

THE NORM OF FAITH IN THE PATRISTIC AGE

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CHRISTIANITY IS a revealed religion. It was born as a response of faith of a small group of people to Jesus Christ, a man mighty in word and deed. He called Himself Son of Man and Son of God. His followers recognized in Him the promised Messiah of the Old Testament and later on discovered the God-become-man. Jesus Christ was, in the belief of His disciples, the fulfilment of the promises given by Yahweh in the Old Dispensation and the realization and center of God's self-revelation in the New. The faith of the followers of Christ was their response to the call of the self-revealing God in and through Christ. The revelation called for a total self-commitment and that total surrender was their faith. What was the model, the criterion, the norm of faith? It was Christ Himself as the self-revelation of God. The Letter to the Hebrews tersely describes the revelation of God and the role of Christ in it: "At various times in the past and in various different ways God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, He has spoken to us through His Son, the Son that He has appointed to inherit everything and through whom He made everything there is. He is the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of His nature, sustaining the universe by His powerful command."¹ In similar vein the primitive tradition, recorded by Matthew, puts on the lips of Jesus the following words: "Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him."² These texts describe the kind of revelation which modern scholars call "propositional." God also revealed Himself through and in the person of Christ and His mighty deeds. Modern scholars call it "activist" revelation. The New Testament contains several references to this self-revelation of God. Christ is the epiphany of God: "Who sees Him, sees God."³ In Him "God's grace has been revealed,"⁴ in Him "the kindness and love of God our Saviour for mankind were revealed."⁵ The mighty deeds wrought by

¹ Heb 1:1-3.

² Mt 11:27.

³ Jn 1:14, 18; 14:9

⁴ Tit 2:11.

⁵ Tit 3:4.

Christ attest to His mission conferred on Him by His Father: "The works my Father has given me to carry out, these same works of mine testify that the Father has sent me."⁶ Jesus stresses the same on the occasion of the resuscitation of Lazarus: "for the sake of all these who stand around me, so that they may believe it was you who sent me."

The revelation brought by Christ was the consummation of God's revelatory activity. It came to an end. His life was stopped and His words were silenced by the tragic event of His death. The work had to be continued by His disciples. Whatever they had learned from Jesus, whatever they had known about Him, whatever they had seen in Him, they taught and preached to others and realized it in practice and worship. They worked to be sure that all they had received would be handed down to posterity. The transmission of teaching and practice became the first tradition, the apostolic tradition. It was passed on to the churches orally and in writing. A part of that tradition was the Scriptures of the Old Testament, recognized by Christ Himself as speaking of Him and as containing eternal life. The apostles themselves interpreted these Scriptures as speaking of, leading to, and fulfilled in, Christ. In brief, they interpreted Scripture Christocentrically. Till the middle of the second century the books of the Old Testament alone remained the Word of God. It is true that side by side with the sacred books of the Old Dispensation there grew steadily the body of apostolic writings, revered because of their apostolic origin. However, they acquired the character of the Word of God only in the latter half of the second century. Towards the end of this century a list of canonical books was composed. Meanwhile, a group of intellectualistically-minded Gnostics began to challenge the whole of the Old Testament and some books of the New. They refused to accept them as the work of the good God, the Father of Jesus Christ. In their stead they claimed to be able to produce secret traditions (gnosis) that allegedly had come directly from Jesus through some apostles or other contact men. The Fathers of this period, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, in order to counteract the Gnostic propaganda, appealed to public tradition handed down, preserved, and explained by the churches presided over by the bishops, legitimate successors to the apostles. They saw that tradition, in contrast with Scripture, condensed in the so-called "rule of faith" or "the canon of the truth." In addition to this

⁶ Jn 5:36. ⁷ Jn 11:42.

oral tradition they knew still another kind of tradition, the apostolic tradition as the totality of the teaching of the apostles transmitted to the churches both in writing and orally. This concept of tradition will be retained by the Fathers of the following centuries. Meanwhile, after the danger of Gnosticism, stressing the importance of a secret tradition, had passed, the Fathers began to appeal to Scripture more and more. Parallel with this development, the concept of a purely oral tradition emerged with Tertullian and was taken up by several Fathers of the succeeding centuries.

The Scriptures were always for the Fathers a supreme and total wisdom, since they contained the Word of God. As to the origin of these Scriptures, only a few Fathers ventured to rationalize. All of them recognized that the sacred books were inspired by God, but they did not agree as to the way of inspiration. Some viewed the inspiration as a species of possession of the sacred writer by the Spirit of God, denying any contribution to the composition of Scripture by the human authors; still others thought that human writers co-operated effectively in the creation of the record of revelation, leaving on it the imprint of their personal education, style, and culture.

Another important problem concerning Scripture was its interpretation. Here two distinct schools of thought arose, each springing up from its own ground of philosophical and theological tradition: the school of Alexandria and the school of Antioch. The former school developed on the philosophical premises of Platonism and Neoplatonism under the influence of the Jewish Midrash and Alexandrian allegorical interpretation of the Bible. The latter school grew rather on the Aristotelian system of philosophy and under the influence of a literal exegesis of Scripture (particularly concerning the so-called messianic prophecies) practiced in some Jewish circles in Palestine.

According to Plato and his followers, a man may experience several kinds of perception of things: he may have an opinion concerning the changing and fleeting world of senses or he may have a true knowledge of the ideal world of ideas (to mention only two pertinent kinds of cognition). Since the ideal world, according to Plato, is not subject to our direct contemplation while we are still imprisoned in the body, our knowledge of it must be a reminiscence of that knowledge which we acquired while dwelling in the sphere of ideas. The school of Alexandria appropriated the metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology of

Plato to find a solution to several theological problems. One was the interpretation of the Bible. Scripture was, for all the Fathers, the Word of God that had assumed the form of human language. Thus the invisible and incomprehensible world became a visible and palpable reality. However, this visible and accessible reality is only a shadow of the invisible true divine reality. How can we know this divine world of ideas? Only by means of spiritual, allegorical interpretation of the shadows of Scripture's literal sense. The literal sense is only a symbol and allegory of the world of God. Here one is reminded of the Platonic allegory of the cave. The Platonic concept was combined here with the *Christian idea of Christ: the Word of God become man was reflected* in Scripture as the Word of God become human word. The allegorical interpretation of the Bible by Philo was a singular source and encouragement for the school of Alexandria in using this kind of exegesis. The Christology of Alexandria, in which the humanity of Christ tended to be absorbed by the divine Word, seems to be another clue to the disappearance of the human word of Scripture in the divine meaning of allegory.

The school of Antioch had a different background for developing the literal interpretation of Scripture: the Aristotelian epistemology, the metaphysics and psychology of knowledge, and the literal interpretation of the Bible within Palestinian Judaism. According to Aristotle, we get to know the reality of the surrounding world by a concurrence of *this very reality and our cognitive faculties. Our knowledge reaches* the reality itself. The Christology of this school was another factor contributing to emphasis on the literal sense, that is, on the human aspect of the Word of God. Antiochene Christology always showed a tendency to stress the humanity of Christ at the expense of its union with the divinity, to underscore the importance of our Lord as the model to be imitated by man in his pursuit of Christian perfection. In the interpretation of Scripture, its human aspect, i.e., the literal sense, was brought out.

On one point both schools agreed: both accepted the typical sense of Scripture, *which saw in the realities, events, and personalities of the Old Testament types, figures, and foreshadowings of Christ, of His life and activities. But even here the school of Antioch proceeded more cautiously by limiting the number of instances of typology.*

Before returning to the main topic of our investigation, the norm of

faith, we can say that for the Fathers God Himself was the ultimate source of salvation and norm of revelation. But to most of them God is absolutely transcendent, incomprehensible, and incommunicable. God has accomplished all the work of salvation and revelation through His Son Jesus Christ. Thus, for all practical purposes, Christ was the source and norm of faith for the Fathers. Christ was for them the supreme Teacher, Truth, Light, Way, and Lawgiver, and His revelation was the supreme wisdom, the Word of God, the good news, divine tradition, the gospel. Christ committed His gospel to the apostles as His eyewitnesses, and the apostles in their turn handed it down to the churches they had founded, orally and in writing, that is, in Scripture and tradition. Scripture and tradition became in their turn the norm of faith for the Church, but in unequal measure. Scripture was to the Fathers the supreme and ultimate norm, but to be interpreted in the light of tradition by the Church, which is the home of the Holy Spirit.

The problem to be discussed in the present essay against the general background sketched above is the norm of faith, or Scripture and tradition, as they are, according to the Fathers, guarded, preserved, interpreted, and handed down in the Church and by the Church.

The patristic era from the end of apostolic times to the end of its golden age can be divided into several periods due to the attitude of the Fathers towards the media of preservation, transmission, and interpretation of the gospel. The first period covers the Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists to the middle of the second century. The second period deals with the latter half of the second century, comprising Irenaeus and Tertullian. The third comprehends the third and succeeding centuries.

APOSTOLIC FATHERS AND APOLOGISTS

According to the Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists (all of them active roughly in the earlier part of the second century), Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the Truth and Light, is the Teacher of men, and His revelation or gospel is the source of the Church's teaching and the basis of her faith. What are the media through which the Church receives the gospel? The Fathers in question answer that Christians receive the gospel of Christ from the prophets, who announced Him in advance, and from the apostles, to whom He entrusted His gospel and whom He sent to preach it. Practically, it meant that the Old Testament, ac-

cepted by these Fathers as the Word of God and consequently as the norm of faith, was interpreted by them as a Christian book, speaking about Christ and preparing for Him. Furthermore, it meant that the teaching of the apostles, in whatever way it might have been transmitted, constituted another source and norm for the Church's teaching and another authority for her faith. As to the written record of apostolic teaching, the main body of the apostolic writings was completed by the end of the first century. Although it was elevated to the status of the Word of God only by the middle of the second century, it enjoyed an extraordinary respect among the Fathers as the "memoirs" and "letters" of the apostles, the eyewitnesses of Christ, commissioned by Him. Besides the writings of the apostles, there existed other media through which the teaching of Christ's disciples was transmitted, particularly the kerygmatic and catechetical instructions and the liturgy. Thus the whole body of doctrines and beliefs comprising the Christocentrically interpreted Old Testament and the writings of the apostles, the kerygmatic, catechetical, and liturgical doctrinal elements of the Christian message, constituted the apostolic deposit or gospel. The term "tradition" (*paradosis*) as designating this apostolic deposit was not used during this period of patristics. It must be added that already in this period of Christian history there had emerged a conviction among the Fathers that the Church's ministers, particularly the bishops, were the divinely appointed successors of the apostles, commissioned by them to preach, preserve, and hand down the gospel.

Clement of Rome opens the first period. He outlines briefly the process of revelation as it comes from God through Christ to the apostles. The apostles are messengers of Christ and ultimately of God Himself. It is through the apostolic preaching that the message of the gospel reaches men:

The apostles are sent to us as messengers of the good news through the Lord Jesus Christ. Now Christ comes from God, and the apostles come from Christ: these two points proceed in perfect order from the will of God. Strengthened with the instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and fully convinced by His resurrection, the apostles, strengthened by the Word of God, went out, with the assurance of the Holy Spirit, to announce the good news, the approach of the kingdom of God.⁸

Ignatius of Antioch expresses similar ideas when he encourages his

⁸ *1 Clement* 42, 1-3 (quoted by R. Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* [Staten Island, N.Y., 1966] p. 87).

readers to abide in the "teaching of our Lord and the apostles"⁹ and to remain "inseparable from Jesus Christ our God and the bishop and the precepts of the apostles."¹⁰ In another letter he expresses his trust "in the gospel as in the flesh of Jesus Christ, and in the apostles as the presbytery of the Church. And we also love the prophets, for they too announced the gospel, they hoped in Jesus Christ and waited for Him; believing in Him, they have been saved; and abiding in the unity of Jesus Christ, they are saints worthy of love and admiration, they have received the testimony of Jesus Christ, and have been admitted in the gospel of our common hope."¹¹ Polycarp encourages the Philippians to serve our Lord "according as He has commanded, just like the apostles who have preached the gospel to us and the prophets who have announced the coming of the Saviour."¹²

According to Justin Martyr, the prophets announced Christ and His mystery.¹³ They announced what they "heard and saw, filled with the Holy Spirit. It is not in terms of human reasoning that they spoke: far beyond all human reasoning, they were worthy witnesses of the truth."¹⁴ For Theophilus, "the prophets have been taught by God, have been acting as His organs and communicating to men His holy will."¹⁵ God has given mankind "a holy law and holy commandments."¹⁶

The above-mentioned Fathers appealed to the Old Testament because they viewed it as a Christian book and interpreted it spiritually or allegorically: "The Scriptures are much more ours than yours," wrote Justin while addressing the Jew Trypho; "for we let ourselves be persuaded by them, while you read them without grasping their true import."¹⁷ In another text he writes again: "How could we believe that a crucified man is the first-born of the ingenerate God, and that He will judge the whole human race, were it not that we have found testimony borne prior to His coming as man, and that we have seen that testimony exactly fulfilled?"¹⁸ In similar vein Barnabas wrote saying that the law was not meant for Jews but for Christians: "Moses received it when he was a servant, but the Lord Himself gave it to us

⁹ *Magn.* 13, 1. ¹⁰ *Trall.* 7, 1. ¹¹ *Philad.* 5, 1-2 (Latourelle, p. 88).

¹² *Philipp.* 6, 3 (Latourelle, p. 87). ¹³ *Dial.* 14, 8; 24, 2.

¹⁴ *Dial.* 7, 1-2 (Latourelle, p. 91). ¹⁵ *Ad Autol.* 2, 14; 2, 33. ¹⁶ *Ad Autol.* 2, 27.

¹⁷ *Dial.* 29 (quoted by J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* [London, 1960] p. 66).

¹⁸ *Apol.* 1, 53 (Kelly, p. 66).

as the people of inheritance, by suffering for our sake."¹⁹ He was convinced that the Jews misunderstood the law because they interpreted it literally, misled by an evil angel. The right interpretation of the Old Testament must be genuinely spiritual, and by a spiritual exegesis he meant an allegorical explanation of every sentence and every word of Scripture.²⁰ To give only a sample of his allegorizing method, the number 318 of Abraham's servants means Jesus and His crucifixion, since the Greek letters IH stand for 18 and point to IH SOUS (Jesus), and Greek T stands for 300 and points to the cross.²¹ This is also true of Justin Martyr, who often interprets the Old Testament texts allegorically, e.g., Is 9:6: "And the government will be upon His shoulder" signifies the crucifixion of Christ.²² Some Apologists such as Aristides²³ and Tatian²⁴ oppose allegory but calmly use it themselves.

When the Fathers of this period speak of Scripture, they mean the Old Testament Scriptures. However, they already are acquainted with the apostolic writings, which they mention with great respect. Ignatius speaks of the gospel as enjoying the same authority as the prophets.²⁵ Barnabas and Justin introduce their quotations from the New Testament with the formula "It is written."²⁶ According to Justin, the "memoirs" of the apostles (Gospels) are read during the Eucharistic Sunday celebration along with the prophets.²⁷

Already in this time there emerges the conviction that the ministers of the Church have the divinely appointed mission to guard and preach the gospel. This is particularly apparent in the text of *1 Clement* quoted partially above:

The apostles preached to us the gospel received from Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ was God's ambassador. Christ, in other words, comes with a message from God, and the apostles with a message from Christ. Both of these arrangements, therefore, originate from the will of God. . . . From land to land, accordingly, and from city to city they preached, and from the earliest converts appointed men whom they had tested by the Spirit to act as bishops and deacons for the future believers.²⁸

¹⁹ *Barnabas* 14, 4 (J. Quasten, *Patrology* 1 [Utrecht, 1950] p. 86).

²⁰ *Barnabas* 1-17; see particularly chap. 9. ²¹ *Barnabas* 9. ²² *Apol.* 1, 32.

²³ *Arist.* 13, 7. ²⁴ *Adv. Graec.* 21. ²⁵ *Smyrn.* 5, 1; 7, 2.

²⁶ *Barn.* 4, 14; *Dial.* 49, 5. ²⁷ *Apol.* 2, 67.

²⁸ *1 Clement* 42 (Quasten 1, 45 f.).

Ignatius, too, sees in the office of the ministers of the Church the embodiment of the authority of God:

I exhort you to strive to do all things in harmony with God: the bishop is to preside in the place of God, while the presbyters are to function as the council of the apostles, and the deacons, who are most dear to me, are entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ.²⁹

The bishop, "who embodies the authority of God the Father . . . the Father of Jesus Christ, the bishop of all men,"³⁰ is the teacher of the faithful and as such protects them against error and heresy.³¹ In similar vein *2 Clement* inculcates obedience to the presbyters, whose task is to preach the faith that comes from Christ.³²

In conclusion one can say that, according to the Fathers of the first period, the gospel or the teaching of the apostles constituted the source of the Church's preaching and practice and the basis of her faith. The content of that gospel was made up of the Old Testament Scriptures interpreted Christocentrically, the writings of the apostles, and the teaching, preaching, and liturgical practice of the Church. The ministers of the Church are believed to have a divinely given mission to explain and propagate the gospel.

IRENÆUS AND TERTULLIAN

For Irenæus and Tertullian, too, Jesus Christ, the Word of God, was the Teacher and the Truth through whom God had revealed Himself and His plans of salvation. This original revelation or gospel was entrusted by Christ to the apostles, and the apostles in their turn handed it down to the churches they had founded. Irenæus and Tertullian called this original message or the teaching of the apostles "tradition" or "apostolic tradition," designating thereby the whole body of doctrines and beliefs regardless of the way in which they might have been transmitted. This usage of the term became classic in the succeeding centuries. They also used the term "tradition" in a restricted and new sense, meaning by it the unwritten beliefs and doctrines in contrast with the Scriptures. This unwritten or oral tradition practically coincided for Irenæus with his "canon of the truth," and for Tertullian with the "rule of faith." The canon of truth or the rule of

²⁹ *Magn.* 6, 1 (Quasten 1, 67); *Magn.* 3, 1. ³⁰ *Magn.* 3, 1.

³¹ *Trall.* 6; *Phil.* 3. ³² *2 Clement* 17.

faith meant for both the pattern of Christian teaching or the summary of Christian doctrines and beliefs, constant in content and varying in wording, believed to be of apostolic origin. Against the Gnostic appeal to a secret tradition, Irenaeus and Tertullian emphasized the importance of this public oral tradition, whose authenticity and apostolicity were guaranteed by the apostolic succession of bishops, to whose care the gospel was entrusted, and by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. They also held that the whole of revelation was to be found in the Scriptures, that is, in the Old Testament and in the apostolic writings: the fourfold Gospel and the letters of the apostles, which were elevated to the status of the Word of God by the middle of the second century. Thus, in the view of Irenaeus and Tertullian, Scripture and tradition were rather two modes of transmission of the same original revelation and apostolic tradition (different in form, coextensive in content). In addition to this view, both firmly insisted that the Church alone was entitled to interpret the Scriptures, since she was in possession of the original and unadulterated tradition set out in the clear and unambiguous form of the rule of faith or truth. It must be added that Tertullian introduced still another use of the term "tradition," to designate the long-standing customs, practices, and rites presumably emanating from the apostles.

Irenaeus

In his usual lapidary formula Irenaeus outlines the history of revelation: "Such is the preaching of the truth: the prophets have announced it, Christ has established it, the apostles have transmitted it, everywhere the Church presents it to her children."³³ The Old Testament announced Christ, His life and passion, in figures and images only;³⁴ the apostles received the power to preach the gospel as eyewitnesses sent by Christ their Teacher:

The Teacher of all things has given His apostles the power to preach the gospel. It is through them that we know the truth, that is, the teaching of the Son of God. . . . This gospel they first of all preached. Then, through the will of God, they handed it down in the Scriptures, so that it became the basis and support of our faith.³⁵

³³ *Demonstr.* 98 (quoted by T. Camelot, "Tradition," in *Vatican II* [Washington, D.C., 1963] p. 186).

³⁴ *Adv. haer.* 4, 33, 10-14.

³⁵ *Adv. haer.* 3, 1, 1 (Latourelle, p. 103).

Irenaeus was the first to call the preaching of the apostles or the gospel "tradition." Speaking of the faith received from the apostles and preached everywhere in the Church, Irenaeus names it "tradition," without implying any contrast between Scripture and tradition.³⁶ In another text he designates it "apostolic tradition": "Anyone who wishes to discern the truth may see in every church in the whole world the apostolic tradition clear and manifest."³⁷

How was the original gospel or apostolic tradition handed down to posterity? Irenaeus answers: by preaching and in writing.³⁸ Against the contemporary Gnostics, who claimed to possess access to a secret extrascriptural tradition, Irenaeus insisted on the importance of public oral tradition preached and transmitted in the churches founded by the apostles and commissioned by them to preach the gospel. Time and time again he repeats the term "tradition" to signify the oral preaching of the Church.³⁹ He could point to many barbarian tribes that received their faith without Scripture by following the original oral tradition:⁴⁰ "Why, he wrote, even if the apostles had not left the Scriptures to us, would it not be right to follow the pattern of tradition which they handed down to those to whom they entrusted the churches?"⁴¹ Practically, the oral tradition of Irenaeus coincided with his "canon of the truth," a summary of the main articles of faith coming from the apostles. We find a detailed description of the canon as tradition in the following text:

The true knowledge, the teaching of the apostles, and the primitive structure of the Church throughout all the world, and the nature of the body of Christ according to the succession of the bishops to whom they entrusted the Church which is in every place; this teaching has come down to us, having been preserved without any use of forged writings, by being handled in its complete fullness, neither receiving addition nor suffering curtailment; and reading without falsification, and honest and steady exposition of the Scriptures without either danger or blasphemy; and the special gift of love which is more precious than knowledge, and, further, more glorious than prophecy, and also superior to all the other sacred gifts.⁴²

The canon of the truth or the rule of faith most probably developed

³⁶ *Adv. haer.* 1, 10, 1-2. ³⁷ *Adv. haer.* 3, 3, 1. ³⁸ *Adv. haer.* 3, 1, 1.

³⁹ *Adv. haer.* 3, 2-5. ⁴⁰ *Adv. haer.* 5, praef.; 3, 2-5.

⁴¹ *Adv. haer.* 3, 4, 1 (quoted by R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* [London, 1962] p. 94).

⁴² *Adv. haer.* 4, 53, 2 (Hanson, p. 95).

from the apostolic kerygma and it prepared material for the future Apostles' Creed. Irenaeus sums it up as follows:

All teach one and the same God as Father and believe the same economy of the incarnation of the Son of God and know the same gift of the Spirit and take to heart the same commandments and preserve the same shape of that ordinance which is towards the Church and wait for the same coming of the Lord and uphold the same salvation of the whole man, that is, of soul and body.⁴⁵

The authenticity or apostolicity of this tradition was guaranteed, according to Irenaeus, by the unbroken succession of bishops to the apostolically founded churches,⁴⁴ by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church,⁴⁵ and by "an infallible charism of truth" the bishops have received from God.⁴⁶ Irenaeus is also convinced that besides the oral transmission of the original gospel, the apostolic tradition has been conveyed to the Church in Scripture: "This gospel they [the Apostles] first preached. Then, through the will of God, they handed it down in the Scriptures, so that it became the basis and support of our faith."⁴⁷ Irenaeus knew very well that the Gnostics claimed to know secret traditions allegedly coming from the apostles, and by appealing to those traditions they twisted the Scriptures. For this reason he insisted so much on the right interpretation of Scripture. As he saw it, only the apostolically constituted Church had the prerogative of explaining the Scriptures, since she alone was in possession of the original apostolic tradition clearly set out in the rule of faith.⁴⁸

If we ask what served for Irenaeus as the norm of the Church's teaching and the basis of her faith, the answer would be: both Scripture and tradition. Scripture is "the basis and support of our faith," and the tradition is substantially identical with the canon of the (apostolic) truth. Which of them is the superior or the ultimate norm? He never asked this question (as a matter of fact, no Father ever asked it); understandably, then, he never gave a direct and explicit answer to it. Indirectly, however, he seems to have used the Scriptures as the last court of appeal. As we have seen, he calls Scripture the foundation of Christian faith, defends orthodoxy by appealing to Holy Writ,⁴⁹ and views even the canon of the truth as a condensation of Scripture.⁵⁰

⁴² *Adv. haer.* 5, 20, 1 (Hanson, p. 96). ⁴⁴ *Adv. haer.* 4, 53, 2; 3, 3, 3.

⁴⁵ *Adv. haer.* 3, 24, 1. ⁴⁶ *Adv. haer.* 4, 26, 2.

⁴⁷ *Adv. haer.* 3, 1, 1 (Latourelle, p. 103). ⁴⁸ *Adv. haer.* 1, 8, 1; 4, 26, 5; 5, 20, 2.

⁴⁹ *Adv. haer.* 2, 35, 4; 3, 5, 1; 4, praef. 1; 5, praef.; 3, praef. ⁵⁰ *Adv. haer.* 1, 9, 4.

Tertullian

Tertullian substantially re-echoes the views of Irenaeus concerning the norm of the Church's faith and teaching. Christ taught the apostles, and the apostles "have faithfully passed on to the nations the doctrine received from Christ."⁶¹ Tertullian terms this doctrine or gospel⁶² the "apostolic" or "Catholic tradition," without contrasting it with Scripture.⁶³ This gospel "obviously contains whatever the churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God."⁶⁴ How was this tradition transmitted? The apostles handed down the apostolic tradition to the churches "they founded in person, and they themselves instructed, both with their living voice, as we say, and later through letters."⁶⁵ Thus Scripture and (oral) tradition are brought out again as two vehicles of the original revelation or gospel. Against the Gnostic secret extrascriptural tradition, he underscores the Church's public tradition.⁶⁶ In the public oral tradition of the apostolically founded churches and in their unanimity Tertullian saw the guarantee for the authenticity of the transmission of the original apostolic tradition.⁶⁷ Like Irenaeus, he identified the oral tradition with the rule of faith, which was for him the intrinsic pattern of the original revelation, an advanced form of the apostolic Christologico-Trinitarian kerygma.⁶⁸

The other vehicle of the apostolic tradition, for Tertullian, was Scripture. His insistence on the absolute authority of the Scriptures can hardly be exaggerated.⁶⁹ However, Scripture for him too must be interpreted in the Church and by the Church, which has the key to its exegesis in the form of the original apostolic testimony, i.e., the rule of faith.⁶⁰

For the first time in the patristic age, Tertullian introduced the concept of purely oral traditions which concerned rather religious customs, rites, and practices.⁶¹

⁶¹ *De praescr.* 6, 4. ⁶² *De praescr.* 44, 9.

⁶³ *C. Marcionem* 4, 5; 5, 19; *De monog.* 2.

⁶⁴ *De praescr.* 21, 4; 20, 4-8; 37, 1 (*Latourelle*, p. 134).

⁶⁵ *De praescr.* 21, 3 (*Latourelle, loc. cit.*).

⁶⁶ *Apologet.* 47, 10; *C. Marcionem* 1, 1, 6; 3, 1, 2; *Adv. Hermog.* 1, 1; *De carn. Chr.* 2, 3, 5.

⁶⁷ *De praescr.* 21; 28; 32; *C. Marcionem* 4, 5.

⁶⁸ *Adv. Prax.* 2; *De praescr.* 13, 1-6; *De virg. vel.* 1, 3.

⁶⁹ *De carn. Chr.* 6; 3; *Adv. Prax.* 29; *Adv. Hermog.* 22.

⁶⁰ *De praescr.* 19; 20; 31. ⁶¹ *De corona* 3.

Thus Scripture and tradition appear to Tertullian the norms of teaching and faith. It is very difficult to determine which of them was the⁷ ultimate norm for him.⁶²

In conclusion, we can say that Scripture, tradition, and Church constituted for Irenaeus and Tertullian the three most intimately connected factors. Scripture is the norm of the Church's teaching and faith, but interpreted by the Church in the light of apostolic tradition.

THIRD CENTURY AND GOLDEN AGE

The position of Irenaeus and Tertullian concerning the apostolic tradition as containing the whole of Christian revelation and the acceptance of Scripture and (oral) tradition as the two coextensive modes or forms of the transmission of that revelation or gospel remained classic in the third and succeeding centuries. It is self-evident that Jesus Christ was always viewed as the source of revelation, and His gospel entrusted to the apostles continued to be the supreme authority of teaching and faith. In the concrete, Scripture and tradition, those two complementary authorities identical in content and different in form, constituted the basis of the Church's teaching and faith. Both enjoyed equal respect due to their apostolic origin. Scripture was always considered by the Fathers of this period as a supreme wisdom, containing all truth necessary for salvation and, from the point of view of its content, totally sufficient. All theological activity of the Fathers of this era concentrated on the exegesis of Holy Writ and every theological proof had to be founded on Scripture. The oral-tradition concept of Irenaeus and Tertullian was retained by Clement of Alexandria and Origen in their "rule of faith" or "ecclesiastical canon." In the following centuries, however, the concept of oral tradition was expanded. It assumed a new meaning, to designate the totality of ecclesiastical life, such as the liturgy, the Apostles' Creed, the catechetical instructions, the decisions of synods and councils, the teaching of the Fathers—all this believed either as emanating from the teaching of the apostles or as clarifying their testimony. The Fathers of this period continued to dwell on the idea of purely oral traditions which concerned mainly religious customs and rites, without making any significant contribution. If the Fathers always viewed Scripture as a supreme wisdom and all-sufficient, they also always

⁶² See *De praescr.* 14, 3, 4.

insisted that Scripture had to be interpreted in the Church and by the Church, since it was always assisted by the Holy Spirit and had at its disposal the living apostolic tradition supplying the rule of faith as an apt instrument of interpretation. Scripture, tradition, and Church invariably appeared in the view of these Fathers as most intimately associated with one another. The question of superiority or priority of any of these authorities over the others never arose; consequently it was never answered or solved. The greatest concern of the Fathers in this period was the integrity of the apostolic tradition. It was the task of the Church to preserve, explain, and hand down that tradition without adding anything to it or subtracting from it. As to the oral tradition, the Fathers tried rather to prove its tenets from Scripture. Meanwhile the importance of the Roman Church as a custodian and mouthpiece of the apostolic tradition grew steadily. The appeal to the testimony of the Fathers of previous centuries increased considerably from the fourth century on. It would be a mistake, however, to view the teaching of the Fathers as a distinct norm of faith: their testimony was looked upon rather as an interpretation of the apostolic tradition than anything else.

Entrusted by Christ to the apostles and handed down to the churches, the original revelation remained for the Fathers of the period under consideration simply the apostolic tradition. Cyprian has in mind this kind of tradition when he speaks of a tradition which concerns "the gospel and apostolic tradition," which "proceeds from the authority of the Lord and the gospel, from the precepts and the letters of the apostles."⁶³ Origen seems to speak of the same tradition in the following text:

Since the teaching of the Church, transmitted from the apostles according to the order of succession, has been preserved in the churches up to the present time, one should accept as truth only what does not depart at all from the ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition.⁶⁴

Gregory of Nyssa writes in similar vein of the original apostolic tradition: "We have, as a more than sufficient guarantee of the truth of our teaching, tradition, that is, the truth which has come down to us

⁶³ *Ep.* 74, 2 (Latourelle, p. 138); see *Ep.* 63, 19, in which text he calls the teaching of Christ "the tradition of the Lord."

⁶⁴ *De princ.* 1, praef. 2 (Camelot, p. 188); cf. *Comm. in. Mat.*, serm. 46.

by succession from the apostles, as an inheritance."⁶⁵ Athanasius likewise expresses his views clearly: "Let us see in the same way, over and above the tradition that goes back to the beginning, the teaching and faith of the Catholic Church, which the Lord has bestowed on us, which the apostles have proclaimed, which the Fathers have maintained."⁶⁶

The Fathers of this period took it for granted that the apostolic tradition was to be found in Scripture and the living tradition of the Church. A few examples will illustrate the statement. Cyprian writes of "the gospel and the apostolic tradition" as the vehicles of apostolic tradition.⁶⁷ According to Basil, the "necessary and salutary doctrine" of revelation is to be found in Scripture⁶⁸ and in oral tradition.⁶⁹ Similarly, Gregory of Nazianzus,⁷⁰ Epiphanius,⁷¹ and Chrysostom⁷² bring out the distinction between oral tradition and Scripture. Vincent of Lerins sums up the classic position of the period when he writes: "Take to yourself a double protection: first, the authority of the divine law, and then, the tradition of the Catholic Church."⁷³

Scripture is a supreme wisdom for the Fathers. They explain it, comment on it, appeal to it. It is the source and norm of Christian teaching and faith and the criterion of dogma.⁷⁴ As far as its content is concerned, it is all-sufficient and more than sufficient. It contains all truth necessary for salvation. Innumerable examples have been collected by historians in support of the patristic view concerning the sufficiency of Scripture. For Tertullian, a doctrine is false if Scripture does not mention it.⁷⁵ Irenaeus describes the Gospels as "the pillars of the Church,"⁷⁶ as divine and perfect, since they communicate the Word of God and His Spirit.⁷⁷ Clement of Alexandria and Origen emphasize the absolute authority of Scripture. Clement tries to build a Christian gnosis on it. Origen knows two incorporations of the Word:

⁶⁵ *C. Eunom.* 4 (Y. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions* [New York, 1967] p. 43).

⁶⁶ *Ep. ad Serap.* 28 (Congar, p. 43). ⁶⁷ *Ep.* 74, 2.

⁶⁸ *De Spir. S.* 4, 32, 77; 10, 32, 11-113. ⁶⁹ *De Spir. S.* 27, 32, 188, 193.

⁷⁰ *Ep.* 101. ⁷¹ *Haer.* 61, 6. ⁷² *In 2 Thess.* hom. 4, 2.

⁷³ *Common.* 2 (Congar, p. 44).

⁷⁴ Cf. Clement, *Strom.* 7, 16, 93; Origen, *De princ.* 1, praef. 10; 3, 6, 6; 2, 5, 3; *C. Cels.* 3, 15.

⁷⁵ *Adv. Hermog.* 22; *De carn. Chr.* 6; *Adv. Prax.* 29; *De praescr.* 38, 1-2; *De anima* 1; *C. Marcionem* 3, 17.

⁷⁶ *Adv. haer.* 3, 11, 11. ⁷⁷ *Adv. haer.* 2, 41, 1.

the Incarnation and Scripture.⁷⁸ Athanasius insists that "the holy and inspired Scriptures are fully sufficient for the proclamation of the truth."⁷⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem writes on the same subject: "The certitude of our faith does not depend on reasoning based on whim, but on the teaching drawn from the Scriptures."⁸⁰ John Chrysostom insists: "Await no other master; you possess the Word of God, and no instruction compares with that."⁸¹ "Everything in the divine Scriptures is clear and straightforward; they inform us about all that is necessary."⁸² Jerome is the most explicit: "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ."⁸³ Theophilus of Alexandria is not less outspoken: "It would be acting according to demoniac inspiration to follow the thinking of the human mind and to think that there could be anything divine apart from the authority of the Scriptures."⁸⁴ Cyril of Alexandria comments: "Not all that the Lord did was written down, but only what was deemed sufficient, either from the point of view of morals, or from the point of view of dogmas, in order that we might come, adorned with good works and virtues, to the heavenly city, and be reunited to the Church of the First-Born. How can we prove and certify as true something which Scripture does not attest?"⁸⁵ Augustine insists that "in open teaching of Scripture one finds all that concerns faith and moral conduct, that is, hope and charity."⁸⁶ Finally Vincent of Lerins: "Fortify our own belief in two ways: first, by the authority of the divine law, and then, by the tradition of the Catholic Church. . . . For the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient"⁸⁷

The concept of (oral) tradition in this period at first reflected the views of Irenaeus and Tertullian; later on it was expanded to comprise not only the rule of faith but also the liturgy, the Apostles' Creed, the decisions of synods and general councils, the teaching of the Fathers—all this believed to reflect the teaching of the apostles. Clement of Alexandria and Origen defended the views of the preceding period by accepting and identifying the oral tradition either with the "ecclesiastical canon"⁸⁸ or with the "ecclesiastical preaching"⁸⁹ comprising the

⁷⁸ *In Jer.* hom. 9, 1; 21, 2; *Jo.* 2, 1-9; *In Lev.* 5 ⁷⁹ *C. gent.* 1. ⁸⁰ *Catech.* 4, 17.

⁸¹ *In ep. ad Col.* 9, 1. ⁸² *In ep. 2 Thess.* 3, 4; *In ep. 2 Cor.* 13, 4.

⁸³ *In Is.* prol. ⁸⁴ *Inter op. Hier. Ep.* 96, 6. ⁸⁵ *In Jo.* 12. ⁸⁶ *De doct. chr.* 2, 9, 14.

⁸⁷ *Common.* 2 (J. R. Willis, *The Teaching of the Church Fathers* [New York, 1966] p. 119). See the texts on the sufficiency of Scripture collected in Congar, pp. 107-11.

⁸⁸ Clement, *Strom.* 6, 7, 61; 6, 8, 68. ⁸⁹ Origen, *De princ.* 3, 1, 1; 4, 2, 2.

totality of Christian faith as contrasted with Scripture. Both accepted also some form of Christian secret tradition supposedly coming from the apostles. Clement seems to have confused it with his canon of faith.⁹⁰ Origen most likely identified it with his esoteric interpretation of the Bible.⁹¹

Meanwhile the concept of oral tradition was expanded. First, the liturgy of the Church, embracing the catechetical instructions, baptismal as well as Eucharistic rites, began to enjoy the designation of "apostolic tradition," as is apparent from the title given to a collection of religious services by Hippolytus. Second, the rule of faith of the second century gradually developed—in connection with the baptismal confession of faith—into baptismal creeds, those short summaries of the main articles of faith sanctioned by the Church.⁹² The title "Symbol of the Apostles" or the "Apostles' Creed" and the legend ascribing it to the apostles themselves point to the conviction of the Church that the Creed originated with the apostles.⁹³ Basil seems to have expressed the reason behind this attitude of the Church when he said that the apostolic tradition had been transmitted in the mysteries as well as in Scripture.⁹⁴ Third, appeals to the decisions of synods and councils and to the testimony of individual Fathers as interpreting and clarifying the teaching of the apostles became more and more frequent. Special dossiers of authorities were compiled. To cite only a few examples, Origen,⁹⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea,⁹⁶ Athanasius,⁹⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus,⁹⁸ Cyril of Alexandria,⁹⁹ and Theodoret¹⁰⁰ in defense of their views appealed to orthodox Fathers and particularly to the Council of Nicaea, which enjoyed an unimpeachable authority. The appeal to the Fathers developed later on into the so-called argument from tradition. However important the appeal might have appeared in the eyes of the Fathers, it would be wrong to draw from this appeal a hasty conclusion that the authority of the Fathers constituted a distinct and independent norm and criterion of teaching and faith. Those who appealed to the

⁹⁰ *Strom.* 6, 7, 61; 6, 15, 131.

⁹¹ *C. Cels.* 1, 7; *In Jos.* 23, 4; *Comm. in Matt.* 10, 6.

⁹² Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church*, chap. 2.

⁹³ Cf. Ambrose, *Ep.* 42, 5; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 5, 12; Augustine, *Serm. ad cat.* 1; *Serm.* 212, 2; Cassian, *De inc.* 6, 3; Leo, *Serm.* 96, 1; *Ep.* 45, 2.

⁹⁴ *De Spir. S.* 26; 28; 66; 67. ⁹⁵ *In Num.* hom. 22, 2. ⁹⁶ *Ep. ad Caes.* 2.

⁹⁷ *De decr. Nic. sym.* 27; *Ad Afr.* 1; *Ad Serap.* 1, 28. ⁹⁸ *C. Eunom.* 4.

⁹⁹ *In John ev.* 4, 11; *Adv. Nest.* 4, 2. ¹⁰⁰ *Ep.* 89; *Ep.* 151.

Fathers were themselves anxious to admit that they did so only because they saw in them interpreters and transmitters of the teaching of Christ and the apostles.¹⁰¹ Theodoret explains the position of them all when he writes while defending the orthodox faith transmitted “not only by the apostles and prophets, but also by those who interpreted their writings—Ignatius, Eustathius, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory, John, and other luminaries of the world, and also by the holy Fathers who before these assembled at Nicaea.”¹⁰² Theodoret expressed his own opinion candidly: “I yield obedience to the Holy Scriptures alone.”¹⁰³ Cyril, too, ultimately appealed to “the tradition of the apostles and evangelists . . . and the bearing of divinely inspired Scripture as a whole.”¹⁰⁴

Thus the idea of tradition, although expanded in the present period, was believed to be based on the teaching of the apostles transmitted through various media in the Church.

What was the relationship of Scripture, tradition, and Church in the opinion of the Fathers under discussion? While dealing with Irenaeus and Tertullian, we saw that these three factors appeared to them as inseparable from one another. Scripture was a supreme wisdom and the norm of faith, but only the Church was divinely empowered to interpret it in the light of the apostolic tradition. We find almost the same situation in the present era. The ancient conviction that only the Church, enjoying the assistance of the Holy Spirit and being in possession of the apostolic tradition, is the divinely empowered interpreter of Scripture persisted also in the time under consideration.¹⁰⁵ The true faith and the authentic interpretation of the Bible are to be found only in the churches founded by the apostles and in the light of the apostolic tradition. Clement of Alexandria was convinced that the true interpretation of Scripture belonged exclusively to the Church as her apostolic heirloom,¹⁰⁶ since her pastors are our masters preserving the true apostolic tradition: “Those masters who preserve the true tradition of the glorious teaching derived in a straight line from the holy apostles Peter, James, John, and Paul, transmitted from father to son . . . have come down even to us, by God’s grace, to plant in us

¹⁰¹ Hilary: *Fragm. hist.* 7, 3; Cyril of Alexandria, *De recta fide ad reg.* 3.

¹⁰² *Ep.* 89 (quoted by Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 49).

¹⁰³ *Eranistes* 1. ¹⁰⁴ *De recta fide ad reg.* 2 (Kelly, p. 49).

¹⁰⁵ Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3, 24, 1; Tertullian, *De praescr.* 19. ¹⁰⁶ *Strom.* 7, 16, 103.

these glorious seeds of their forebears and of the apostles."¹⁰⁷ He also sees in the rule of faith the authentic instrument of interpretation: "Everything comes intelligible for those who preserve the interpretation that the Lord has given of Scripture, by accepting it in accordance with the ecclesiastical rule, a rule which is the unison and symphony of the law and the prophets with the Testament transmitted when the Lord came."¹⁰⁸ Origen, too, warns not to abandon the ecclesiastical tradition and not to accept anything in faith unless it has been passed on to us by the succession of the churches.¹⁰⁹ He stresses particularly the importance of the tradition preserved in the Church in order to distinguish the truth from falsehood:

Seeing there are many who think they hold the opinions of Christ, and yet some of these think differently from their predecessors, yet as the teaching of the Church, transmitted in orderly succession from the apostles, and remaining in the churches to the present day, is still preserved, that alone is to be accepted as truth which differs in no respect from ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition.¹¹⁰

The great champion of orthodoxy, Athanasius, equally emphasizes the need of sound teachers and the importance of the Church's grasp of tradition in explaining Scripture.¹¹¹ Cyril of Jerusalem writes in similar vein.¹¹² The ideas of the Western Fathers are not dissimilar. According to Hilary, "those who are outside the Church cannot understand the Word of God."¹¹³ Augustine is quite outspoken when the acceptance of the gospel is concerned: "For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Church."¹¹⁴ Only the authority of the Church can guarantee the right interpretation of biblical texts in the light of the rule of faith.¹¹⁵

Vincent of Lerins in a masterly way explained how and why Scripture, tradition, and Church are interrelated. On this occasion he elaborated his famous rule for discerning the Catholic truth from heretical falsehood:

I have often then inquired earnestly and attentively of very many men eminent for sanctity and learning how and by what sure and so to speak universal rule

¹⁰⁷ *Strom.* 1, 11, 3 (Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 28).

¹⁰⁸ *Strom.* 6, 15, 124-25 (Congar, p. 32). ¹⁰⁹ *In Matt.* serm. 46.

¹¹⁰ *De princ.* 1, praef. 2 (Willis, *Teaching of the Church Fathers*, p. 121).

¹¹¹ *C. gent.* 1; *C. Ari.* 3, 58. ¹¹² *Cat.* 4, 33; 5, 12.

¹¹³ *In Matt.* 13, 1. ¹¹⁴ *C. Manich.* 4 (Willis, p. 102).

¹¹⁵ *De doct. chr.* 2, 12; 3, 2. *C. ep. Manich.* 6; *C. Faust. Manich.* 22, 79.

I may be able to distinguish the truth of Catholic faith from the falsehood of heretical pravity; and I have always . . . received an answer to this effect: . . . Fortify our own belief in two ways: first, by the authority of the divine law, and then, by the tradition of the Catholic Church. But here some one perhaps will ask, since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church's interpretation? For this reason, because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another. . . . Therefore it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation. Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself all possible care must be taken that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. . . . This rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent.¹¹⁶

So far we have studied Scripture and tradition, those media, identical in content and different in form, through which the original revelation or apostolic tradition has been transmitted to the Church. Besides these two modes of transmission, numerous Fathers claimed to have known purely oral traditions of equally apostolic origin. Some of them even laid claim to secret traditions of the same source. There arises the question to what extent the first kind of information has contributed to the doctrinal heritage of Christian revelation, and how reliable the second kind of claim is. This will be the subject of discussion in the next section of this essay.

EXISTENCE OF PURELY ORAL TRADITIONS IN EARLY CHURCH

In addition to the oral tradition doctrinally coinciding with Scripture, numerous Fathers were acquainted with some merely oral or extrascriptural traditions which were supposed to have supplied some information not to be found in the Bible. Tertullian was the first to mention some oral traditions of this kind: e.g., the renunciation of Satan at baptism, threefold immersion, tasting of the mixture of milk and honey after the rite, abstention from the daily bath for the whole week after the baptismal ceremony, the reception of the Eucharist only at the assemblies before the dawn and only from the hands of the presiding celebrant, the anniversary offerings for the dead and in honor of the martyrs, the prohibition of fasting and praying on one's

¹¹⁶ *Common. 2* (Willis, pp. 119 f.)

knees on Sunday and during Eastertide, the custom of signing one's forehead with the sign of the cross on various occasions during the day.¹¹⁷ Origen specified such customs as infant baptism, praying on one's knees while facing the east, the baptismal and Eucharistic rites.¹¹⁸ Cyprian saw in the offering of the chalice of wine mixed with water a custom instituted by Christ.¹¹⁹ He also viewed the rule of electing the bishop in the presence of the people and in the assembly of the bishops of the province as of "divine tradition and apostolic practice."¹²⁰ Epiphanius speaks of an ancient immemorial usage prohibiting marriage after the vow of virginity.¹²¹ Jerome invokes an apostolic origin for the imposition of hands and invocation of the Holy Spirit after baptism, the threefold baptismal immersion, giving milk and honey to the newly baptized, the practice of praying in an upright position and of not fasting during Paschaltide.¹²² Augustine quotes infant baptism as an apostolic tradition,¹²³ then such baptismal rites as aspersion, exorcisms, and insufflation,¹²⁴ the celebration of the Passion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost as liturgical feasts.¹²⁵ Leo puts forward as apostolic traditions the Ember day fasts,¹²⁶ the custom permitting a priest to have only one wife,¹²⁷ the celebration of baptism only on Easter and Pentecost,¹²⁸ the consecration of bishops on a Friday.¹²⁹ John Damascene appealed to apostolic tradition in defense of the devotion to images. Furthermore, he referred to the oral traditions of Basil. He backed up as apostolic the threefold baptismal immersion, the veneration of holy places, the adoration of the holy cross, the institution of the sacraments.¹³⁰

A careful study of these so-called purely or extrascriptural traditions makes it clear that they concern themselves almost exclusively with customs and rites, not doctrines—at least not directly. Perhaps an exception could be made for the practice of infant baptism. Augustine concluded from this practice to the belief of the primitive Church in the presence of original sin in infants.¹³¹ Unfortunately, no historical

¹¹⁷ *De cor.* 3–4. ¹¹⁸ *In Lev.* hom. 8, 3; *In ep. ad Rom.* 5, 8; *In Num.* hom. 5, 1.

¹¹⁹ *Ep.* 63, 9–13. ¹²⁰ *Ep.* 67, 5. ¹²¹ *Panarion* 61, 6. ¹²² *Dial. adv. Lucif.* 8.

¹²³ *De Gen. ad litt.* 10, 23, 39; *De bapt. c. Don.* 4, 24, 31.

¹²⁴ *De nupt. et concup.* 2, 50. ¹²⁵ *Ep.* 54, 1 ad Januar.

¹²⁶ *Sermo* 8; 10, 1; 12, 4; 81, 1. ¹²⁷ *Ep.* 4, 2; 5, 3; 12, 3. ¹²⁸ *Ep.* 16, 1; 168, 1.

¹²⁹ *Ep.* 111, 2. ¹³⁰ *De imag. or.* 1, 23; 11, 16; *De fide orthod.* 4, 12.

¹³¹ *De nupt. et concup.* 1, 22.

reason justifies his conclusion. It is also impossible to ascertain that all of the ancient customs and rites mentioned above are of apostolic origin.

In addition to the oral traditions specified so far, some later Fathers laid claim to a secret extrascriptural tradition containing esoteric teaching allegedly coming from Christ. Clement of Alexandria and Basil are the main representatives of this opinion. The *disciplina arcani*, developed probably by the middle of the third century, belongs here. It is a peculiarity of this claim that earlier Fathers like Irenaeus and Tertullian vehemently opposed the Gnostics of their time exactly on this issue. Irenaeus was the first to deny firmly that the apostles concealed some esoteric knowledge in order to impart it to a privileged group.¹³² He is quite outspoken when he writes: "There is no gnosis other than the teaching of the apostles,"¹³³ entirely public and accessible to everyone, transmitted by them to the churches they had founded.¹³⁴

Anyone who wishes to discern the truth may see in every church in the whole world the apostolic tradition clear and manifest. We can enumerate those who were appointed as bishops in the churches by the apostles and their successors to our own day, who never knew and never taught anything resembling their [the Gnostics'] foolish doctrine. Had the apostles known any such mysteries, which they taught privately and *sub rosa* to the perfect, they would surely have entrusted this teaching to the men in whose charge they placed the churches. For they wished them to be without blame and reproach to whom they handed over their own position of authority.¹³⁵

Tertullian rejected no less strongly the Gnostics' claim to a secret apostolic tradition.¹³⁶

Clement of Alexandria was the first among the Fathers to allege the possession of a secret knowledge coming from Christ,¹³⁷ which he probably confused with the rule of faith.¹³⁸

On the basis of scattered testimonies¹³⁹ some scholars are inclined to admit that the so-called *disciplina arcani* developed in the Church after the middle of the third century. This rule of secrecy consisted

¹³² *Adv. haer.* 3, 5, 1; 2, 40, 2. ¹³³ *Adv. haer.* 4, 33, 8. ¹³⁴ *Adv. haer.* 3, 2-5.

¹³⁵ *Adv. haer.* 3, 3, 1 (Quasten 1, 301). ¹³⁶ *De praescr.* 22-27.

¹³⁷ *Strom.* 1, 1, 11-12; 6, 7, 61; 6, 8, 68. ¹³⁸ *Strom.* 7, 15, 92-93; 7, 16, 105.

¹³⁹ Aristides, *Apol.* 16, 2; *Ep. ad Diogn.* 4, 6; 6, 4; 7, 1; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 10, 1; 9, 4; 19, 15; *Epiaph of Abercius*; Hippolytus, *Apost. trad.* 23, 13-14; Cyprian, *Testim.* 3, 50; *Didasc. apost.* 15.

mainly in keeping secret the religious gatherings and rites, particularly those of baptism and Eucharist, from the eyes of outsiders. The reason for the secrecy was more often than not the fear of persecution, of arrest and trial, the desire to avoid profanation by pagans, and later, probably under the influence of mystery religions, a wish to encourage in newcomers a healthy curiosity and veneration for Christian mysteries. However, it must be emphasized that the secrecy concerned only outsiders and never Christians, as if some mysteries were accessible only to an elite.¹⁴⁰ The character of that secrecy is insinuated (unjustly) by a pagan as represented by Minucius Felix in his *Octavius*:

For why do they [Christians] make strenuous efforts to veil and hide away whatever it is that they worship, since things that are innocent always rejoice in publicity, but crimes are secret? Why do they have no altars, no temples, no recognized images, why do they never speak openly, never meet freely, unless what they worship and suppress deserves either punishment or shame?¹⁴¹

One of the most puzzling views on the existence of extrascriptural secret traditions is that of Basil. He compiled a dossier of customs and rites and insisted that they were transmitted by the apostles in a secret way. Further, on account of their apostolic origin they deserved, according to him, the same respect as the Scriptures themselves. The object of these secret traditions includes such customs as signing with the sign of the cross, turning to the east for prayer, the epiclesis in the Eucharistic celebration, the blessing of baptismal water and oil and the baptized person himself, the threefold baptismal immersion, etc.¹⁴² With these customs and rites we are well acquainted, since they were already referred to by Tertullian, Origen, and others. What is new and puzzling is the fact that, according to Basil, they were secretly transmitted by the apostles and that they deserve the same reverence as Scripture itself. After having enumerated the religious customs and rites referred to above, he insists that they are known to us not from written documents but

from the sacred and mystical tradition . . . from this unpublicized and secret teaching which our fathers preserved in a silence proof against the meddlers and busybodies, having well learnt the lesson that the holy nature of the mysteries is preserved in silence. For how could it be likely that the teaching of what it is not

¹⁴⁰ R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church*, pp. 27-35.

¹⁴¹ *Octavius* 10, 1 (Hanson, p. 30). ¹⁴² *De Spiritu Sancto* 27, 66.

permissible for the uninitiated to gaze upon should be advertised in writings . . . ? The apostles and fathers who were ordering the institutions in connection with the churches in the beginning used to preserve that which was sacred in the mysteries by a secret and undivulged method. For that which is published for common and chance hearing is not properly a mystery. This is the reason for the tradition of unwritten things, to prevent the knowledge of secret doctrines becoming neglected and through familiarity becoming contemptible in the eyes of the majority.¹⁴³

It is disconcerting to see the customs and rites which were known publicly two centuries earlier without the aura of mystery and secrecy become for Basil mystical and hidden and deserving the same respect as Scripture itself. Christianity seems to have become suddenly for Basil a mystery religion, and all customs, rites, and beliefs have assumed the same value. A hundred years later Vincent of Lerins was more cautious when he set up a criterion for Catholic belief: universality, antiquity, and consent.

In conclusion, one can say that so far no historian has been able to produce a doctrine which has reached us exclusively through an extra-scriptural oral tradition. This view is shared today by all those scholars who let themselves be convinced by the force of historical reasons alone. Yves Congar writes on this subject:

In all honesty it is difficult to see what *truths of faith* there could be that had been handed down secretly through the ages, whispered in the ear. Apart from the fact that the testimony of the earliest Fathers expressly contradicts the idea of an esoteric tradition, any such secret transmission would be a complete historical improbability. The discipline of the *arcantum*, which did exist, never had this sense. It merely applied, either to the maintenance of a discreet silence with regard to pagans or, after the organization of a catechumenate, to a liturgical observance within the community

Now revelation is of its nature public; it was made through the prophets, in Christ and through the apostles, once and for all, and Scripture is its sufficient and perfect record. Tradition is not a second source, alongside Scripture, from which comes a *part*, not contained in Scripture, of the truths of the faith, but another and complementary way of handing on of these truths.¹⁴⁴

So far, so good. A Catholic scholar, however, is faced with a special difficulty. Within the last hundred years several dogmas have been proclaimed in the Catholic Church. Now, according to the customary

¹⁴³ *De Spir. S.* 27, 66 (Hanson, pp. 181 f.).

¹⁴⁴ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, pp. 63-64.

interpretation, a dogma is a doctrine solemnly proclaimed as divinely revealed by a pope or a general council. Thus the definition of the Assumption of Mary has created particular difficulties (to take only one example), since neither scientific exegesis nor a history of the first centuries of the Church has been able to discover even traces of this doctrine. To get out of the impasse, some theologians such as Benoit and R. Brown have defended the so-called fuller sense of Scripture,¹⁴⁵ which would explain the appearance of the new dogmas. Some theologians-historians, e.g., Congar, have tried to introduce a new concept of tradition, some kind of Christian midrash, i.e., a constantly developing understanding of Scripture in the Church and by the Church.¹⁴⁶ The objections leveled against these two attempts are serious, and no one seems to have proposed a sufficient solution. The fuller sense seems to reintroduce into exegesis the highly subjective and arbitrary method of the school of Alexandria, which has wrought such havoc in Christian biblical scholarship. The expansion of the concept of tradition seems to admit the emergence of a new revelation—another ominous phenomenon which may lead to the divinization of the papacy as it did towards the end of the Middle Ages.¹⁴⁷

Still another attempt has been made by some theologians to solve the problem. They believe they are authorized to conclude from the unanimity of the Church's ordinary and universal teaching of a doctrine to its authenticity or apostolicity.¹⁴⁸ From this point of view, this theory seems related to the concept of expanded tradition. This argument is evidently based on the argument of Vincent of Lerins, with only one difference: it lacks a very important element, i.e. the element of antiquity. It can be objected to this method that as far as sound history is concerned, it is a blind leap into the darkness. No serious historian will feel authorized to conclude from the existence of a contemporary consensus concerning a doctrine to the presence of

¹⁴⁵ Cf. P. Synave and P. Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration* (New York, 1961) pp. 149–51; R. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore, 1955); "The Sensus Plenior in the Last Ten Years," *Cath. Bib. Quart.* 25 (1965) 262–85; R. North, "Scripture Trends in 1964," *Amer. Eccl. Rev.* 152 (1965) 361–97.

¹⁴⁶ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, pp. 18, 63ff., 6, 434–56.

¹⁴⁷ G. H. Tvard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York, 1959) chap. 10: "The Permanent Revelation."

¹⁴⁸ Cf. James Gaffney, "Scripture and Tradition in Catholic Thought," in *Vatican II*, pp. 147–50.

that doctrine in the preaching of the apostles. Many would also object to the assumption of the existence of a genuine consensus in the Church. The concept of consensus, according to them, implies the free expression of some kind of belief or decision. Now an unbiased historian well knows that any kind of consensus in the Church has been strictly controlled and even imposed on the faithful by highly centralized authority. Msgr. Drinkwater has ably and with great humor shown how much that consensus is worth: "There is heard only, so to speak, a single gramophone record playing on and on."¹⁴⁹

Some theologians suggest a more radical solution. They assume the fact of the development of doctrines in the Church—a fact which only extremists would deny. They call it a legitimate and healthy phenomenon in the living Church. However, they would never view the results of the development as the apostolic teaching but rather as an ecclesiastical interpretation.

To recapitulate the argument of the second part of the present essay, one can say that, according to the Fathers of the third century and of the golden age, the gospel or apostolic tradition as contained in Scripture and interpreted by the Church in the light of her tradition is the criterion of teaching and the norm of faith.

CONCLUSION

The task of the present essay was to determine the criterion of teaching and the norm of faith in the patristic Church. We have arrived at the conclusion that Scripture and tradition played this role, but not in the same measure. Scripture was for the Fathers the ultimate criterion and norm, supreme wisdom, and all-sufficient for salvation—but Scripture guarded and interpreted in the Church and by the Church in the light of tradition. The concept of tradition, as contrasted with Scripture, developed gradually. At first, in the latter half of the second and the earlier part of the third century, it meant the rule of faith, i.e., the pattern or summary of the Church's teaching in whatever form of worship and life it might have been expressed. In the third and the following centuries the concept of tradition was expanded to comprise not only the preaching and catechetical instruc-

¹⁴⁹ F. H. Drinkwater, "Ordinary and Universal," *Clergy Review*, Jan., 1965, pp. 2-22; cf. p. 19.

tions of the Church, but also the liturgy, the Apostles' Creed, the decisions of synods and general councils, the appeal to the Fathers—all recognized as depositories of the Church's living patrimony, as either emanating from the apostles or confirming and explaining their teaching. To be sure, Scripture and tradition were always viewed as modes, identical in content and different in form, of the transmission of the original gospel or apostolic tradition. In addition to this kind of tradition, there emerged in the early third century the concept of purely oral traditions to be developed in the following centuries. However, those traditions were confined rather to ancient customs and rites. From the doctrinal point of view, they have not contributed anything new, at least not directly. As has been hinted, the Church and its ministers (magisterium) played an increasingly important role in preaching, guarding, and interpreting the norm of teaching and faith. Now it is important to keep in mind the fact that by the Church the Fathers meant the new People of God, the mystical Body of Christ inhabited by the Holy Spirit as its soul, served and guided by its ministers.