Europe were built with a church at their center. Walking pilgrimages were a natural part of life, though under Communism they often had to be done secretly. People prayed as they worked in the fields, and marked certain places with little shrines so they would be reminded to pause and pray during the day. Feasting and fasting had their place in the life of the faithful. There was a clear distinction between a weekday and a Sunday. I remember sitting on my grandfather's lap listening to stories, waltzing with him in the living room, watching my grandmother make homemade noodles on the kitchen table, and singing folk songs with her in the afternoons. I remember baking Christmas cookies with my mother and preparing Easter baskets to be blessed on Holy Saturday. I remember countless priests visiting our home. They would share a meal with us, teach secret religion lessons during the Communist rule, and sometimes they

would even take an afternoon nap on the sofa after lunch. My grandfather would have theological discussions with them. I remember *Corpus Christi* processions and visits to convents of various religious orders. The most important events of the year were the celebrations and feasting centered on the liturgical year. These moments were tied to a specific time or a season and provided a certain rhythm to daily life. Despite the Communist regime and people's suffering, there was a certain richness to life—a foretaste of something eternal.

In his lectures at the University of Virginia titled *After Strange Gods*, T.S. Eliot makes an interesting observation about traditions. He says that we become “conscious of their importance, usually only after they have begun to fall into desuetude, as we are aware of the leaves of a tree when the autumn wind begins to blow them off—when they have separately ceased to be vital.” Traditions come with a certain responsibility on our part. Naturally, as a mother, I have a desire to create a home filled with good memories for our children, a home where traditions are kept, celebrated, and lived. But traditions do not simply happen. In most cases they first need to be received by us (although there is certainly a place in each family for new traditions to be discovered and begun in the course of their life together). Traditions need to be repeated over and over again until they become a natural part of our lives. In order to truly transform the heart and make sense to our children, they also need to be explained. And only then, I believe, can they keep the vitality so necessary for their survival. We need to be reminded daily of our own responsibility, otherwise all these good “saving” moments will fall into desuetude.

I find it beautiful and somewhat paradoxical that the preservation of tradition is entrusted both to an adult and to a child. An adult has the immediate responsibility to teach and form the child and to hand down traditions to the next generation. But it is through a child that an adult is daily reminded to do so and that he is invited to a deeper understanding of reality. Children naturally ask questions. They are intrigued by life. They want to embrace it and live it fully. But in order to live it fully, they need to understand it. We need to remember that each new child that is given to us needs to be initiated into the traditions of faith and family life. Sometimes I forget. It is easy to assume that our four-year-old knows how to pray the Hail Mary because all of her older siblings do. But each new child needs to be taught how to pray! With each new child I need to explain why there are four candles on the Advent wreath. With each new child I need to wonder at the miracle of Easter. This act of explaining and pondering the mysteries of our faith keeps my own faith alive and stronger with each new child. The Catholic culture, so deeply present in my home country during my childhood, has disappeared almost entirely. The Czech Republic is now considered one of the most secular countries in the world. We must have forgotten God. Traditions are no longer explained. We no longer have children who remind us to ask. Everything is instant and readily available and we have lost our ability to prepare, to wait, and to truly celebrate.

The renewal of a truly Catholic culture must begin in the home—in and through small steps, done with faithfulness and love. In order to do that, our lives need to be rooted in God, His sacraments, prayer, and silence. We need to “encourage one another daily, while it is still today” (Hebrews 3:13). One concrete way to do this is to encourage one another to celebrate Sundays by keeping them holy and set apart for God and neighbor. As a wife and a mother I experience a deeper joy when I truly keep Sunday—by doing simple things like not going shopping or not doing that load of laundry that can wait one more day. It is oftentimes these small things that begin making a difference. If our families have the courage to keep the Sabbath, we will be actively affecting the world around us, changing it one Sunday at a time.

I am experiencing many memories from my childhood in my own family and with our own children now. Once again, the most fruitful and memorable times are those intimately tied to the celebrations

centered on the liturgical year and the sacraments, a consistent life of prayer, sharing meals together around the table, reading around the fire, or opening our home to others. I hope that our children will remember these moments and wish to embody them in their own families one day. Among the many traditions that we strive to live and celebrate as a family, there are several that have been especially fruitful and that our children embrace with a particular joy. Praying together every night is probably the first one that comes to mind. Every night we pray the Liturgy of the Hours. Sometimes we simply recite Compline, that is, Night Prayer of the Divine Office. Other times we chant it. But every time we gather to say this particular prayer, our children experience something very powerful and profound. Around the whole world, whether you are a lay person or consecrated, in a small mountain village or in a large city, the Church offers us her beautiful prayer to unite us. The same words are prayed by everyone. Children have a deep desire to be a part of this experience! After just a few weeks, they learn the prayers by heart because they hear them repeated over and over again. There is something very comforting about it.

Most of our other family traditions are tied to particular liturgical seasons or feasts of various saints that are dear to us. For example, every day during Lent we pray the Stations of the Cross together. Younger children announce the stations and snuff a small candle after each station's meditation. After the last station, the room is enveloped in darkness. After a moment of silence, we light a large candle to be reminded of Christ's victory over death. Praying the Stations has become part of our family culture, a way that we and our children have learned to experience Lent. During the Advent season, it is the singing of Advent hymns before the fire every night that our children anticipate with joy. This simple tradition has changed our children's understanding of Christmas. Advent music expresses our waiting and longing for the Messiah. It is teaching our children the importance of waiting not only for the gift of Christmas, but for anything good and important in life. The Feast of Saint Martin of Tours (an old European Thanksgiving Feast), celebrated with a juicy roast goose, red wine and singing, is another day in the Church year that our children associate with joy.

All of these moments might seem quite insignificant, but they are like little seeds that we plant day after day. They are rooted in real life. They invite us to enter into the present moment. You never know how life-changing it can be for someone to be included around your table for a meal, for a family Night Prayer, to join you in folk dancing on the lawn or sitting around a bonfire on saints' feast days. The fruits of these moments are often invisible and only unfold in time. But seeds grow slowly and we need to be patient. Our Lord is at work!

Even though the world is crumbling in front of our eyes, there is hope. When I am back in my home country and see the glorious architecture of the churches that still stand in the center of towns, or pass by a little shrine on the side of a road, I know that somewhere deep beneath the surface the country's heart is still beating with life. It is impossible to erase Catholic identity altogether. Someone might notice these visible signs and wonder. Perhaps he will ask questions. And perhaps someone will remember the answers. In our own homes, we can begin now! Even one good memory of something good and beautiful can serve some day for our salvation. The task of sowing the seeds belongs ultimately to God. But he trusts us to be his co-workers and witnesses of joy and life in the world. It is "time to plant" (Ecclesiastes 3:2)!

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