

November 6, 2005 Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The first extant Christian use of the word "tradition" (*paradosis*) is found in what appears to be the second earliest book in the New Testament, where the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church at Thessaloniki, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the *traditions* that you were *taught* by us, either by the *spoken word* or by our *letter*" (2 Thessalonians 2:15, emphasis added). I suggest four points of interest in this text.

First, Paul's "traditions" had to do with what was "taught" (*didachthete*). They were doctrinal. That is to say, these "traditions" referred, not to customs particular to the congregation at Thessaloniki, but to authoritative instructions of an Apostle.

In this respect it is useful to consult the full context of that reference, which Paul began by writing, "But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and faith of the truth. To this he called you through our Gospel" (2:13-14). Paul's "traditions," then, had to do with the apostolic Gospel (*dia evaggelion hemon*) and the true faith, or "faith of the truth" (*pistis aletheias*).

Second, Paul uses the noun *paradosis* in the plural, which suggests that he is thinking, not of a general abstraction, but of individual components integral to the Gospel.

Third, those apostolic traditions were both oral and written down, "either by the spoken word (*dia logou*) or by our letter (*di' epistoles hemon*)." The two references here are easy to discern and are both worthy of more comment.

The "spoken word" had to do with the catechesis given to the Thessalonians during the three weeks that Paul was among them (Acts 17:2). The context of that instruction was their baptism. This fact is significant, because it means that the "traditions" bore an implicit ecclesial and sacramental reference. The sheer brevity of the Thessalonians' formal instruction permits us the better to perceive its relationship to their baptism.

The "traditions," those teachings that were "handed on," were thus placed in a sacramental context. Indeed, from the beginning, the preaching of the Apostles was directly connected to certain sacramental rites (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:23). Their teachings were inseparable from apostolic communion and worship, those very components of the common life that Luke describes: "And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation.' So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the

apostles' teaching (*didache*) and communion (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:41-42).

The second reference here, in addition to the "spoken word," is "through our epistle," a clear allusion to the earlier letter that Paul sent to the Church of the Thessalonians. This epistle, then, and by extension all writings of the Apostles, likewise pertained to the "traditions."

In this respect it is important, I believe, not to interject into Paul's formula a later controversy between the Protestants and the Council of Trent. We observe that Paul does not distinguish between "Scripture and Tradition." For him, the apostolic writings are not a separate entity, something apart from and somehow superior to the traditions. The Scriptures are one of the means by which the "traditions" are handed down. Whether written down or conveyed orally, the "traditions" are of the same weight, because the apostolic authority is identical.

Fourth, the Church at Thessaloniki was presumed to know what Paul had taught them, whether orally or by writing. The Church at Thessaloniki bore a special responsibility by reason of that teaching. It was a church founded by the Apostles themselves; theirs was not a derivative tradition. The believers at Thessaloniki did not form just one more local church. Theirs was an apostolic church. In the second century, when the churches began to "canonize" the apostolic writings into what came to be called the New Testament, this fact would make a great difference. It was the immediacy of the apostolic witness in certain local churches that gave those churches, in the eyes of other Christians, a special kind of authority as witnesses.

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