

FORGETTING AS A PRINCIPLE OF CONTINUITY IN TRADITION

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Whether intentionally or not, Catholic tradition frequently fails to take account of, or to remember, beliefs, practices, or objects previously received by the tradition. Such forgetting proves unavoidable, but it can actually help the tradition as a whole to endure in continuity with its origins. The theories of Yves Congar, John Thiel, and Kathryn Tanner on Christian tradition could be strengthened by taking into account this role of forgetting. The argument developed in this article could have significant implications, for example, in ecumenism.

DEI VERBUM, VATICAN II'S DOGMATIC CONSTITUTION on Divine Revelation, states that in what has been handed on from the apostles, "the church perpetuates—in its doctrine, life, and worship—and transmits to all generations everything that it is, everything that it believes." That section goes on to claim that this tradition from the apostles progresses in the church (*in ecclesia proficit*).¹ This progress involves a growth in the perception of the things and words handed on. The growth in question is the church's tending continuously toward the fullness of divine truth, until the end of the world. As Protestant commentators on the council pointed out soon after the publication of *Dei Verbum*, this account is not the whole

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¹ *Dei Verbum* no. 8, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990) 974.

story.² Indeed, at least since the advent of historical-critical exegesis and of the 19th- and 20th-century *ressourcement* movement, some Catholics, too, have known that the church does not always pass on all that it is. It leaves some things behind, at least until it retrieves them.

Even if the final text of *Dei Verbum* does not stress this fact, this section of the constitution does allow for it because of changes to the penultimate draft of the text insisted on by some council fathers. In a commentary on the draft, John Whealon, auxiliary bishop of Cleveland, wrote that “everything” (*ea omnia*) at this place seemed to “exaggerate the concept” of apostolic tradition since many things in today’s church do not come down to us from the apostles.³ Cardinal Paul-Émile Léger’s address on the draft also called for a distinction here in the text between apostolic and post-apostolic traditions.⁴ In his report presenting to the fathers the final emended draft of this section of *Dei Verbum*, Umberto Betti noted that the drafters took the words “all that it has” (*omne quod habet*) out of this very sentence of the earlier draft. They made this modification in order to take account of Whealon’s and Léger’s interventions “so that it would appear more clearly that all and only those things come forth from apostolic Tradition that are substantial to the Church, namely, all that it is, all that it believes.” These two “all” phrases represent the precise wording of

² See Oscar Cullman, “The Bible in the Council,” in *Dialogue on the Way: Protestants Report from Rome on the Vatican Council*, ed. George A. Lindbeck (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965) 129–44, at 132–35 (“errors” that creep into tradition); this article was written before the final text of *Dei Verbum* was approved. See also Kristen Ejner Skydsgaard, “Scripture and Tradition: A Preliminary Study of the Development and Content of the ‘Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum),’” in *Challenge . . . and Response: A Protestant Perspective of the Vatican Council*, ed. Warren A. Quanbeck, Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, and Vilmos Vajta (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966) 25–58, at 38–39, 51–54 (Scripture as the criterion for recognizing false tradition, and tradition as possibly interpreting Scripture falsely); Paul S. Minear, “A Protestant Point of View,” in *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal*, ed. John H. Miller (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1966) 68–88, at 79–80. See, finally, the Montreal Statement’s affirmation that “the traditionary process may operate in either direction, toward entropy or renewal—and there are no infallible differentiae which tell when apparent continuities conceal an actual betrayal or a pseudomorphosis of what was pretended to have been traditioned. . . . Tradition is also the process in which [the Christian] past is fossilized and betrayed” (World Conference on Faith and Order, *The Report of the Theological Commission on Tradition and Traditions*, Faith and Order Paper 40 [Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1963], part 1: “The Renewal of the Christian Tradition: The Report of the North American Section,” section 2: “Our Consensus” 17).

³ *Acta synodalia sacrosancti concilii oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol. 3, part 3 (Vatican City: Typis polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–1978) 507; hereafter cited as *Acta* followed by vol. no., section, and p. nos.

⁴ *Acta* 3.3.183.

the final version approved by the council.⁵ Thus, the drafters meant the final text of *Dei Verbum* no. 8 to allow for, if not to express obviously, the fact that the church's tradition, all the way back to the apostles, leaves behind elements that are not part of the substance of what the church is and believes.⁶

I would like to call that leaving behind "forgetting." In this article I argue three points about forgetting in Catholic tradition. First, the Catholic tradition does indeed forget. The work of many scholars has made this point abundantly plain. Second, Catholic tradition cannot avoid forgetting. Third, some recent theories of tradition could benefit by including this forgetting, paradoxically, among the elements of continuity in Christian tradition. In these three steps I explore the idea of forgetting as a principle of continuity in tradition. The exploratory nature of this study and the limits imposed by a journal article oblige me to leave without detailed examination many questions that my discussion will likely provoke. However, I end this article by briefly adverting to some of the implications and questions flowing from the three main points about forgetting that I make in these pages. My argument will proceed to a great extent through the accumulation of a number of suggestive analogies that point to the positive role that forgetting can play in

⁵ *Acta* 4.1.353. The sentence in question goes from saying *sicque Ecclesia . . . omne illud perpetuat cunctisque generationibus transmittit quod ipsa est, omne quod habet, omne quod credit* to saying *sicque Ecclesia . . . perpetuat cunctisque generationibus transmittit omne quod est, omne quod credit*. See *ibid.* 349. Betti's explanation for dropping "*omne quod habet*," while keeping "*omne . . . quod ipsa est*," implies that the church *is substantially* what it is—holy, for example—but that the church merely *has* features that are not part of its substance. In the background here lies, perhaps, Aristotle's distinction between having as an accident (*hexis*, which becomes *habitus* in Latin) and being as a substance (*ousia*, which becomes, according to the context, *essentia* or *substantia* in Latin). In this article, I will capitalize "church" only when it occurs in a title, is capitalized in a source I am quoting or translating, or is part of a proper noun.

⁶ Here, though without saying so, the drafters of the final text of *Dei Verbum* seem to leave room for claims made in Cardinal Albert Meyer's intervention of fall 1964, in which he called for inclusion of the notion that the tradition is not always and everywhere growing to perfection and that, at least in some of its ecclesial subjects, the tradition can be defective. See *Acta* 3.3.150–51. This speech is cited by Skydsgaard, "Scripture and Tradition" 38–39. Here and elsewhere in this article, I use the terms "substance" and "substantial" to refer to the defining content passed on and received by Christian tradition. In this sense, the substance of the Christian tradition is what makes it what it is, what makes it identically Christian across the differences of times and places. In this usage I am following the example of the *Acta* of Vatican II to which I refer in this article; they use "substance" for this reality more often than they use "essence" for it. I will use "essential" in my presentation of Congar's theory of tradition later on. In that place I explain in a note the meaning of that term.

passing on the tradition.⁷ Cultivating this sort of rigor leads me here to a kind of argumentation that is suggestive and deliberately highlights the paradoxical.

Before setting out on the path just laid out, I should make a few more remarks on what I mean by two terms essential for my argument: “forgetting” and “continuity.” As I use the former term here, a church can forget without the intent to suppress something from the tradition. Intentionally ceasing to do or to believe something and moving on to something else can let that first thing slip from our collective or individual memories without any express intention of suppressing the prior practice or belief. Of course, a church can intentionally drop something from its tradition, as in the reforms of various Christian liturgies in the 20th century.⁸ The church can also avoid remembering one thing by attending to something else, and in this way it can forget. For example, by attending to the “peculiar institution” of slavery in this country, the Catholic Church in many places settled into separate congregations for its black and white members, respectively, and it here avoided remembering something central about the equal dignity before God and people of all the baptized and of all human beings. We can have difficulty deciding just how intentional such forgetting is.⁹ This article focuses on the sort of forgetting that we can define as failing to take account of something known or failing to remember it, whether this failure is intentional or not. I hope to show that this modest, perhaps simplistic, notion of forgetting can help us to understand better the way church tradition functions.¹⁰

“Continuity” can name a feature of beliefs or practices that last over time in a relatively stable form and that thereby become invested with authority by the church. But the continuity this article principally treats

⁷ Some might wish to compare this strategy of argument to what John Henry Newman called the “*accumulation* of probabilities” from which one can construct “legitimate proof, sufficient for certitude” in “religious inquiry” (*An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. I. T. Ker [New York: Clarendon 1985] 265 [= 411–12 in 2nd ed., London: Longmans, Green, 1895]).

⁸ I thank Ralph Del Colle for drawing my attention to the appositeness of this fact here.

⁹ One might wonder whether there is any difference between this sort of forgetting and what might be called selective remembering. This is a terminological point that my argument need not settle here. It suffices to note that this sort of forgetting fits with the definition I give in the next-to-last sentence of this paragraph.

¹⁰ According to Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “when . . . a person that has undergone intellectual, moral, and religious conversion” engages in the functional specialty of dialectic, “he will be presenting an idealized version of the past, something better than was the reality” (*Method in Theology* [Toronto: University of Toronto, 1999] 251). One might wonder whether something like the forgetting I discuss here is necessarily involved in this process.

is that of the Christian tradition as a whole, and not that of one or another of its particular beliefs or practices. Indeed, the last of the three points I want to make in this essay is that the forgetting of beliefs or practices or other elements of Christian tradition belongs among the factors contributing to the continuity of that tradition as a whole. What I mean by the continuity of Christian tradition as a whole is a quality that distinguishes Christian tradition as a whole, precisely as a reality that lasts over time since its origins, from other traditions that have ceased to exist. The continuity of the whole of Christian tradition distinguishes that tradition from, for example, the cultural tradition of one of the many peoples in the Eastern Mediterranean to disappear by the tumultuous end of the Bronze Age. While elements of these cultures may indeed survive to this day, no one survives to claim himself or herself as a participant in the cultural traditions precisely of these vanished peoples. However, the Christian church still exists, and we find a large number of people who claim themselves as participants in the Christian tradition. On this point the Christian tradition differs from these Bronze Age cultural traditions because the former still has continuity, while the latter do not. Continuity here is in something as its quality of lasting over time since its origins, and the Bronze Age traditions in question here no longer last, while the Christian tradition does.

Some might claim that Christian tradition has changed so much that it has lost all continuity with its origins. Assessing this claim belongs to an investigation other than the one I propose here, which begins with the supposition that Christian tradition as a whole has retained substantial continuity with its origins. This continuity lies behind the Christian confession of the church's apostolicity. It is among the factors of this same continuity that I wish to place the forgetting of certain elements of Christian tradition. By doing so, I will claim that such forgetting of certain things that occurs within Christian tradition helps that tradition as a whole to last over time. While Christians notoriously disagree with one another about the exact contours of Christian tradition as a whole, the argument in this essay should be able to apply to various conceptions of Christian tradition as a whole that are formulated or presupposed in these disagreements.

This article does not really describe how continuity in tradition happens. Such a description might well require a treatment of the theological problem of continuity per se. A treatment of this sort would try to explain how the church's belief in apostolic continuity can be reconciled with the gaps in the historical record for so many of the beliefs and practices claimed as apostolically continuous. This type of explanation belongs elsewhere since I am not here offering an *ex professo* description of how tradition is continuous. I do, however, attempt to show, among other things, that forgetting contributes to continuity in tradition.

CHURCH TRADITION FORGETS

While the church passes on what it is and believes through its tradition, that “what it is and believes” changes as the church forgets some of what it has previously handed on. That such forgetting occurs is the first and easiest thing I want to show. The biblical, liturgical, and patristico-medieval *ressourcement* movements of the 19th and 20th centuries all discovered that the church had forgotten many things about Scripture, about its own public prayer, and about its doctrine, way of living, and institutions. In all these areas, critical history and philology led to these discoveries of forgetting. Thanks to the integration of historical studies into standard theological formation, any well-trained theologian can easily list ten things the church failed to pass on, at least for a while, because, sometimes inadvertently, it did not take account of them or remember them.

From Yves Congar’s 1950 study on church reform, one can conclude that the church has a tendency to forget in two ways.¹¹ First, the church tends to mistake a mere expression of its substance for that substance itself, or to take the means to the church’s end as that end itself. Some have asked, How can we be Catholic if we do not say the rosary? One might say that Christians asking this question might be forgetting something about the substance of the church because they misconstrue the rosary for an essential part of that substance. Someone might wonder, How can we be one with God if we are not participating in an anti-war group? One could think such a person forgets something about the church’s goal, union with God, because he or she mistakes a means to that goal for the goal itself. In a second manner, the church also tends to forget by misconstruing as fidelity to its origins the resistance toward a needed adaptation to a changed historical context. Fourth-century pastors asked, How can we be Christian if we allow people to undergo the church’s penitential rites more than once in a lifetime?¹² One could judge that these pastors were forgetting something about the shining forth of divine mercy through human flesh that forms part of the divine origin of the Christian movement.

Although such forgetting about the church’s substance, goal, and originating inspiration does seem to occur, *Dei Verbum* states that the church passes on all it is and believes in the tradition that stems from the apostles. The constitution also affirms that there is a growth in the perception and

¹¹ Yves Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l’Église*, 2nd rev. ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1968) 143–78.

¹² See Jean Gaudemet, *L’Église dans l’Empire romain (IV^e-V^e siècles)*, rev. ed., *Histoire du droit et des institutions de l’Église en Occident* (Paris: Sirey, 1989) 676–77; Joseph G. Mueller, *L’Ancien Testament dans l’ecclésiologie des Pères: Une lecture des Constitutions apostoliques, Instrumenta patristica et mediaevalia* 41 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005) 359–63.

understanding of the realities passed on. According to Archbishop Ermenegildo Florit's report on the proposed modifications of the final draft considered by the Doctrinal Commission, *Dei Verbum* means at least two things by these statements. First, the divinely originated substance of the church has been transmitted from the apostles on down such that we cannot say that something substantially new has been added to it. Second, the growth in perception and understanding is the acquisition of a more perfect clarity and explicitness in the expression of the divinely originated substance of the church's life. Through this more perfect perception of them, the elements of the church's substance transmitted by tradition—in liturgy, doctrine, the *mores ecclesiae*, etc.—are changed for the better without thereby ceasing to form the same ecclesial substance that existed at the time of the apostles.¹³ We can thus conclude that this substance has not been replaced by something else in the process.

We need not deny anything in the preceding paragraph when we affirm that the church has at many times forgotten something about its substance. Such forgetting takes the form of a deterioration of our understanding or perception of elements in the church's substance that we continue to pass on. This deterioration can happen even while growth is taking place. In fact, the latter can occasion the former. Once the church arrived at the clarity of the Nicene *homoousion* (a growth in understanding of a part of Christianity's substance), it forgot something about how to read many Gospel passages portraying Jesus' human weakness (a deterioration of understanding about an element of Christianity's substance). The fourth-century Nicenes' innovative and strained exegesis of these passages proves the point that progress and unintended decline in understanding can occur at the same time on the same point of doctrine, on the same element of the church's traditional substance—in this case on the identity of Jesus. A new understanding of this substantial point of Christian tradition occasioned a forgetting of something about it.

Irenaeus finds no embarrassment in admitting Christ's ignorance of the day of judgment and in comparing this ignorance to our ignorance of the manner of his being begotten of the Father.¹⁴ Tertullian uses Christ's ignorance of the day of judgment to show the manner of the Son's distinction from the Father.¹⁵ But pro-Nicene Cappadocians think that asserting the ignorance of Christ on this point amounts to a false allegation. Fighting the Anomeans who take Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32 as a pretext to assert the subordination of the Son to the Father, they have to engage in a somewhat convoluted exegesis to show that these passages do not assert

¹³ *Acta* 4.5.740.

¹⁵ Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 26.

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 2.28.6–7.

that Jesus did not know the day of judgment.¹⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus admits the ignorance of the Son only according to the economy of his lowly incarnation, that is, only in his humanity, but not according to his divine nature.¹⁷ Even here, post-Nicene thinking can no longer abide distinguishing the trinitarian Father and Son as Tertullian did, by the knowledge of the former and the ignorance of the latter. Similarly, after Augustine, the West no longer remembers that the second- and third-century tradition of seeing the Son as the visible divine person showing himself in Old Testament theophanies could actually help to save the Trinity from heretical deformations. Following the great bishop of Hippo, the West after him will avoid as redolent of subordinationist heterodoxy the idea that the visible preincarnate Son himself appeared in the Old Testament theophanies.¹⁸

Henri de Lubac observed in the 1930s that changes in the way the church's tradition applied the body of Christ idea to Jesus, the Eucharist, and the church eventually occasioned the almost total abandonment by the church's theology of a really symbolic approach to the Eucharist and of an appreciation for the mysterious character of the church. Unless the church had already forgotten how to perceive it, de Lubac could not have called his fellow Christians to "relearn from our Fathers . . . to see present in the unique Sacrifice the unity of the 'three bodies' of Christ."¹⁹ De Lubac

¹⁶ Fragment 5 in Amphilochius, *Amphilochii Iconiensis opera: Orationes, pluraque alia quae supersunt, nonnulla etiam spuria*, Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca 3 (hereafter CCG), ed. Cornelis Datema (Turnhout: Brepols, 1978) 232–33; Basil of Caesarea, Letter 236.1–2; Gregory of Nyssa, "Adversus Arium et Sabellium de Patre et Filio," in *Gregorii Nysseni opera*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. F. Mueller (Leiden: Brill, 1958) 84–85. The forgetting of the pre-Nicene exegesis will last a long time; see Anselm of Canterbury's arguments showing that Christ could not have been ignorant in his human nature (*Cur Deus homo* 2.13). It took the historical-critical renewal of biblical interpretation to bring back the forgotten acceptance of Jesus' ignorance.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 29.18; 30.15–16.

¹⁸ Contrast Justin's (*Dialogue with Trypho* 54–65; *First Apology* 36), Irenaeus' (e.g., *Adv. haer.* 4.7; 4.9.1; 4.20), Tertullian's (e.g., *Adv. Prax.* 13–14), Novatian's (*De trinitate* 17–19 and 26), and Cyprian's (*Ad Quirinum* 2.5–6; 2.19) interpretations of the Old Testament theophanies with Augustine's explanations of them in his *De trinitate*, Books 2–3. See also Augustine, Letters 92, 147, and 148. The East will continue to follow the more ancient reading of the theophanies; see, for example, this most likely sixth-century text: J. H. Declerck, *Anonymus dialogus cum Iudaeis saeculi ut videtur sexti*, CCG 30 (Turnhout: Brepols; Leuven: University Press, 1994) III, lines 41–169, pp. 23–27; see also John of Damascus's first oration against the iconoclasts, chaps. 21–22 (*Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. 3, Patristische Texte und Studien 17, ed. Bonifatius Kotter [New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1975] 107–11).

¹⁹ Henri de Lubac, *Corpus mysticum: L'Eucharistie et l'Église au Moyen Âge: Étude historique*, *Théologie* 3, 2nd ed., rev. (Paris: Aubier, 1949) 293. The preface to the first edition is dated 1939; this edition represents the fruit of a course de

explicitly evoked *l'oubli du dogme*, “the forgetting of dogma” by the church itself, in his attempt to understand how so many non-Catholics could think of Catholicism as an individualistic religion.²⁰ Among many others, Geoffrey Wainwright noted that “twentieth-century biblical and patristic scholarship has . . . delivered to us a more ancient understanding of the notion of ‘memorial.’”²¹ Such scholarship would never have had to deliver this ancient understanding to us in the first place if we had not forgotten it. Thus, Wainwright calls this delivery a “categorical rediscovery.”²²

In a collection published in English under the title *Laity, Church, and World*, Congar furnished us with another example of the church’s forgetting something about its substance. He “blamed the rise of legalism” in church life “on a collective forgetting of the relationship of service and subordination.”²³ On the theme of subordination, the church might well have forgotten, throughout its entire exegetical tradition until the 20th century, an important aspect of the teaching on marriage in Ephesians 5:21–33. Adopting a position taken by J. Paul Sampley, Rudolf Schnackenburg, and Luke Timothy Johnson, Pope John Paul II interpreted this passage as teaching that husbands and wives should be mutually subject to each other.²⁴ If this position correctly interprets the meaning of the author of this letter, it shows that virtually all Christian interpreters from the first

Lubac taught in the winter of 1937–1938. To gauge how well the Catholic Church has done this relearning over the past seven decades, see, for example, Avery Dulles, “The Church as Body of Christ,” in *Pope John Paul II on the Body, Human, Eucharistic, Ecclesial: Festschrift Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.*, ed. John M. McDermott and John Gavin (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University, 2007) 155–65.

²⁰ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicisme: Les aspects sociaux du dogme*, 7th ed., Traditions chrétiennes 13 (Paris: Cerf, 1983) ix–x.

²¹ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Is the Reformation Over?* Père Marquette Lecture in Theology 2000 (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2000) 28–29.

²² *Ibid.* 27.

²³ A. N. Williams, “Congar’s Theology of the Laity,” in *Yves Congar: Theologian of the Church*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 32, ed. Gabriel Flynn (Louvain: Peeters, 2005) 135–59, at 150 n. 63, where Williams cites *Laity, Church, and World: Three Addresses by Yves Congar*, trans. Donald Attwater (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1960) 31.

²⁴ See his general audience of August 4, 1982, in John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline, 1997) 309–11; John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* nos. 23–27. See also J. Paul Sampley, “*And the Two Shall Become One Flesh*”: *A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21–33* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1971) 114–21; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary*, trans. Helen Heron (1982; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991) 242–45, 257; and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 378–79.

to the mid-20th century, including giants like Theodoret of Cyrrhus and Thomas Aquinas, had forgotten what Ephesians was attempting to hand on here.²⁵ Of course, some exegetes dispute the position taken up by John Paul II, Sampley, Schnackenburg, and Johnson.²⁶ But much contemporary exegesis, including feminist approaches, claims to find meanings intended by biblical authors almost never perceived by the church's exegetical tradition. If any of these claims have validity, then we can trace some examples of the forgetting I am talking about here back to the very beginnings of postapostolic Christian tradition.

The church can also forget elements of tradition that we would not want to think of as belonging to the substance of what the church is and believes. John Noonan has convincingly shown a fact that most people have forgotten, namely, that the church approved of slavery, and this for a very long time.²⁷ We can understand better how much the church forgets of what is other than its traditional substance by recalling one of the kinds of things that Congar called "monuments of tradition." In this regard, he speaks of "the gestures and customs in which the Christian spirit is expressed in acts that constitute the ordinary weave of people's lives: birth and death, child-

²⁵ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Interpretatio in xiv epistulas sancti Pauli*, PG 82, col. 545, notes that Ephesians 5:21 applies to all Christians, and he sees 5:22-6:9 as specifying this "common law" (*koinēn tēn . . . nomothesian*). But Theodoret does not apply mutual subjection explicitly to marriage. He says that wives should not revere their husbands in the way that God alone deserves, but this does not exclude for him a one-way reverence and submission owed by wives to their husbands. Thus, he can take Genesis 3:16 as a "law" that illumines Paul's meaning in Ephesians 5:22-33 (col. 549). Thomas Aquinas, *Super epistolam ad Ephesios lectura*, in *Super epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, vol. 2, 7th rev. ed., ed. Raphael Cai (Turin: Marietti, 1953) chap. 5, lect. 8, sect. 316, p. 74, sums up the passage in Ephesians 5: "First, he cautions the women to be subject. Second, he admonishes the men to love" (my translation). Aquinas notes that Paul thinks this love is to be mutual, but Aquinas believes that the husband's superiority to his wife draws him naturally to love her more than the parents to whom he is subject; see chap. 5, lect. 10, sect. 333, p. 76.

²⁶ For example, Sarah J. Tanzer, "Ephesians," in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 2, *A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 325-48, at 333-35; Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, *Sacra Pagina* 17 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2000) 341.

²⁷ John T. Noonan Jr., *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2005) 110-23. One might well ask whether the church's present-day forgetfulness of its past support of slavery has fostered a naïve and therefore harmful belief in the charism of magisterial authority. Many have interpreted the modern change in the church's teaching on slavery as a substitution of Enlightenment thought for scriptural doctrine (for example, in Paul's letters). In no way does this article imply or endorse the idea that this sort of substitution would come fairly easily and without anxiety-provoking consequences.

hood and old age, love and the home, sickness and hospitality for the poor, feast days, work and its fruits, etc. . . . Whatever concerns the way the faith spreads out, socially, into human common life and fashions for itself there a body in which Christians are formed and a Christian culture continues.”²⁸ My grandparents, rural U.S. Catholics without high school education who still spoke German at home before this country entered World War II, practiced then and there many things answering to this description that are totally unknown to me, who grew up in a modestly prosperous suburb without knowing German and with the certitude that I would go to college. Just think of how thoroughly the church has forgotten so many other analogous Christian practices from the Middle Ages or the patristic era. Scholarly research can and does rediscover some of them, but even then, the fruits of such study do not always penetrate very deeply into the everyday life of the church. Historians recognize wistfully how fragmentary and hypothetical their reconstructions of these periods are, which can only leave them convinced that many, if not most, of these monuments of Christian tradition from daily life still lie forgotten.

I want to be clear that the forgetting discussed here can really hurt the church, even if it does not kill it, by changing its substance to that of something else. Having forgotten the many attempts, in the aftermath of Chalcedon, at union with churches that had not received this council, the Catholics and Eastern (Byzantine and Slavic) Orthodox condemned until recently the Oriental Orthodox churches as “monophysite” and relegated them to the dustbin of heretics. This forgetting delayed for 15 centuries the finding that these Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches share a complementarity of the faith in Christ, despite their diversity in doctrinal formulations.²⁹ We are still smarting from having forgotten that the difference between the *filioque* and the doctrine of the procession of the Spirit from the Father need not divide the church. The late medieval Western church’s forgetting of the preaching of the gospel occasioned splits among Christians that handicapped that church’s evangelization precisely when it could reach literally around the world for the first time. This handicap has endured for over a quarter of the church’s lifespan. How gravely has the modern church suffered from its frequent forgetting of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body in favor of a belief in only the immortality of

²⁸ “Les gestes et les coutumes dans lesquels s’exprime l’esprit chrétien dans les actes qui font la trame ordinaire de la vie des hommes: la naissance et la mort, l’enfance et la vieillesse, l’amour et le foyer, la maladie et l’accueil des pauvres, les fêtes, le travail et ses fruits, etc. . . . Il s’agit du rayonnement que la foi prend, socialement, dans la vie humaine commune: elle s’y façonne un corps dans lequel des chrétiens se forment, et une chrétienté continue” (Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions: Essai théologique* [Paris: Le Signe—Fayard, 1963] 206).

²⁹ I owe the idea for this example to Jaroslav Z. Skira.

the soul? Even if it does not simply denature the church, our forgetting how to understand elements of the church's substance that we pass on can deeply wound our communion. If a greater perception of things and words passed on does not remain external to them but becomes a proper element of them,³⁰ so, too, a forgetful degeneration of insight into the content that tradition passes on does not remain external to that content but distorts it in some way. Becoming aware that church tradition forgets and that this forgetting can distort the church's hold on the very substance of Christianity, one might anxiously be tempted to treat such forgetting simply as a danger to flee at all costs.

FORGETTING: AN INEVITABLE FACTOR IN THE CONTINUITY OF TRADITION

Nonetheless, my second principal claim in this study affirms that the church has no way to avoid this forgetting entirely, because it helps to keep tradition going. What I mean to claim here is that the forgetting of certain elements of Christian tradition represents one of the factors contributing to the continuity of Christian tradition as a whole. To make this point, I reflect on four themes: Congar's theory of church reform, the characteristics of oral culture, the necessity of forgetting for the proper functioning of an individual's memory, and Nietzsche's essay on the utility and liability of historical study.

Congar's Theory of Reform

In a recent article on Congar's theory of reform, I attempted to show that even our attempts to reform the church in order to overcome our ecclesial forgetting necessarily bring us to forget something else about the church's substance that we continue to pass on.³¹ Congar notes that that permanent substance only exists and is understood in one or another of its instantiations in a contingent social, political, economic, and ideological situation of the church's life. But he believes that this contextualization always prevents the full existence and understanding of this substance. He observes further that when the historical situations that hold back Christianity's substance are left behind, this substance is incarnated in new historical situations that bind it in a new way.³² From these positions of Congar, I concluded in my article that in the very effort to adapt the church's life to

³⁰ *Acta* 4.5.740.

³¹ Joseph G. Mueller, "Blindness and Forgetting: The Prophet-Reformer in Yves Congar's *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église*," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 34 (2007) 641–56, at 647–48.

³² Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme* 175–76.

a new historical situation, reformers both liberate and bind Christianity's understanding of its structural core. Each reformed historical incarnation of Christianity highlights in a new way a previously insufficiently understood aspect of the Christian substance, while casting another aspect that people previously understood into an oblivion of incomprehension.³³

If I am right about all this, the reformers and those to be reformed need each other. Each group can remind the other of what it is forgetting. Recognizing this mutual need is a condition for full communion between reformers and those they would reform. Furthermore, if forgetting is a necessary feature of any reform, every reform calls for another.³⁴ Thus, forgetting becomes a constant aspect of the tradition in a church that reforms itself. *Ecclesia semper reformanda semper oblitura est*. Forgetting is one of the ways a self-reforming tradition always works. In this respect, forgetting keeps that tradition going.

Orality of Tradition

The kinship between tradition and oral culture opens another window on how forgetting works in favor of the continuity of tradition. In his *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong made the point that "oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance."³⁵ By using the term "homeostasis," Ong suggests that forgetting here functions to maintain a dynamically stable state within an oral cultural system because sloughing off memories without present relevance constitutes a regulatory process that is internal to the culture and that tends to counteract any disturbance of the culture's stability by external forces or influences. The stable state thus maintained is an aspect of the culture's continuity, that is, its lasting over time since its origins. Thus, Ong implies that forgetting memories bereft of present relevance represents a factor contributing to the continuity of those cultures. David Rubin confirms the phenomenon discussed by Ong. Rubin notes that singers in oral traditions sometimes report that they pass on their repertoire unchanged even as they vary it in a limited way to suit themselves or their audiences in a manner that aids its long-term stability.³⁶ In oral

³³ For the claim that a similar dynamic functioned in the history of tradition about the eucharistic and ecclesial body of Christ, see de Lubac, *Corpus mysticum* 288–94.

³⁴ Mueller, "Blindness and Forgetting" 450–52.

³⁵ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, New Accents (New York: Methuen, 1982) 46.

³⁶ David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epics, Ballads, and Counting-Out Rhymes* (New York: Oxford University, 1995) 6–7.

cultures the different retellings of a myth tend to fuse into one in people's memory, and because no fixed textual reference exists as a standard of correction, variations constantly insinuate themselves into performances of a myth, partly since people forget some of the content of the myth, and partly because they make unconscious attempts to adapt that content. Anthropologist Jack Goody concludes that "much cultural transmission has to be of this kind" because "in many cases perfect reproduction is not even aimed at."³⁷ Noting that literate cultures long maintain many of the characteristics of their oral antecedents, Ong pointed out examples of such homeostasis found in "high-technology culture" in which "literate" live and work.³⁸ While admitting that Christian tradition has been literate since its inception, Ong recognized that it has always continued "to authenticate the primacy of the oral in many ways."³⁹ I want to suggest that one of those ways is the homeostatic function by which Christian tradition sloughs off some of its store of memories in order to maintain its own continuity over time.

Now since the patristic era, orality has characterized tradition insofar as the church has paired the latter with Scripture. A look at Basil of Caesarea's classic treatment of tradition at the end of his work on the Holy Spirit attests this fact, as do 20th-century studies of ancient Christian notions of tradition.⁴⁰ Decree 1 of the Council of Trent's fourth session notes that the "truth and discipline" that flow from the gospel as from a source are "contained in written books and in traditions without writing" that "have come down to us as having been received from the mouth of Christ himself by the apostles or as having been passed on as if through hands by the apostles themselves at the dictation of the Holy Spirit."⁴¹

³⁷ Jack Goody, "Memory in Oral Tradition," in *Memory*, ed. Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson, Darwin College Lectures (New York: Cambridge University, 1998) 86–93, at 90.

³⁸ Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 47; see also 59–61, 63 for other examples of homeostasis in literate cultures. Ong repeatedly indicates in literate Western cultures of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and modern period, even up to the 1960s, the survival of characteristics of a culture totally ignorant of writing. See *ibid.* 6, 26, 41, 67–70, 171. Thus, he denies that orality is "completely eradicable" (*ibid.* 175).

³⁹ *Ibid.* 75.

⁴⁰ Basil of Caesarea, *Sur le Saint-Esprit*, ed. Benoît Pruche, Sources chrétiennes 17 bis (Paris: Cerf, 1968) chaps. 27 and 29, pp. 479–91, 501–19. See also Mueller, *L'Ancien Testament dans l'ecclésiologie des Pères* 481 and the studies cited in the notes there.

⁴¹ "Veritatem et disciplinam contineri in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus, quae ab ipsius christi ore ab apostolis acceptae aut ab ipsis apostolis spiritu sancto dictante quasi per manus traditae ad nos usque pervenerunt ("Decretum primum: recipiuntur libri sancti et traditiones apostolorum"), in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 2:663).

Vatican I uses the same expressions.⁴² Vatican II endorses its own version of this distinction when, in *Dei Verbum* no. 7, it sets in parallel two ways in which the apostolic age transmitted what God had revealed: tradition by oral preaching, examples, and institutions, on the one hand, and composition of writings, on the other.⁴³ No. 8 of the constitution begins with a reinforcement of this oral/written dichotomy by alluding to 2 Thessalonians 2:15, as it recalls Paul admonishing Christians to hold to the apostolic preaching they had learned whether by discourse or by letter.⁴⁴

Thus, the association of Christian tradition with orality should lead us to expect that, insofar as it differs from merely keeping sacred books in a safe, this tradition must keep its balance and thus maintain its continuity in part by constantly forgetting things passed on from the previous generation. We should expect this balance through forgetting even though Christian tradition now exists in many places in a culture of literacy, for we still pass on much of our tradition in ways characteristic of oral cultures. I suspect that in the new world of visual and information culture we are supposed to be so bravely entering functions in the same way. Simply to get through the day's e-mail, many people must forget impressive amounts of the even more impressive amount of information presented to them. Thus, as Christian tradition appropriates this visual and digital culture to transmit all that the church is and believes (witness the late telegenic pontiff and the ubiquity of church Web sites), that transmission must continue to occasion lapses of memory and understanding for the sake of the long-term stability of the tradition.

One might wish to claim that, without print, forgetting means the incapacity ever to retrieve what someone has forgotten. If this were true, there would be no *ressourcement* without textual *sources* to which to return. On the other hand, we have all had the experience of having forgotten something for which we had no written record and then of having recalled it after we had jogged our memory, again without consulting written sources. Oral cultures have a traditional lore on just this way of making forgetting

⁴² See *Dei Filius*, chap. 2 where *haec . . . supernaturalis revelatio* takes the place of *veritatem et disciplinam* in Vatican I's citation of this sentence from Trent (*Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 2:806).

⁴³ "Tum . . . in praedicatione orali, exemplis et institutionibus . . . tradiderunt . . . tum . . . scriptis mandaverunt" (*ibid.* 2:973–74).

⁴⁴ "And thus the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, had to be conserved by a continuous succession until the end of the time. For this reason the apostles . . . admonish the faithful to hold on to the traditions that they have learned whether through discourse or through letter" ("Itaque praedicatio apostolica, quae in inspiratis libris speciali modo exprimitur, continua successione usque ad consummationem temporum conservari debeat. Unde apostoli . . . fideles monent ut teneant traditiones quas sive per sermonem sive per epistolam didicerint" [*ibid.* 2:974]).

only temporary. One can find written traces of some of this oral lore in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. His presentation of the second meditation of the first week suggests that one bring back into memory one's past sins by bringing to mind the places where one lived, the sorts of relations one had with others, and the sorts of occupations one had at various times in the past.⁴⁵ Be all of this as it may, if the Christian tradition remembers what it has forgotten through written records, as in the *ressourcement* movements I mentioned earlier, this fact does not keep that tradition from needing to maintain its continuity in part by a homeostatic forgetting that is a surviving characteristic of oral culture. Of course, my argument in this paragraph turns in part on the analogy between individual memory and tradition, an idea that at this point needs explicit treatment.

Analogy between Tradition and Individual Memory

If tradition is collective memory, as many have thought, we can expect forgetting to be necessary for it.⁴⁶ Indeed, we build the notion of collective memory from an analogy between societies lasting over time and individual persons retaining their identity through their memory. But the annals of psychology contain the fascinating case of the sufferings of a person who could forget almost nothing. In a book translated under the title *The Mind of a Mnemonist*, the eminent 20th-century Russian psychologist, Aleksandr Luria, told the story of a certain Solomon Veniaminovich Sheresheveskii, whom Luria called simply "S" to shield his identity while he was still alive. After years of experiments and conversations with S, Luria noted that he seemed endowed with a memory limited neither in its capacity nor in the durability of traces it retained.⁴⁷ S achieved feats of recall nearly defying belief because his memory was almost entirely concrete and particular and because his perception and memory intention were synesthetic, that is, he

⁴⁵ *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. George E. Ganss, Jesuit Primary Sources in English Translations 9 (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992) 43.

⁴⁶ See Congar, *La Tradition: Essai historique* 83–86. According to Lieven Boeve, "the tradition . . . is the collective-constitutive memory of the Church that, as memory, must remain present in our reflection as the impulse and legitimation of the continuation of the same tradition" (*Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 30 [Dudley, Mass.: Peeters, 2003] 64). Boeve offers nowhere in his book an argument to justify this affirmation. Here one sees the obviousness with which tradition can seem, to contemporary theology, a social analogue to individual memory.

⁴⁷ A. R. Luria, *The Mind of a Mnemonist: A Little Book about a Vast Memory*, trans. Lynn Solotaroff (New York: Basic, 1968) 11–12, 34–35, for example.

could sense and remember the smell of colors, the temperature of tastes, the color of sounds and words, etc.

But the functioning of his memory left him with difficulties that one can only attribute—as paradoxical as this might sound—to an inability to forget. He could not logically organize the things he knew and remembered and had great difficulty in understanding abstract ideas, while the constant flood of superfluous and vivid sensory memories made any growth toward higher understanding a great challenge.⁴⁸ His inability to select his remembering according to significant detail led him to have great difficulty in reading simple stories, as many swirling details and remembered associations imposed themselves on his attention to each word or phrase. As one might suspect, having a memory that did not forget handicapped him, such that he had to quit many jobs, among them his position as a journalist. S, in fact, had to learn how to forget some of the chaotically crowding details that surged from his memory to claim his attention.⁴⁹ The power of his vivid, stable, and recurring memories—many going as far back as his infancy—tended to become “the dominant element in his awareness,” scattering his attention to texts he tried to read, to tasks he became incapable of doing, or even to conversing with people in front of him.⁵⁰ This situation, of course, made it hard for S to take in and follow directions and to be on time, which again made for a difficult employment history, until he hit on the idea of making a living on the stage as a mnemonist.⁵¹

The painful life of this man who could not forget reveals what many psychologists have proven through countless experiments in less tragic settings: memory cannot function correctly unless it engages in some

⁴⁸ Ibid. 58, 135–36.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 67–72, 113, 123.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 114, also 116, 130, 135, 155–56.

⁵¹ On S's frequent tardiness due to the invasive memory of a given position of clock hands long after they had moved ahead, see *ibid.* 152. In a case similar to that of S, a 42-year-old woman has experienced continuous and unstoppable invasive autobiographical recall of each day of her life since the age of 14. See Elizabeth Parker, Larry Cahill, and James L. McGaugh, “A Case of Unusual Autobiographical Remembering,” *Neurocase* 12 (2006) 35–49; Jill Price, as told to Burt Davis, *The Woman Who Can't Forget: The Extraordinary Story of Living with the Most Remarkable Memory Known to Science: A Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2008). Price's memories keep her from sleeping well, and she suffers greatly from invasive memories of bad experiences, although she gains support for difficult times by recalling good experiences of the past. She was a poor student, and, like S, she has trouble grasping abstract concepts and analogies. See also the unforgettable, and unforgetting, title character in Jorge Luis Borges's story “Funes, the Memorious,” in Borges, *Ficciones*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan, ed. John Sturrock, intro. John Sturrock (1942; London: Everyman's Library, 1993) 83–91. The fictional portrait Borges paints of Funes resembles Luria's descriptions of S.

forgetting.⁵² In order to equip people for the tasks of living, human memory must be able to forget.⁵³ Therefore, if Christian tradition is the church's collective memory that equips people for the daily tasks involved in following Christ, we can expect that tradition to function well, in part, by forgetting to pass on some objects, practices, beliefs, customs, or understandings that have previously served to incarnate and inculcate the way of the Lord Jesus. Passing on the tradition would then require that we forget to pass on some of its elements. Thus, on the supposition that the analogy between individual memory and tradition as collective memory holds even in this domain of forgetting, if Christian tradition did not forget, it would paralyze the church and thus destroy itself. Once again, forgetting would represent a needed factor of continuity in the tradition, a factor that keeps tradition going.⁵⁴

Nietzsche on the Utility and Liability of History

We have explored the inevitability of forgetting and its contribution to the continuity of tradition according to the insights stemming from the theology of church reform, as well as from the social psychology of orality and the individual psychology of memory. We can thus readily perceive the pertinence of Nietzsche's essay *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life* for the argument of my article.⁵⁵ In this work, Nietzsche claimed

⁵² See Gérard Emilien et al., *Memory: Neuropsychological, Imaging, and Psychopharmacological Perspectives* (New York: Psychology, 2004) 39; "Forgetting," in Carol Turkington and Joseph R. Harris, *The Encyclopedia of Memory and Memory Disorders*, 2nd ed. (New York: Facts on File, 2001) 92–93; Daniel L. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) 187–91; Endel Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory*, Oxford Psychology 2 (New York: Oxford University, 1983) 17–120, on semantic memory as recall of generic facts independent of the specific episode in one's life when one learned them. S could not recall things in this way very well.

⁵³ Compare Paul Ricoeur's notion of a type of forgetting that is a condition of remembering because it links us to the past before we remember it. What he is referring to here is the psychic survival of the way past experience impressed itself on us and affected us, a survival of which we are unaware until we realize that it must have helped us to remember that experience. See Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, L'Ordre philosophique (Paris: Seuil, 2000) 26, 553, 570–74. Still, Ricoeur leaves ample room for the justifiable worry occasioned by the possibility of forgetting what we need or want to remember; see, e.g., *ibid.* 36–37, 536, 552–53, 574–89.

⁵⁴ None of what I am saying here contradicts the fact that aspects of Christian tradition can be forgotten because they no longer fit into someone's or some group's overarching narrative, and that this forgetting can be intentional.

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben," in *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, part 2 (Leipzig: E. W. Fritzsche, 1874), which I have consulted, in the Kritische Studienausgabe (KSA) version of the

that to feel a moment of happiness or to do anything to make others happy, we need to be able to forget the past, to experience things unhistorically.⁵⁶ For Nietzsche the vitality of a person, a people, or a culture consists in its ability to grow in its own way and from its own resources, to transform and to assimilate the past or the other, to heal past wounds, and to replace what was lost or to make new forms on the model of older broken ones. The foundation for any of this vitality lies in our capacity to forget the past that we cannot master and use for our purposes, to let it slip below the horizon that we draw for ourselves of the possible objects of our consideration. Nietzsche thinks that this requirement is a universal law of noble human flourishing. All serenity, good conscience, joyful activity, and trust in the future depend on our drawing this sort of horizon for forgetting some of the past—even, Nietzsche says at one point, most of the past—so that we can concentrate on what we need to do to create our future.⁵⁷

Much of Nietzsche's essay attempts to show the vanity of trying entirely to overcome this forgetting through the study of history. Such an effort would destroy our capacity for drawing from the past heroic examples that inspire humanizing initiative and noble innovation.⁵⁸ It would ruin our ability to conserve reverently our identity inherited from the past.⁵⁹ It would even undermine our motive for correcting critically these two endeavors in order to liberate the suffering and the poor they marginalize.⁶⁰ We see, then, why Nietzsche calls the necessary unhistorical, even antihistorical, forgetting and enclosure of oneself within a bounded horizon an art and a faculty (*Kunst und Kraft*), and not a vice or a mental weakness. Applying this art of forgetting allows us, he says, to experience the suprahistorical realm of art and religion, that which gives to existence the character of the eternal and the identical.⁶¹ Nietzsche thus sees that theology would drain the life from Christianity if it did not tame its

Colli/Montinari edition in the Past Masters database. I will refer to this text using the KSA pagination. I thank Stephen N. Wolfe for the suggestion that Nietzsche's essay might have some relevance for the argument I develop in this article.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 250.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 251–52, 330; see 250: *alle Vergangenheiten vergessend*.

⁵⁸ On this monumental style of history (*monumentalische Art der Historie*), see *ibid.* 258–65.

⁵⁹ On this antiquarian style of history (*antiquarische Art der Historie*), see *ibid.* 265–69.

⁶⁰ On this critical style of history (*kritische Art der Historie*) and the abuses to which an excess of critical history can lead, see *ibid.* 269–323; 253–54; in particular 305 (historical sensibility and formation lead to the passivity that believes things cannot be improved); and 323 (too much study of history dampens the ardor of a feeling for justice by preventing the student from experiencing and acting ahistorically).

⁶¹ *Kraft*: *ibid.* 250, 251. *Kunst und Kraft*: *ibid.* 330. For a presentation of what Nietzsche calls the *Überhistorische*, see *ibid.* 330.

use of history by subjecting it to the limits of a forgetting that leaves room for the experience of the suprahistorical.⁶² His claim that cultural vitality requires this sort of forgetting implies the belief that the very existence of a culture will lie under threat without the art and faculty of forgetting. Thus, forgetting becomes a factor contributing to that culture's continuity, to its lasting over time.

Nietzsche might well have thought that we create "reality" entirely out of the mind, and he certainly was no friend of Christianity, at least as he understood it. What he meant by the eternal, the religious, and the supra-historical, therefore, do not fit in many ways with the manner in which Christian tradition appropriates these notions. But the point I draw from Nietzsche here is that cultures flourish only at the cost of forgetting some of their past. Christian theology will surely wish to modulate his account of that flourishing, perhaps especially his particular emphasis on self-assertion. However, the logic of his argument still applies to the creative engagement with past and present that characterizes Christian tradition when it is functioning well. Congar believed that Christian tradition is really the Christian life that puts us in touch with the eternal God in an ecclesial communion identical through the ages, although always reforming itself.⁶³ If he was right about this, and if Nietzsche's ideas on the necessary forgetting in vibrant culture were correct, we can conclude that the vitality of a self-correcting Christian tradition nourished by its past so it can face creatively those around it and its own future must forget some of that past. Once again, we see the necessity of forgetting for Christian tradition's healthy functioning and thus, paradoxically, for the maintenance of its continuity.

ROOM FOR FORGETTING IN SOME ACCOUNTS OF TRADITION

If Christian tradition has always needed to forget in order to function with the continuity that keeps it alive, why not just go on as we have, without enunciating this principle? What do we have to gain by making the principle consciously operative in the church? If love forms the basis of the Christian life and of its transmission, and if the more love knows what it is doing, the fuller love is, then the loving transmission of the Christian life in tradition gathers strength from an increased knowledge of what it is doing, even when that knowledge reveals that tradition functions in part by forgetting. Furthermore, the more Christian

⁶² Ibid. 295–98.

⁶³ Congar, *La tradition: Essai théologique* 9–10, 111–36. For the idea of constant reform, see Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme* 25–27, especially the very first sentence of the introduction of 1950: "L'Église a toujours été en activité de se réformer elle-même" (25).

tradition understands what it is doing, the better it can praise God for the divine grace that guides and fosters that activity, even the activity of forgetting. This claim becomes clearer in my final paragraph. But for now, I can note that theology has as one of its tasks to serve the church's praise of God by helping Christian tradition to understand better what it is and how it functions. Thus, if forgetting is necessary for the continuity of Christian tradition, some contemporary theological theories of tradition could benefit from taking better account of this fact. This claim is the third and final point in my argument. I will try to prove this point by briefly considering notions of tradition developed by Yves Congar, John Thiel, and Kathryn Tanner.

Yves Congar

According to Congar's theological essay on Christian tradition, each act of fidelity to God's plan involves an actualization by the Holy Spirit of what has been passed on, an actualization that answers to the full historicity of moments successively experienced by the human subjects of tradition. Congar concludes that tradition has to be development and not merely transmission. By "development" here he means that Christians transmit more than they receive because those who have received the Christian life well enough to pass it on have added something of their own to the Spirit's work of making the tradition actual.⁶⁴ But Congar neglects the fact that human subjects who pass on the tradition—whether individuals, churches, or the whole church—also filter out some of what their forebears tried to pass on to them. Therefore, to understand tradition as transmission, we need not only the concept of development that yields something more or an increase but also the notion of a pruning that leaves behind some of what has been offered by forebears.

Had Congar taken better account of the necessary forgetting involved in tradition, he could have avoided certain excesses, for example, his claim that "the tradition that each one receives . . . is . . . the totality of what has been unveiled of Christ in the course of the ages. Nothing is lost of the

⁶⁴ Congar, *La tradition: Essai théologique* 39–40; see also, e.g., 72, 127–28. In *Vraie et fausse réforme* 244, Congar writes, "Because no form or formula produced at a given time is the adequate expression of the catholic truth, it will be possible, *in the very name of communion*, to seek to move beyond expressions currently used, and this movement beyond, if it is a matter of properly dogmatic formulas, can be only development by explicitation" (Parce qu'aucune forme ou formule produite à un moment donné n'est l'expression adéquate de la vérité catholique, il sera possible, *au nom même de la communion*, de chercher un dépassement des expressions actuellement tenues, ce dépassement ne pouvant être, s'il s'agit des formules proprement dogmatiques, que développement par explicitation). In this article I am pointing out the problematic nature of the word "only" in this statement.

valid acquisitions of the past.”⁶⁵ I have difficulty seeing how such unannounced statements do not contradict both the historical evidence and the constant need for reform in the church. Later in his essay, Congar finds the nuance he needs when he specifies that the tradition permanently transmits not the historically adventitious concrete forms of realities, but the innermost meaning of things.⁶⁶ After all, he himself admits that magisterial pronouncements can so orient themselves as to leave aside important aspects of tradition and that “momentary” forgetting or obscuring can occur in “dogmatic consciousness.”⁶⁷

When he makes this last statement, Congar is contrasting this forgetting and obscuring with the fullness that constitutes one of the modes in which the magisterium is obliged to transmit the evangelical deposit. Congar sees forgetting as a principle of discontinuity in what is not essential to the tradition, but he neglects to appreciate the role that forgetting plays in helping tradition to continue.⁶⁸ He therefore fails to observe that this forgetting actually helps the magisterium, and the rest of the tradition, to aim at being what he calls “a totalization, a communion as full as possible in the faith or the thought of the *ecclesia universalis*.”⁶⁹ This forgetting forms part of the inevitable historical rootedness of church tradition. Consequently, the fullness of transmission is, for the tradition, an asymptotic goal. Just as some mathematical functions make a curve advance upward ever toward an axis precisely by the way in which they keep the curve away from that axis, so the forgetting involved in tradition allows us continually to approach a full communication of the gospel by always keeping us from that fullness. Thus, the tradition can never hand over to us the whole gospel at once, which *Dei Verbum* no. 8 seems to imply when it asserts that by its tradition the church continually tends toward the fullness of divine truth. We can still commune with all the Christians of every age and every place, while forgetting some of their “valid acquisitions,” at least on this side of the eschaton.

⁶⁵ “La tradition que chacun reçoit n’est pas une quintessence du christianisme primitif, mais la totalité de ce qui s’est dévoilé du Christ au cours des âges. Rien n’est perdu des acquisitions valables du passé” (Congar, *La tradition: Essai théologique* 41–42).

⁶⁶ Ibid. 115.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 98. What does “momentary” mean when the *ressourcement* movements of the 19th and 20th centuries recalled to the church important aspects of the tradition that had been obscured for a thousand years or more? See also *ibid.* 115.

⁶⁸ I use the difference between the essential and the nonessential to refer to a distinction that Congar conceives of as a contrast between the church’s irreformable structure and its reformable life expressed in various historical forms and conceptions. See *Vraie et fausse réforme* 89–108, 171, 321–33; and *La tradition: Essai théologique* 42 (“structure essentielle”).

⁶⁹ Ibid. 99.

John Thiel

A postmodern approach will challenge the modern account of tradition favored by Congar and others because it depends on the idea of the constancy of unchanged form or essence with some growth or progress modifying it in a nonessential way. To find his own solution to what he sees as deficiencies in modern theologies that speak of changes in tradition as development, Thiel proposes, in his book *Senses of Tradition*, an account of four sorts of interpretation that contribute in different ways or contexts to the functioning of Christian tradition. These interpretations, which he calls four senses of tradition, give rise to “judgments about the path of apostolic truth through time and culture, in the course of which the apostolic tradition is always being identified and reidentified as perceptions of infallible and contingent truths are modified.”⁷⁰ Because each of these judgments arises, flourishes, and dies in a single shifting network of similar judgments, which is the tradition, their changing, even fleeting, character still allows for the continuity of the tradition.⁷¹

In what Thiel calls the first, literal, or plain sense, the community can think that a practice or belief is obviously what we have always and everywhere believed or done and therefore something we do not spontaneously think is open to change. Thiel calls the literal sense of tradition the “unity, stability, and concreteness” of a tradition that “manifests an abiding plain sense, the clarity of an ecclesial consensus that perdures in Christian communities and serves as an authoritative measure for Catholic belief, doctrine, and practice.”⁷² This “canonical identity of tradition is shaped,” according to Thiel, “by the belief that certain teachings and practices have been passed down through the ages since the time of the apostles and that only these teachings and practices . . . are rightly included in the authoritative deposit or canon of tradition and, in turn, rightly inform and measure the faithful identities of Catholic believers.”⁷³ Thiel concludes that “the literal sense of tradition is defined by the very fact of ecclesial universality in belief, doctrine, and practice.”⁷⁴

However, Thiel claims with equal clarity that Christians’ serene possession of beliefs and customs as what they have always believed and done usually emerges “from a history of interpretive ambiguity, disagreement, and conflict.”⁷⁵ He goes on to show how doctrines and practices that first appear as new developments in continuity with tradition’s past come to be

⁷⁰ John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Tradition in Catholic Faith* (New York: Oxford University, 2000) 27. One can also see these interpretations as discernments of the work of the Spirit in the church; see *ibid.* 165–86.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 28–29.

⁷² *Ibid.* 39.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 44.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 53.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 39.

accepted as tradition in the literal sense, that is, as something that is not really new but is what the church has always thought or done.⁷⁶ Thiel even tries to account for the process by which the adoption or suppression of beliefs or practices that seem in discontinuity with tradition's past can come to be accepted as the literal sense of tradition, allowing Christians to believe they have always accepted or refused these beliefs or practices.⁷⁷ For example, Thiel labels the "third sense of tradition" or the sense of "dramatic development" judgments by Christians "that a particular belief, doctrine, or practice is developing in such a way that its current authority" as traditional "will be lost at some later moment in the life of the church and that such a teaching or practice exhibits signs in the present moment that this final loss of authority has begun to take place." He notes that this sort of judgment represents frequently "a development perceived by many in the church as discontinuous with the past."⁷⁸ According to him, such judgments that "eventually prove truthful, and by doing so reconfigure the literal sense, find themselves negotiated by and integrated into the long history of first-sense claims that are presently affirmed in a particular pattern of the apostolic tradition."⁷⁹ Here Thiel is claiming, among other things, that Christians come to see the dropping of a belief or practice once thought authoritative as something consistent with what the church has always thought and believed, even if the church previously cherished the belief or practice for centuries as something dear to its tradition.

If Thiel is right, the usual way the church securely possesses any doctrine or custom as what it has always and everywhere believed or practiced is by forgetting the emergence of such elements of tradition from ambiguity and conflict, by forgetting that they were not always and everywhere what the church thought and did. If the part of his theory that I am here presenting is correct, since we have no tradition without this secure possession of its literal sense, we can conclude that Christian tradition continues to function often through the church's forgetting of the origination of its tradition in the innovation born of ambiguity, conflict, and disagreement. Christian college students frequently show amazement when they learn that the belief that Jesus is of one and equal divine being with the Father had to win its place as a defining Christian belief through decades of bitter struggle and centuries of biblical interpretation. Before these students arrive in my classroom, Christians have already taught them two things: first, that what makes one a Christian is belief that Jesus is to be worshipped as God and, second, that Christians have existed from the time of Jesus to our day.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 82–94.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 131–32, 134, 150–51; see also 170–71, 180–81.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 101.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 171.

One can understand why students conclude that Christians have *always* believed in the statements of the Nicene Creed.

The literal sense of tradition, as Thiel persuasively depicts it, occasions a forgetting and a transmission of a forgetting, a point he does not make explicit in his study. But surely interpreting and forgetting are not the same thing. Hence, Thiel's account of the literal or plain interpretation of tradition becomes more fully rounded when we point out the forgetting included within this interpretation. Acts of tradition are more than just acts of interpretation; they are also frequently acts of forgetting.

Had Thiel integrated the role of forgetting into his theory of tradition, he could have given a thicker account of what makes for the continuity of the tradition. Instead of resting that continuity simply on the postmodern notion of a network of similar, changing, and fleeting judgments, he could have added a further explicating factor. The continuity of tradition's fabric is a weave in which interpretive judgments are necessary threads and in which forgetting provides the equally necessary empty spaces between the threads.⁸⁰ If there are no spaces between the threads, there is no fabric.

Kathryn Tanner

To learn what happens to a theology of tradition when it tries to root out entirely what I have called forgetting, one can examine Kathryn Tanner's 2003 critique of appeals to tradition. Her critique boils down to the following:

"Tradition," if it is to exercise any normative force over present practice, must be a subset of . . . presently circulating hold-overs from the past, and therefore a product of selective judgment. . . . Cultural elements that are central to a preferred organization of Christian life are labeled "tradition" for the purpose of authorizing that preferred organization over against competitors. . . . The authorizing force of the appeal to tradition is increased to the extent that the invented character of tradition—the selectivity and human effort of attribution involved in it—is disguised. . . . Which materials are labeled "tradition" is a matter for human judgment, a judgment that hinges on the always contestable claim of their centrality or importance to Christian life.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Of course, too frequently the forgetting in question results from the use of bodily, institutional, or bureaucratic force exercised in the name of the continuity of the tradition. In such cases, the "interpretive ambiguity, disagreement, and conflict" highlighted by Thiel verges into violent ambiguity, disagreement, and conflict. The arguments in this article are consistent with the notion that Christian tradition should always avoid this violent sort of forgetting. But the frequency of violent forgetting in Christian tradition suggests to many that this use of force proves necessary for that tradition's continuity. The limits of this article do not permit a serious answer to this sort of critique, although my arguments might well contribute to a proper formulation of such an answer.

⁸¹ Kathryn Tanner, "Postmodern Challenges to 'Tradition,'" *Louvain Studies* 28 (2003) 175–93, at 184; see also 187–89.

I observed above that forgetting in tradition can indeed disguise the fact that elements of tradition serenely accepted as what Christians have always and everywhere done or believed can actually originate as innovations in rough-and-tumble, even violent, debate and struggle. To deal with this situation, Tanner advocates pulling off the disguise that covers the arguments that went on about the various things we now take to be traditional in what Thiel would call the literal sense of tradition. The way to do this unmasking is “to include” in tradition “the full contents of history: a history that encompasses, at any one time and place, multiple and conflicting opinions about the received past, about the character of the processes by which it has been transmitted, and its authority simply as such.”⁸²

The conflicts to which Tanner here succinctly refers can occasion anxiety for many who live in the present postmodern moment. These conflicts can plunge us into deep and dangerous waters. For we can experience retrieved Christian memories or competing claims about Christian tradition as dangerous if they call into question convictions, practices, or institutions that we hold as central to Christianity or to our cherished position within it. Here we find a strong, and sometimes ignoble, motive for forgetting in tradition. On the other hand, memories that some take as threatening can to others look freeing and therefore welcome. Thus Tanner’s endorsement of the expansion of the contents of our conscious knowledge about Christian tradition’s history can point to a needed, if uncomfortable, corrective—although perhaps at the price of occasioning conflict, or of simply revealing a conflict heretofore ignored by some or all parties.

However, Nietzsche showed that when a culture tries to pass on all its history, it deprives itself of the creative vitality it needs to benefit from its past so as to face the present and the future. A church that tried to include in its tradition “the full contents of history,” as Tanner suggests, would lose some of its vitality and thus, paradoxically, attack the continuity and integrity of its own tradition. This could happen in the following way.

Part of what can make the corrective Tanner offers uncomfortable for some is that the effort to include in tradition the full contents of a history characterized by many conflicting positions can set one before a number of historical narratives explaining, for example, the origins of conflicting ideas on the divinity of Christ. One then faces the potentially daunting task of discerning in which of the conflicting directions suggested by the conflicting views on Christ’s divinity the church needs to go.

⁸² Ibid. 190. For Thiel’s response to Tanner’s similar positions in her book *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), see his “The Analogy of Tradition: Method and Theological Judgment,” *Theological Studies* 66 (2005) 358–80.

Tanner recommends accomplishing this task by building an argument in favor of one of the conflicting directions. Such an argument should found itself on interpretations of past Christian claims and practices, interpretations that lead to judgments about the coherence of these claims and practices and about the room that such coherence leaves for various directions in which the church might go.⁸³ Tanner's endorsement of argument here goes so far as to claim that that "tradition as a process . . . amounts to a process of argument, among upholders of different Christian viewpoints, whether in the past or present. Or, one might say, what is now transmitted is the practice of argument itself."⁸⁴ This idea of tradition appears to neglect the fact that the Christian life is more than just argument. Indeed, if Congar is right, tradition is the passing on of that life and in fact is that very Christian life. On this view, tradition amounts to much more than argument. Thus, in stating as tradition's goal the remembering of the church's whole history, Tanner develops an idea of tradition that underemphasizes much of the vitality of tradition. This result is precisely what Nietzsche's essay would lead us to expect.

Christian tradition is the living out of faith, hope, and love, all of which involve recognizing and taking the people who bring us into this tradition to be in communion with Jesus Christ. The recognition of the communion with Christ of those who initiate us into Christianity and our treatment of them as partakers in Christ are both acts that are themselves passed on. They are passed on in a process by which one invites others to make similar acts of recognition and communion behavior and by which those others accept to do these actions. These invitations and actions form a process that constitutes an important element in what makes people a church. In this process, the invitation and acceptance happen in such a way that the communion with Christ occurs in this very relation of invitation and acceptance between Christian initiator and initiated Christian. This process of inviting people into ecclesial communion with Christ, of treating one another as if we are in that communion, and of accepting that invitation and treatment—this whole process of tradition depends inexpressibly on trust placed by some people in other people. The trust functions as a necessary foundation for this tradition process because it represents, as Congar knew, a whole form of life and an educative life milieu similar to the one in which parents raise their children.⁸⁵ Such a milieu functions only on the basis of trust.

Because anyone with a modicum of life experience knows that people are not entirely trustworthy, this trust can be rational and constitute a true

⁸³ Tanner, "Postmodern Challenges" 190–92.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 192.

⁸⁵ Congar, *La tradition: Essai théologique* 111–36.

exercise of specifically Christian faith only if its ultimate object is the very God of Jesus Christ, who sends the Holy Spirit into the church. Just as we must love other people in our love for God and love God through our love for others, so the trust on which tradition is built leads us to trust those who preach Christ to us in the church, to trust them within our trust in God, and it leads us to trust in God through our trust in our Christian mentors. Just as the theological virtue of charity includes love of the neighbor, so the theological virtue of faith, because it is exercised in tradition, includes trust of the neighbor. This sort of trust in those who feed us and raise us in the life of the church differs from what Tanner's view of tradition as argument suggests that we owe them: "the initial respect of consideration, and the respect of argumentative engagement where disagreement exists."⁸⁶ Such an argumentative, if respectful, posture only belongs in tradition on the basis of a trust that provides the foundation of this posture. The basic trust in which tradition sinks its roots allows us to receive our Christian life from God in the church through those who forget some of it, and it thereby allows us to pass on that forgetting, as well as our own, to other Christians. Recommending the inclusion of the whole of Christian history in tradition leads Tanner, then, to an account of tradition as argument, an account that underemphasizes the vital role that trust and forgetting play in it.

Of course, Tanner rightly notes that this forgetting serves to cover up and thereby marginalize certain voices in the tradition. Clearly, such marginalization can be unjust. But we can conclude from Nietzsche's arguments that the attempt to root out all forgetting in tradition through the study of history would undermine our motive for critical history's correction of that forgetting for the sake of liberating the suffering and the poor whom that forgetting marginalizes. Nietzsche's position thus goes toward showing that even the critical-historical retrieval of what tradition forgets must allow for some forgetting in tradition because forgetting of some elements of the tradition makes possible the critical retrieval of other forgotten elements.⁸⁷

Tradition, then, is not just constancy without meaningful change, as the ancients and medievals tended to think. Nor is it just that constancy of unchanged form or essence with some growth or progress modifying it in a nonessential realm, as 19th- and 20th-century thinkers like Congar tended to believe. Postmodern authors like Thiel and Tanner have integrated into their accounts of tradition the acts of discontinuous amputation or innovation and the contradictory currents of belief and practice that historians

⁸⁶ Tanner, "Postmodern Challenges" 192.

⁸⁷ See Nietzsche, "Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie" 269–323; see also 253–54.

have brought to light. But like so many of their forebears, they have overlooked the fact that tradition draws its healthy life and continuity in part from the forgetful distortion of, or regression from, what has been handed on and what sometimes turns out to be needful later on or elsewhere.

IMPLICATIONS AND QUESTIONS

I have claimed that Catholic tradition does indeed forget, even things about its substance, that this forgetting is inevitable and necessary for the continuity of tradition, and that certain theories of Christian tradition could benefit from integrating these facts into their structure. The arguments I have made for these claims point to several implications and questions that I can here only indicate as needing a proper exploration.

First, the notion that tradition cannot avoid forgetting and even maintains its continuity through forgetting could have important implications for ecumenism. This notion could help to encourage the ongoing renewal of investigations into certain ecclesiological sticking points in ecumenical dialogues, such as differences of doctrine or practice that in the past have accompanied efforts to show that one church's approach did or did not go back to the apostles—for example, the apostolicity or the apostolic succession in the ministry.⁸⁸ What does tracing a ministry back to the apostles mean if we try to appreciate fully the role of forgetting in maintaining the continuity of tradition? Perhaps this question is odd enough and pertinent enough to contribute to new progress in our ecumenical discussions. The notion that forgotten elements of Christian tradition might remain available for retrieval could lead to interesting reformulations of our understanding of continuous succession in Christian faith and institutions.

Recognizing the necessary function of forgetting in tradition could also help us point out more explicitly one of the aspects of the estrangement that Congar claimed characterizes the wounds in communion between the Eastern and Western churches.⁸⁹ My suggestion earlier in this article implies that the process by which these two great Christian families became strangers to each other resulted in part from the forgetting of elements of Christian tradition. Two examples from Congar's account of

⁸⁸ See, e.g., John J. Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now: An Ecumenical Church in a Postmodern World* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2004); Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, *The Apostolicity of the Church: Study Document of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University, 2007).

⁸⁹ See Yves Congar, *Neuf cents ans après: Notes sur le "Schisme oriental,"* Irénikon (Gembloux: Chevtogne, 1954) 7–8, 52–53, 61, 80–94. This work is a republication in book form of the article with the same title in the collection *L'Église et les églises: Neuf siècles de douloureuse séparation entre l'Orient et l'Occident, 1054–1954*, vol. 1, *Neuf cents ans après*, Irénikon (Gembloux: Chevtogne, 1954).

the estrangement illustrate this implication. First, Congar tries to show that, before and after 1054, the East recognized the primacy of the bishop of Rome much more extensively than the Orthodox of his day admitted, although the East did not understand this primacy in the same way that Rome did.⁹⁰ This claim amounts to implying that the Orthodox of Congar's day had forgotten the recognition their forebears had given to Rome's primacy. Second, in the long development of the East-West estrangement, Rome tended to forget that, at least into the fifth century, it had not asserted the same authority with regard to the Eastern bishops that it had exercised over the bishops in Italy or in the West generally.⁹¹ What would recognizing the role of forgetting in the East-West division teach us about the forgetting that tradition needs, the sort it must try to avoid or overcome, and about the way tradition's forgetting might actually help heal the estrangement in question? Of course, historical study can help the churches remember those elements of tradition whose forgetting has worsened the split between them. However, can we find a case of forgetting that helps to heal Christian division in the act by which Athenagoras and Paul VI intentionally consigned to oblivion the mutual excommunications between Rome and Constantinople?⁹²

Taking account of the role that forgetting plays in the continuity of tradition can have implications that help us better understand church reform. Reformers correctly believe that the forgetting that accompanies the working of tradition can pose dangers to the church. But they would be wrong to think that we must try to stamp out all traditional forgetting. An attempt at such an eradication would do violence to tradition itself. We should remember that to know that forgetting is necessary for tradition, we have to know that we have forgotten. To know that our tradition has forgotten something, we have to have remembered at least something about what we have forgotten. Therefore, neither the fact nor the necessity of forgetting in tradition implies that we must find ourselves permanently and totally cut off from the forgotten past. Forgetting makes reform both necessary and possible because it helps afford tradition its fragile conti-

⁹⁰ Congar, *Neuf cents ans après* 63–66.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 74–75; at 75 n. 2, Congar quotes Martin Jugie's comment on the ninth-century disputes involving Nicolas I and Photius: "On paraît oublier à Rome la véritable situation de l'Église byzantine par rapport à l'Église occidentale sur le terrain canonique" (Jugie, *Le Schisme byzantin: Aperçu historique et doctrinal* [Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1941] 141).

⁹² For the official documents of this act, in Greek, Latin, and French, see *Tomos agapēs, Vatican-Phanar (1958-1970)* (Rome and Istanbul: Imprimerie polyglotte vaticane, 1971) 278–94. This consignment to oblivion is called here a "gesture of justice and of reciprocal pardon" (280, 281). I owe the idea for making the suggestions in this paragraph to Ann K. Riggs and Jaroslav Z. Skira.

nuity, even as it threatens that continuity. If the retrieval of this forgotten past is more or less necessary for any reform in the church, reformers need to learn to respect the necessity of forgetting even as they try to overcome some of its abusive effects.

I have in this study mentioned several examples of forgetting in tradition that can have such negative effects, while I have also discussed the role of forgetting in supporting the continuity of tradition or even, in some cases, the reconciliation of Christians long separated from each other. Thus, the theology of tradition must keep on its agenda a whole series of questions. How can forgetting be used and abused? Who are the ones who control the church's forgetting? For what purposes would they do so, and under what circumstances? One could address such questions, for example, from the point of view of the exercise of authority in the church or from the perspective of a theology of reception.

Finally, we do well to wonder at the fragility of tradition, the continuity of which finds support and peril in forgetting. Indeed, the tenuous continuity that forgetting assures tradition makes it an ideal place for God to show himself at work in our lives. In fact, we can extend to this situation the divine dictum Paul passed on in 2 Corinthians 12:9: in the human weakness of a tradition that continues in part through forgetting, the extent of God's power to make divine revelation available to us becomes manifest. In its no. 13, *Dei Verbum* follows John Chrysostom in asserting that God marvelously condescends to our level by making his revelation depend on the fragile medium of Scripture's human language. I have tried to show in this study that ecclesial tradition represents another weak human site of the revealing and pedagogical divine condescension. For through Christian tradition God stoops to transmit his historical revelation to all generations by a human process that requires forgetting.⁹³ That necessary forgetting should teach us that God preserves us in the Christian tradition more than we, who forget, keep that tradition going. But this truth is easy to forget.

⁹³ Note that the official explanation of the text of *Dei Verbum* no. 13 actually supports the extension of Chrysostom's ideas to tradition beyond the fragility of Scripture as a vehicle for God's condescension. According to Alois Grillmeier's report to the fathers of Vatican II on the draft text of September 20, 1965, the quote from Chrysostom was added to the text to deal with the concern of some fathers that the draft should make clearer the "constant norm of divine action with people, which [norm] is verified in Holy Scripture, in the Church, in the Incarnation, where the divine is joined together with human things" (*Acta* 4.1.360).