

The Relation of Revelation and Tradition in the Theology of John Henry Newman and Joseph Ratzinger

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Abstract

Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI called Blessed John Henry Newman “an important influence in my own life and thought.” In his memoirs, Ratzinger describes the energy with which Newman’s work on conscience, history, and on the development of doctrine was read and discussed in his seminary days. Yet, in terms of Ratzinger’s own work on history, tradition, and revelation, he makes almost no direct mention of Newman in his writings over his long theological career. This paper, by comparing the two theologians’ writings on the subject, seeks to ascertain whether and to what extent Newman’s theology of tradition and revelation had an impact on Ratzinger’s theology.

Keywords

Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, Newman, Tradition, Revelation

In an address on the vigil of the beatification of John Henry Cardinal Newman in 2010, Pope Benedict XVI told the crowd, “As you know, Newman has long been an important influence in my own life and thought.”¹ Benedict did not elaborate, either in the remainder of this address or in his beatification homily on the subsequent day, how Newman influenced him. But in an address on the centenary of the death of Newman two decades earlier, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, in an autobiographical reflection, did describe “my own way to Newman.”² While a seminarian in Germany after the Second World War, a

¹ Address of Benedict XVI at the Prayer Vigil on the Eve of the Beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman, 18 September 2010. Available at <www.vatican.va>

² Presentation by His Eminence Card. Joseph Ratzinger on the Occasion of the First Centenary of the Death of Card. John Henry Newman, 28 April 1990. Available at <www.vatican.va>

fellow seminarian and two theologians introduced Ratzinger to Newman's thoughts on conscience and the development of doctrine; in his address Ratzinger called Newman's teaching on these two themes "his decisive contribution to the renewal of theology."³ Regarding the latter teaching Ratzinger stated that Newman "had placed the key in our hand to build historical thought in theology, or much more, he taught us to think historically in theology and so to recognize the identity of faith in all developments."⁴

Despite the importance of history in Ratzinger's theological project,⁵ he makes only a few glancing references to Newman in his work on the theology of tradition. Ratzinger exhibits clear knowledge of Newman's work on the development of doctrine,⁶ yet he does not engage or draw on Newman directly in his own work on tradition. In fact, Ratzinger recalled in his memoirs that he owed his understanding of revelation, Scripture, and tradition to St. Bonaventure, not to anyone else.⁷ This essay argues that even though a straight line between Newman and Ratzinger on tradition cannot be easily drawn, Ratzinger's understanding of the Church's living tradition certainly shares many similarities with Newman, and the future pope's centenary address points to the common element of their respective perspectives: the understanding of revelation as objectively revealed by God yet living and developing in history through subjective encounters in the Church.

Revelation as the Source of Tradition in Newman's Theology

According to Günter Biemer, Newman's fifteenth sermon before the University of Oxford marked his "break-through to a new concept of tradition."⁸ Prior to this point, "Newman had really envisaged only the mechanical concept of tradition which was generally in vogue. He had cherished the idea that formulas verbally identical had been

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Tracey Rowland argues that near the heart of Ratzinger's theological project is "coming to an understanding of the mediation of history within the realm of ontology," which he deemed the "fundamental crisis of our age." See *Benedict XVI: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 8, 93; quotation at 93.

⁶ See Joseph Ratzinger, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation:" [hereafter "Constitution"], *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, trans. William Glen-Doepel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 156; and Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 91-92.

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 108-109.

⁸ Günter Biemer, *Newman on Tradition*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 51.

handed on, and that this repetition had assured the essential identity of doctrine.”⁹ This “mechanical concept” receives sharp criticism from Ratzinger on account of its positivistic understanding of revelation, which limits God’s action to one particular moment after which he ceased speaking to man in history.¹⁰ For this reason he deems insufficient Vincent of Lérins’s “static *semper*”—taken from his understanding of tradition as what has been held *semper, ubique, ab omnibus*—because in twentieth century theology, revelation is “no longer adequately expressed by the simple ideas of a given fact and its explanation.”¹¹

Newman, reflecting in his fifteenth Oxford sermon on Mary’s own internal pondering of the events surrounding Jesus’ birth, expressed a “new concept of tradition” that “represents a decisive turning-point not only in Newman’s life, but in the theology of tradition.”¹²

[A]ccording to Newman, Mary represents the prototype and model of the true Christian and of true Christianity. Christianity too, the true Church, has the duty of preserving well the revelation entrusted to it. The Church too will meditate upon it in the course of time. The result of the Church’s meditation in the course of time on the word of God is displayed constantly through new insights. The exploring and explicating thought of the Church is actually necessary, if it is to be true to the structure and content of the gospels.¹³

In imitation of Mary, the Church does more than simply propose the revealed word of God entrusted to her as a mirror reflects light: the Church meditates on the revelation she has received, and, over time and with the help of external circumstances, this reflection gives rise to new insights and understandings of this revelation. Revelation,

⁹ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

¹⁰ Ratzinger, “Constitution,” 175.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 187-188. Thomas G. Guarino argues that Ratzinger, along with Yves Congar and other theologians of the conciliar period, has mischaracterized Vincent’s canon, for they have failed to see that “[t]radition, for Vincent, is a dynamic, organic process, deeply rooted in Scripture, while allowing for a harmonious, architectonic unfolding.” See *Vincent of Lérins and the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 2-3, 81-82; quotation at 81. Guarino also offers a detailed analysis of Newman’s career long encounter with Lérins, including how Newman’s understanding of Lérins’s canon developed as Newman moved from the Anglican Church to the Catholic Church. See Chapter 2. For the advantages of Newman’s approach to doctrinal development over that of Lérins, see Biemer, *Newman on Tradition*, 131-134.

¹² Biemer, *Newman on Tradition*, 52. Biemer precedes this comment by noting that, contrary to the opinion of Owen Chadwick, this new turn in Newman’s thought did have roots in his earlier work. See pages 48-51.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 52. For Yves Congar’s similar gloss on this passage in Newman’s sermon, see *Tradition and Traditions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), 253-254.

therefore, is not a positivistic “static *semper*” but a living and growing encounter with the word of God.¹⁴

In his writings Newman uses the term “revelation” broadly and colorfully, defining it as “God’s voice speaking”¹⁵ and “the manifestation of the Invisible Divine Power, or in the substitution of the voice of a Lawgiver for the voice of conscience.”¹⁶ However, by underscoring the reality of God’s voice, these poetic images coincide with the more technical definition he gives in his brief essay known as “The Newman-Perrone Paper on Development:” “[T]he revealed word of God is that gift of Gospel truth, or deposit of faith, given in its fullness by Christ to his Apostles and by his Apostles to the Church, and transmitted whole and entire through the ages, even to the final consummation.”¹⁷ God’s own voice reveals his word, the deposit of faith that has been entrusted to the Church by Christ and the Apostles. Revelation, then, as “word,” necessarily requires a recipient to hear it and put it into practice. A sort of dialogue thus ensues whereby the word communicates and develops in the minds of the faithful. This “dialogue,” since it takes place “through the ages,” creates a diachronic dimension in Newman’s understanding of revelation as living in history. Additionally, his inclusion of conscience in his more florid definitions is significant: just as conscience is the supreme element of natural religion, Scripture, the Church, and the see of Rome are the guiding elements of revealed religion.¹⁸

In his exchange with Perrone, Newman introduces a very significant distinction into his understanding of the word of God.

God’s word has two aspects. In part it is subjective and in part objective. It is to be termed objective insofar as it has been, and will continue to be transmitted, from Christ, from the Apostles, from the Supreme Pontiff, from Ecumenical Councils in dogmas. But everything that has been everywhere handed down unanimously, not by design or in virtue of any definition, but freely and spontaneously, with depth of feeling and variety of expression, is subjective to the mind of Catholics.¹⁹

¹⁴ In addition to the Fifteenth Oxford Sermon, this thinking is echoed in Newman’s note on the “logical sequence” of an idea’s development in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 189-195.

¹⁵ Quoted in *Newman on Tradition*, 115; the citation is from Newman’s *Parochial Sermons*, IV.

¹⁶ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* [hereafter *Essay*] (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 86.

¹⁷ John Henry Newman, *Roman Catholic Writings on Doctrinal Development*, ed. and trans. James Gaffney (Kansas City, Missouri: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 11.

¹⁸ Newman, *Essay*, 86. Biemer asserts that, by virtue of Newman’s illative sense, “the act of tradition may be described as the functioning of the conscience of the Church.” *Newman on Tradition*, 147.

¹⁹ Newman, *Roman Catholic Writings on Doctrinal Development*, 12.

This distinction between subjective and objective aspects of revelation allows Newman to moor his account of the development of Christian doctrine in the harbor of the Council of Trent without falling into the opposing errors of liberalism and positivistic understanding of revelation.²⁰ The word of God, which exists in itself or “in the form of dogma,” is objective primarily “in the intellect of the Holy Spirit, to whom, as its supreme author and giver, the whole revelation is in every respect entirely manifest,” and also “in the intellect” of the Apostles and the Church of Rome.²¹ This objective revelation, given once and for all in Christ, impresses itself into the minds and hearts of the faithful, the “subjects” of the Church, in whom, upon meditation and instruction, the word of God becomes “alive and active in the intellect, no longer as a shadow of truth but as a reality, with its own foundation and properties.”²² However, “[e]ven though the word of God has parts, those parts are not thrown together randomly but constitute a single whole. Their coherence and consistency are such that all together comprise one totality.”²³ The singular event of revelation, then, has both static and dynamic elements.²⁴ It is not a dead proposition but the living word of God in history.

Newman does not examine the relationship between revelation and tradition in a systematic or ordered manner. According to Biemer, Newman sees tradition in its sacred sense as beginning after revelation ceased with the death of the last Apostle.²⁵ Yet a continuum between revelation and tradition becomes evident by comparing Newman’s definition of objective and subjective revelation with his terms “Episcopal Tradition” and “Prophetic Tradition,” which he describes in his *Via Media*.²⁶

Episcopal Tradition consists of both the Creed, which “is delineated and recognized in Scripture itself . . . and again, in the writings of

²⁰ Biemer, *Newman on Tradition*, 131.

²¹ Newman, *Roman Catholic Writings on Doctrinal Development*, 11. Newman adds that “the word of God cannot be regarded otherwise than as present in some intellect, in a way that does not detract from its integrity and fullness, nor inject any alien taint into the natural luster of divine realities.” *Ibid.*, 11.

²² *Ibid.*, 15. Cf. John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford between A.D. 1826 and 1843* [hereafter *Oxford Sermons*] (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 333.

²³ Newman, *Roman Catholic Writings on Doctrinal Development*, 14.

²⁴ Biemer, *Newman on Tradition*, 126-129.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁶ John Henry Newman, *The Via Media of the Anglican Church. Illustrated in Lectures, Letters, and Tracts written between 1830-1841*, Vol. 1 (London: Gilbert and Rivington, 1877), 249-251. Biemer summarizes the two terms in *Newman on Tradition*, 46-47. For a more recent account see John McDade, S.J., “Episcopal and Prophetic Traditions in the Church,” *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1038 (2011): 176-188. The summary that follows is my own.

the Fathers,”²⁷ and has been passed along at baptism through the guarantee of episcopal succession, as well as traditions handed on orally or in practice, such as rites and ceremonies, from the earliest days of Christianity. Tradition in oral form or in practices “is of the nature of a written document, and has an evidence of its Apostolic origin the same in kind with that adducible for the Scriptures.”²⁸ Newman’s Episcopal Tradition, then, is the authoritative continuation of the objective word of God revealed by Christ and passed on to the Church. Since Newman holds that the Creed expresses the deposit of faith,²⁹ then, in addition to a means of instruction, the Creed functions as an extension of the gospel in time. However, the Apostolic traditions (in the sense of practices) of the Church are as authoritative as Scripture, implying that, first, revelation is more than Scripture alone, and, second, that these traditions also belong to the deposit of faith. Because Newman’s definition of the word of God includes a diachronic element, it follows that revelation, after the death of the last Apostle, is handed on authoritatively by the Church in the Episcopal Tradition in the form of dogma, as mentioned above.

Prophetic Tradition, on the other hand, is a manifestation of Newman’s understanding of the subjective aspect of the word of God. The Prophetic Tradition consists of the teachings and interpretations of revelation by the Church’s prophets—doctors—whose teachings form

a certain body of Truth, pervading the Church like an atmosphere . . . partly written, partly unwritten, partly the interpretation, partly the supplement of Scripture, partly preserved in intellectual expressions, partly latent in the spirit and temper of Christians; poured to and fro in closets and upon the housetops, in liturgies, in controversial works, in obscure fragments, in sermons, in popular prejudices, in local customs.³⁰

After objective revelation impresses itself on the subjective mind of the believer, understanding of revelation grows and develops in the life of the Church through a variety of expressions and practices, as discussed above. Biemer argues that Newman’s Prophetic Tradition “brings out better the dynamic nature of the faith as attested by the Church” because of its ongoing nature.³¹ This prophetic form of tradition, therefore, is alive and growing.

Newman has this form of living tradition in mind in his *Lectures on the Present Condition of Catholics in England*, where he argues

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 249.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Biemer, *Newman on Tradition*, 95: “Newman often treats the Creed in a wide sense as the equivalent of the deposit.”

³⁰ Newman, *Via Media*, 250.

³¹ Biemer, *Newman on Tradition*, 47.

that practices, thinking, principles, judgments, and the like reveal the very life of Catholics, “and what is here called life the Catholic calls Tradition.”³² Against Protestants who believe Catholic tradition is a thesaurus of written statements, Newman counters that tradition is necessarily unwritten because “Tradition is uniform custom. It is silent, but it lives. It is silent like the rapids of a river, before the rocks intercept it. It is the Church’s . . . habit of opinion and feeling, which she reflects upon, masters and expresses, according to the emergency.”³³ Catholic tradition, like a flowing river, exhibits its dynamism and vitality as it is experienced in history in the lives of believers.

Continuing Newman’s analogy, the source of the river of tradition is revelation, the understanding of which, though definitively revealed once and for all, continues to grow and develop in time, and it does so precisely because it subsists in the Church.³⁴ Thus the Church is the *sine qua non* of revelation, for to her alone has the word of God been entrusted; she forms the banks in which the river is contained. Because of this Biemer calls Newman’s conception of the Catholic Church

the key to the integration of the prophetic and episcopal tradition, and to their indissoluble connexion with scripture as the source of faith. He thus did justice to the historical reality of the Church, that is, to the changes constantly seen in creeds and dogmas. And he also gave due place to the human and dynamic aspect of the Church: the effort of thought and penetration, of formulation and re-formulation which the inadequacy of human words makes imperative. Finally, he also included in his new principle the divine and all-transcendent element of the Church: the work of the Paraclete, who alone preserves the truth of revelation and the revelation of truth.³⁵

In his *Essay* Newman addresses the relationship between revelation, the Church, and her infallibility. In arguing against Protestants who deny the doctrinal authority of the Church, Newman asserts that “common sense” implies “that some authority must there be if there is a revelation given, and other authority there is none” except the

³² John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Present Difficulties of Catholics in England* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1896), 326. Cf. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 369: “Tradition as coextensive and fundamentally identified with the Christian life as handed on in the Church since the time of the apostles is the proper milieu of faith.”

³³ *Ibid.*, 328.

³⁴ In the *Essay* Newman compares the central idea of a philosophy or belief to a stream, which, contrary to popular belief, is not clearer near the spring; rather the idea “is more equable, and purer, and stronger, when its bed has become deep, and broad, and full.” *Essay*, 40. It follows according to Newman’s theory of the development of doctrine that the truths of revelation become better known after they have been meditated upon, or even challenged, and then formulated into dogma.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

Church.³⁶ Without an authority infallible in its judgment there can be no agreement on the truth of Christianity; thus the gift of infallibility “secures the object, while it gives definiteness and force to the matter, of the Revelation.”³⁷ Here Newman’s understanding of the relationship of Scripture and tradition becomes apparent: although Scripture is pre-eminent since it is inspired by God,³⁸ the Church’s tradition interprets Scripture. However, Scripture functions as a “guardian” for tradition by supplying “a certain negative norm” against which the doctrines of tradition may be measured lest they contradict revelation in some way.³⁹

It is significant that Newman’s theology of tradition begins with revelation and finds its expression within the Church. In this way Newman anticipated, or perhaps influenced, the approach of the Second Vatican Council’s *Dei Verbum* a century later; this is also the approach of Joseph Ratzinger, as will be examined below. By way of summary, Newman believes that the Incarnation is the central idea of Christianity:⁴⁰ Christ himself taught his Apostles, who in turn handed on his divine word to the Church. What the Apostles and their successors the bishops handed on and believed, in the form of writings and oral practices, constitute Catholic tradition for Newman.⁴¹ Thus revelation precedes Scripture in time and exceeds it in scope, although the former cannot be separated from the latter.⁴² The “ears of faith” bring the objective word of God into “the mind of the Catholic world” through “the ministering and teaching Church.”⁴³ Once received in the mind, this divine word is

distinguished and arranged; it is given a shape, strengthened by tests It goes through alterations, displaying different complexions and different learnings in accordance with different ages. In its manifestations it resembles ideas occupying the mind of some philosopher who, over the course of many years, ponders them, discusses them, and brings them to maturity.⁴⁴

³⁶ Newman, *Essay*, 88-89. Cf. “The gift of inspiration requires as its complement the gift of infallibility,” John Henry Newman, *On the Inspiration of Scripture* (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Books, 1967), 111 (§ 15).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 91. For a summary of Newman’s position on the Church as infallible interpreter of revelation, see John Coulson, *Newman and the Common Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 74-82.

³⁸ Biemer, *Newman on Tradition*, 153.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴¹ Although Newman mixes the terms “tradition” and “Tradition” with a capital “T” in the *Essay*, with both he essentially means, in the words of James Gaffney, “what Christians had always, at least implicitly, believed.” James Gaffney, Preface to *Roman Catholic Writings on Doctrinal Development*, xv.

⁴² See Newman, *Oxford Sermons*, 335.

⁴³ Newman, *Roman Catholic Writings on Doctrinal Development*, 19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Through meditation and study, the subjective aspect of the word not only helps the Church comprehend the objective word, but it can also pass into and become objective dogma. This is the essence of Newman's teaching on the development of doctrine, which elucidates his view of tradition: "Christian dogma really grows, rather than accumulates; there is no new beginning of truth, but the continuance of a real tradition."⁴⁵ This tradition itself has grown from revelation, which is the voice of God communicated by his Son, Jesus Christ, to the Apostles and to the Church.

Ratzinger's Knowledge of Newman's Theology of Tradition

Whereas Newman's theology of revelation and tradition must be pieced together from his various writings, Joseph Ratzinger, writing a century after Newman and in a very different theological milieu, devoted, early in his career, a book length essay to their relationship, entitled *Revelation and Tradition*,⁴⁶ which was written in the midst of the conciliar debates surrounding the document that would become *Dei Verbum*. According to Ratzinger a "new view of the phenomenon of tradition, which had been developing, for various reasons, from the beginning of the last century"⁴⁷ contributed to this new milieu:

The first impetus towards a new attitude to tradition came with the Romantic movement, for which tradition became a leading philosophical and theological idea. In the one case it was seen as an organically evolving process, and in the other appeared to be practically identical with the voice of the Church as living tradition. The controversy concerning the dogma of 1854 was a further milestone, for which—in default of biblical proof—tradition was made responsible, which could now, however, no longer be understood as the simple passing on of something that had been handed down once and for all, but had to be understood in terms of categories of growth, progress and the knowledge of faith that Romanticism had developed. The ideas that were developed in this connection by the Jesuit School in Rome not only had a decided influence on Newman's idea of development, which in turn gave rise to a varied literature on the subject of the development of dogma, but were also the basis of the later discussion that arose, in similar circumstances, concerning the dogma of 1950 and now placed

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁶ Originally published as Joseph Ratzinger and Karl Rahner, *Revelation and Tradition*, trans. W.J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966). Ratzinger's essay has been reissued with a new translation and a new title. See Joseph Ratzinger, "The Question of the Concept of Tradition: A Provisional Response," *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Thomas Söding, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 41-89. All citations in the following account are from the latter text.

⁴⁷ Ratzinger, "Constitution," 155.

the idea of the Church's knowledge through faith in the forefront of the idea of tradition.⁴⁸

Ratzinger's assertion that the Roman College influenced Newman's idea of development is noteworthy: Biemer names only Englishmen, namely Edward Hawkins, Richard Froude, and John Keble, as influences for Newman's thoughts on tradition.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Newman composed his Fifteenth Oxford Sermon and his *Essay*, his most complete works on the subject, before he studied in Rome. Biemer, Gerald McCool, and Aidan Nichols suggest that Newman's approach took shape alongside the similar approach developed by the nineteenth century Tübingen School that incorporated Schelling's idealism into an historical, as opposed to a Kantian and positivistic, theology of tradition.⁵⁰ Yves Congar also sees Newman's "decisive contribution to the problem of the relationship between magisterium and history in tradition" as developing independently from continental influence.⁵¹ In fact, Congar presents Newman as an original thinker whose theology of tradition and revelation grew from his rejection of the Anglican Church's "completely textual and historical idea of tradition."⁵² As for Ratzinger's statement concerning the influence of the Roman College on Newman, both sides were cool to the other: Newman maintained that the professors in Rome were ignorant in matters of history, while the Roman academics viewed Newman's work with

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 155-156.

⁴⁹ Biemer, *Newman on Tradition*, 36-42. Newman, in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), credits Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion* for exposing him to "the historical character of Revelation" (30).

⁵⁰ See *Newman on Tradition*, 52. Gerald McCool, *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), 67-75; the reference to Newman, the only one in the book, is at 67. Although it is beyond the present scope, it is noteworthy that McCool's summary of Johann Sebastian von Drey's (founder of the Tübingen School in 1817) theory of a "formative idea" that develops in Christianity is remarkably similar to Newman's account of the development of ideas in the *Essay*, similar enough that one may allow for the possibility of Newman's acquaintance with the German idealists. McCool's summary is at 71. However, Philip C. Rule insists that Newman did not read German and therefore was cut off from Germany's philosophical and theological happenings. See *Coleridge and Newman: The Centrality of Conscience* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 26-27. Aidan Nichols states that interest in development emerged independently in England, Germany, and Rome. See *From Newman to Congar: The Idea of Doctrinal Development from the Victorians to the Second Vatican Council* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 5.

⁵¹ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 211. Congar notes that Newman and Johann Adam Möhler (1796-1838) were the first Catholics to work out a theory of development (217-218). One could add, based on the above discussion, that the two did so roughly contemporaneously and likely without a great familiarity with the other's work.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 210.

suspicion.⁵³ To Newman's criticism, Congar maintains that the Roman College's theology of tradition was far from advanced; J.B. Franzelin eventually made contributions to this field, but he did not arrive at the College until 1851, four years after Newman's departure and six years after the publication of his *Essay*.⁵⁴

Given his account of the sources of Newman's theology, it is fair to ask how intimately Ratzinger was acquainted with the intricacies of Newman's theology of tradition and development. As mentioned initially, Ratzinger certainly demonstrates knowledge of the heart of Newman's theory on development. For example, in an essay on the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, Ratzinger speaks of "the idea of development" and "the historical dynamism of the Church" in a manner reminiscent of Newman's stream analogy: "a body maintains its identity by the fact that it constantly becomes new in the process of living There is real identity with the origin only when there is at the same time a living continuity that unfolds it and thereby preserves it."⁵⁵

In his Centenary Address quoted above, Ratzinger notes that he first "found access to Newman's teaching on the development of doctrine" as a seminarian through the work of Heinrich Fries. Tracey Rowland identifies one of Fries's works, *Die Religionsphilosophie Newmans*, which appeared in 1948 while Ratzinger was still a seminarian.⁵⁶ In subsequent years, Fries also published two articles focused more pointedly on Newman's work on tradition and development.⁵⁷ These two articles appeared just before the 1957 acceptance and publication of Ratzinger's own *habilitationschrift* on St. Bonaventure's theology of revelation, a work that does not mention

⁵³ Mark F. Fischer, *Catholic Hermeneutics: The Theology of Tradition and the Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1983), 304.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 196-197. Franzelin's flagship work on the topic, *Tractatus de divina traditione et scriptura*, was published in 1870.

⁵⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*, trans. Michael J. Miller et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 16-17. This passage is identified by Tracey Rowland in *Benedict XVI: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 69, but in a slightly different context.

⁵⁶ Rowland, *Benedict XVI: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 12n20. "Presentation by His Eminence Card. Joseph Ratzinger on the Occasion of the First Centenary of the Death of Card. John Henry Newman." Heinrich Fries, *Die Religionsphilosophie Newmans* (Stuttgart: Schwabenverlag, 1948).

⁵⁷ Heinrich Fries, "Die Dogmengeschichte des fünften Jahrhunderts im theologischen Werdegang von John Henry Newman," *Das Konzil von Chalkedon*, ed. Alois Grillmeier (Würzburg, 1954), III, 421-454; and Heinrich Fries, "Henry Newmans Beitrag zum Verständnis der Tradition," *Vita et Veritati: Festgabe für Karl Adam* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1956), 103-143.

Newman.⁵⁸ It is perhaps through these two detailed summaries by Fries of the heart of Newman's thought that Ratzinger "found access" ("*trovai l'accesso*") to Newman, a term that is difficult to measure, particularly in such a testimony, but it seems to imply two related points. First, at this stage in his studies Ratzinger did not read Newman directly, but through Fries. Second, at least early in his career, Ratzinger's encounter with Newman's theory of development differed in degree from the formal study that he had of Newman's theory on conscience and of his *Grammar of Assent* during his seminary years. Newman's theory on conscience not only figures as the *leitmotif* in Ratzinger's aforementioned Address, but it is also the subject of a presentation the future pope made in the United States in 1991.⁵⁹

Yet given the precision with which Fries summarized and analyzed Newman, Ratzinger's comment about the Roman School influencing Newman's thought remains mysterious: Fries explains how Newman, after he arrived in Rome, willingly submitted a Latin version of his theory of development to Giovanni Perrone, S.J., a professor at the Roman College.⁶⁰ Perrone made comments and minor criticisms in the margins of Newman's work, but, on the whole, accepted Newman's thesis on development as it had been written by Newman before he came to Rome.⁶¹

It seems, then, that on the topic of tradition and development Ratzinger did not pour over Newman to the same extent that he did Augustine on ecclesiology or Bonaventure on revelation.⁶² Aside from Newman, Ratzinger's theology of tradition also has other influences, with Bonaventure and the Tübingen School's major exponent J.R. Geiselmann most prominent among them.⁶³ Ratzinger's varied explanation of the source of Newman's theology of development

⁵⁸ Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1989).

⁵⁹ This presentation has been published as one of two essays in Joseph Ratzinger, *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007): 11–41. Ratzinger does not seem to have given equivalent attention to Newman's theory on development or tradition in his long career of theological writing.

⁶⁰ Fries, "Henry Newman's Beitrag zum Verständnis der Tradition," 135–136. "Wir haben darüber eine schriftliche Fixierung von Newman selbst mit kommentierenden Zusätzen des römischen Theologen . . . Perrone präzisiert sie vor allem im Blick auf das Moment der Autorität der Kirche und der klaren Unterscheidung zwischen Zeugnis und Autorität."

⁶¹ According to James Gaffney, Newman and Perrone's "positions appear to assume different slants while sharing the same foundation." See Introduction to *Roman Catholic Writings on Development*, 8.

⁶² Rowland paraphrases Ratzinger's studies of Newman in *Benedict XVI: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 12–13. Ratzinger also mentions his studies of Newman on conscience in *Milestones*, 43.

⁶³ Geiselmann's own work on tradition is examined carefully by Ratzinger in both "Constitution" and "The Question of the Concept of Tradition." For Geiselmann's role

anticipates the conclusion of this essay: that the new theological milieu of the mid-twentieth century makes Ratzinger an heir, rather than a direct student or disciple, of Newman's work on tradition.

The Revelation of Christ and the Living Tradition in Ratzinger's Theology

In the midst of the conciliar debates, Ratzinger, spurred by the discussion of the material sufficiency of Scripture, sought to solve the tension between the relation of Scripture and tradition by reaching beyond them

to their inner source: the revelation, the living word of God, from which Scripture and tradition both spring and without which neither can be grasped in the importance they have for faith. The question of "Scripture and tradition" remains insoluble so long as it is not expanded to a question of "revelation and tradition" and thereby inserted into the larger context in which it belongs.⁶⁴

Ratzinger begins his answer to "the question of 'revelation and tradition'" by addressing the source of tradition's existence:

The fact that there is "tradition" rests first of all on the incongruence between the two entities "revelation" and "Scripture". For revelation signifies all God's acts and utterances directed to man; it signifies a *reality* of which Scripture gives us *information* but that *is* not simply Scripture itself. Revelation goes beyond Scripture, then, to the same extent as reality goes beyond information about it. We could also say that Scripture is the material principal of revelation . . . but is not that revelation itself.⁶⁵

Ratzinger sees revelation as preceding Scripture in time and exceeding it in scope because "God's acts and utterances" come first and transcend the limits of any text. Although this coincides with Newman's thinking, as mentioned above, Ratzinger acknowledges Bonaventure as his source for the formal and temporal priority of revelation.⁶⁶

Ratzinger makes the further point that "revelation always and only becomes a reality where there is faith" because, as a living reality,

in advancing the prominence of the Tübingen School, see McCool, *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism*, 68.

⁶⁴ Ratzinger, "The Question of the Concept of Tradition," 50.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 51. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Cf. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 108-109: "[I]f Bonaventure is right, then revelation precedes Scripture and becomes deposited in Scripture but is not simply identical with it. This in turn means that revelation is always something greater than what is merely written down."

revelation “requires a living person as the locus of its presence.”⁶⁷ From this Ratzinger concludes that revelation “has its basis in God” yet it also simultaneously “happens to man in faith.”⁶⁸ This distinction resonates with Newman’s objective and subjective aspects of the word of God: the former, the deposit of faith, exists “alive and active in the intellect” of the faithful “as a reality.”⁶⁹ In both cases revelation is a living reality that is experienced throughout history as a dynamic encounter between God and man in faith. However, Ratzinger’s insight cannot be attributed, at least solely, to Newman: Aaron Canty has demonstrated that Ratzinger’s understanding of the objective and subjective dimensions of revelation and their dependence on faith stem directly from Bonaventure and is expressed in Ratzinger’s *The Theology of History of St. Bonaventure*.⁷⁰ Yet the similarity between Ratzinger and Newman on this point is too great to ignore.

With regard to their understanding of what God revealed, Ratzinger goes beyond Newman, who, defining revelation as “God’s voice speaking” and “the manifestation of the Invisible Divine Power,” does not, at least explicitly, highlight the role of Jesus Christ in revelation. For Ratzinger

[t]he reality that comes to be in Christian revelation is nothing and no one other than Christ himself. . . . Accordingly, receiving revelation is considered equivalent to entering the reality of Christ, from which emerges that dual objective situation that Paul describes alternately with the words “Christ in us” and “we in Christ.”⁷¹

Whereas Newman in his exchange with Perrone called revelation the word of God given by Christ, Ratzinger realizes that with Christ “we have *the* Word. Christ no longer speaks merely of God, but he is himself the speech of God.”⁷² The revelation of Christ the Word is received in the dialogical act of faith both by the individual and by the community of believers, the Church. Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, is both the speaker and the content of “the dialogue of salvation, the communication from person to person that takes place in the

⁶⁷ Ratzinger, “The Question of the Concept of Tradition,” 52.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶⁹ See note 22, above.

⁷⁰ Aaron Canty, “Bonaventurian Resonances in Benedict XVI’s Theology of Revelation,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 5, no. 2 (2007): 249-266. In Canty’s summary of Bonaventure on the forms of revelation, “The subjective dimension of revelation, that is, what pertains to an individual’s penetrating vision of the intelligible world, is bound up with prophecy and contemplation. The objective dimension of revelation, that is, what pertains to the content of revelation, is found in Scripture and the understanding of Scripture as articulated by the Fathers of the Church.” Quotation at 253.

⁷¹ Ratzinger, “The Question of the Concept of Tradition,” 56.

⁷² Ratzinger, “Constitution,” 175. Emphasis in original.

word.”⁷³ Thus Ratzinger concludes “that the presence of revelation essentially has to do with the realities of ‘faith’ and ‘Church,’” which are closely related.⁷⁴ Because the Church is Christ’s body, Christ is living and present as his Spirit works within her.⁷⁵ Moreover, in the Church the reality of Christ is proclaimed, and “proclamation, accordingly, is by its nature interpretation (explication).”⁷⁶

With this background, Ratzinger sets forth four “strata” concerning “the concept of tradition (or rather, the reality called tradition).”⁷⁷ First, because of Christ’s enduring presence in the Church, “the entire mystery of Christ’s presence is in the first instance the whole reality that is transmitted in tradition, the decisive and fundamental reality that is always antecedent to all individual explications, even those of Scripture.” Second, tradition “exists in concrete form as presence in faith, which in turn, as the indwelling of Christ, is antecedent to all particular explications *and is fruitful and living*, and, thus, explaining itself throughout all ages.” Third, tradition “has its organ in the authority of the Church, that is, in those who have authority in her.” Fourth, tradition “also exists, however, as already articulated in what has, on the basis of the authority of faith, already become the rule of faith (the creed, *fides quae*).”⁷⁸ In sum, tradition is the abiding reality of Christ’s living and enduring presence in his body as is expressed in the rule of faith and is transmitted through and interpreted by the Church.⁷⁹

There are noteworthy differences in the accounts of the relationship of revelation and tradition by Newman and Ratzinger. First, Newman does not explicitly define the precise relationship between revelation and tradition; Ratzinger, as was noted, made their relationship the focus of his study. Second, Ratzinger’s depiction is deeply Christological, which is reflective of the different milieu in which he was writing. Third, whereas by “tradition” Newman intends the Tridentine sense of concrete practices and beliefs, Ratzinger, following the work of Congar later incorporated into *Dei Verbum*, uses “tradition” in the singular—“Tradition” with a capital “T”—and therefore

⁷³ Ibid., 179. Ratzinger reiterates the dialogical character of revelation throughout his commentary.

⁷⁴ Ratzinger, “The Question of the Concept of Tradition,” 57-58.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁶ Ibid. The authority to interpret comes from the presence of Christ’s Spirit in his body, the Church. See Ibid., 63.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 63-64. Emphasis added.

⁷⁹ Ratzinger expresses this same idea with a pneumatological accent in “Constitution:” “[T]radition takes place essentially as the growing insight, mediated by the Holy Spirit, into revelation that has been given once and for all; it is the *perfectio* of faith which the Spirit brings about in the Church” (179).

general sense of the Church's interpretation of revelation.⁸⁰ Fourth, Newman bases his understanding of living tradition on the development of doctrine that explains how the word of God grows over time; for Ratzinger tradition is living because in the Church "Christ is not dead, but living; not merely the Christ of yesterday, but just as much the Christ of today and tomorrow."⁸¹

In an essay concerning the Anglican-Catholic dialogue two decades later, Ratzinger reformulated these last two points on tradition as interpretation and as living. Especially noteworthy is the fact that the two points are now closer to Newman's formulations.

[I]n the Catholic Church the principle of "tradition" refers not only and not even in the first place to the permanency of ancient doctrines or texts that have been handed down, but to a certain way of coordinating the living word of the Church and the decisive written word of the Bible. Here "tradition" means above all that the Church, living in the form of apostolic succession with the Petrine office at its center, is the place in which the Bible is lived and interpreted in a binding way. This interpretation forms a historical continuity, setting fixed standards but never itself reaching a definitive point of completion after which it is a thing of the past. "Revelation" is completed, but the binding interpretation thereof is not So in Catholicism tradition is essentially characterized by the "living voice"—that is, by the obligatory nature of the teaching of the universal Church.⁸²

Although "tradition" as singular is still a development beyond Newman, the emphasis on apostolic succession⁸³ in interpreting the Bible to form "a historical continuity" resembles Newman's account of doctrine developing from its subjective status in the Prophetic Tradition to dogma by virtue of the teaching of the Episcopal Tradition. Ratzinger's "relecture" sees the interpretation of tradition more along the lines of developing doctrine, yet Christ is still palpably present as the Church's ultimate "living voice."

One additional similarity between Newman and Ratzinger is the emphasis they place on criticizing tradition: they assign to Scripture the role of "guardian" of tradition, as discussed above in regard to Newman.⁸⁴ Ratzinger argues that *Dei Verbum* should have mentioned "the possibility of a distorting tradition, and of the place of Scripture

⁸⁰ For Ratzinger's understanding of "Tradition" and "traditions" at Vatican II, see "Constitution," 183-184.

⁸¹ Ratzinger, "The Question of the Concept of Tradition," 58.

⁸² Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*, 82.

⁸³ For more on the relationship between apostolic succession and tradition, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 244-247, and *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, 77-85.

⁸⁴ See note 39, above.

as an element within the Church that is *also* critical of tradition.”⁸⁵ He deemed this “an unfortunate omission” for “a council that saw itself consciously as a council of reform and thus implicitly acknowledged the possibility and reality of distortion in tradition.”⁸⁶ History attests the possibility of distortion of tradition, and because of this “tradition must not be considered only affirmatively, but also critically; *we have Scripture as a criterion for this indispensable criticism of tradition*, and tradition must therefore always be related back to it and measured by it.”⁸⁷

Conclusion: An Heir More Than a Disciple

The century that passed between John Henry Newman and Joseph Ratzinger’s respective work on the theology of revelation and its relationship to tradition⁸⁸ was extraordinarily innovative and fertile. Although Ratzinger mentioned that he learned a good deal from Newman, it is very difficult, given the lack of citations to Newman in Ratzinger’s work, the strong influence of Bonaventure and the Tübingen School in Ratzinger’s thought, and the radically different theological milieus in which they lived, to measure what exactly Ratzinger learned from Newman regarding revelation and tradition. Yet undoubtedly there are multiple similarities between the two thinkers that stem from two shared thoughts: revelation as the source of tradition, and tradition as living and developing in history within the Church.

But more significant than the exact correlation between Newman and Ratzinger on this score is the former’s contribution, acknowledged by Ratzinger in his Centenary Address and mentioned at the outset, to thinking historically within theology. If the mediation of history within the realm of ontology is the “fundamental crisis of our age” and a major component of Ratzinger’s theological work,⁸⁹ then Newman has contributed the foundation stones for dealing with this crisis. Hence, while an exact measure between the two thinkers on this topic may lie beyond our grasp, in a certain sense Joseph Ratzinger is an heir to the theological project of John Henry

⁸⁵ Ratzinger, “Constitution,” 193.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 185. Emphasis added. In a different context, Ratzinger makes the same point: “It is essential to have the most accurate knowledge possible of what the Bible says from a historical point of view. Progressive deepening of such knowledge can always serve to purify and enrich tradition.” *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, 86.

⁸⁸ According to Biemer, Newman’s theology of tradition was solidified in the 1840s. See *Newman on Tradition*, 57, 64.

⁸⁹ See note 5, above.

Newman, a project that Ratzinger has taken up and advanced to address his own, very different, theological audience.

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