



'*Haec Traditio proficit*': Congar's Reception of Newman in *Dei Verbum*, Section 8

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Abstract

The 1960s were an incredibly busy and productive time for the Dominican Yves Congar (1904–1995). In addition to drafting many seminal passages of Council documents, including *Dei Verbum* 8, which is the subject of this paper, he also wrote his historical-theological masterpiece, *Tradition and Traditions* between 1960 and 1963. Drawing on the latter's explicit references to John Henry Newman, this article unpacks the particular ways in which Newman's thought contributed to the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation through the reception by and writing of Congar. Particular attention is paid to the connatural way of knowing which stems from the gifts of the Holy Spirit, typically alluded to by Newman in his meditations on the faith of Mary.

Keywords

Newman; Congar; II Vatican Council; *Dei Verbum*

I would like to briefly discuss the Vatican II *peritus* Yves Congar's reception of Cardinal Newman's thought, especially in the former's contribution to the drafting of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. Like all Conciliar documents, *Dei Verbum* is saturated with references to scripture, the Fathers, and past Councils, but it refers to no modern theologian except for some popes. Hence, trying to pinpoint which sentences and paragraphs in the document are "Newmanian" is a difficult, if not impossible, task. Nevertheless, what I can, and intend, to do, is to present some of the explicit points of reception of Newman's thought in Congar's own writings, leaving it to the reader to speculate about the extent to which Newman was in the forefront of Congar's mind as he was drafting key passages of *Dei Verbum*. In the crucial chapter in question, *Dei Verbum* 8, which we attribute to Yves Congar, I will suggest that Congar had St. Thomas in the forefront of his mind, and John Henry Newman not far behind.

Congar was already fairly-well acquainted with Newman's thought before the Council. In the 1930s he was aware of Newman's place in the history of theology as exemplified in his lengthy contribution to the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique's* entry on 'theology'. In his 1950 introduction to theology entitled *La foi et la Théologie*, Congar was already dedicating sections to Newman. By the time of his 1960–63 two-volume masterpiece *Tradition and Traditions*, Congar was actively engaging with detailed aspects of Newman's thought. Congar's indebtedness to Newman was considerable, as is clear from his recourse to his Dominican confrère and Newman expert, Jan Walgrave of Louvain and the French philosopher Jean Guittou, whose *La Philosophie de Newman: essai sur l'idée de développement* of 1933 was influential for him. Of the nearly *one thousand* authors referenced in his great opus of the conciliar period, Congar cites only a half-dozen or so writers — both ancient and modern — more often than he cites Newman. It is from these explicit points of reception in *Tradition and Traditions* that we can distill the Newmanian influences when Congar helped draft *Dei Verbum*.

In *Tradition and Traditions*, for example, Congar lauds Newman's articulation of the relationship between scripture and tradition.¹ Congar also refines some of Newman's thoughts in a very nuanced way such as when he compares Newman's Illative Sense to the Church's Sensus Fidelium.² While not being uncritical of Newman, Congar also makes note of Newman's distinction between conscience's moral sense and its sense of duty — a distinction which Congar finds 'foreign to genuine Thomistic tradition.'³ There are more examples,⁴ but I mention these to show that Congar's engagement with Newman was far from a cursory familiarity. Congar read Newman and read him closely.

Of the numerous points of reception, I have discerned two main tenets in Congar's theology of tradition which have Newman as their main protagonist. Congar is indebted to Newman for the following: first, the consideration of the church as an *active and living* subject and, secondly, the view that this active subject, the church, includes *all the faithful*, including the laity. Both of these points are present — in varying degrees of explicitness — in both *Tradition and Traditions* and *Dei Verbum*. A proper understanding of *Dei Verbum*, especially Section 8, is only possible when one allows for these two elements

¹ Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), p. 118.

² Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 318.

³ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 332 n.4.

⁴ He further cites Newman's 'eirenic and lucid' exposition of how an encounter with a reality is the chief vehicle for acquiring further insights into it (*Tradition and Traditions*, 356–7). Later, Congar also examines what it might mean for one to attribute a 'conscience' or 'consciousness' to the church as Newman and other modern theologians have done.

that are clearly Newmanian in character, namely: that the Church is not merely passive, but active in its reception of the revealed deposit that is transmitted; and that all Christians, by virtue of their baptism, have the capacity to contribute to the deposit.

That Yves Congar was amongst the drafters who made up the commission that formulated this passage is indisputable.⁵ It was during the second session that Congar — together with Umberto Betti (1922–2009) and Karl Rahner (1904–1984) — was assigned to the project on the nature of tradition and revelation transmitted in the church.⁶ In his commentary on Section 8, Joseph Ratzinger writes, 'It is not difficult... to recognize the pen of Y[ves]. Congar in the text'.⁷

It is in Section 8 that we find the seminal paragraph in *Dei Verbum* which formally recognizes that doctrine develops over time. In addition, Section 8 seeks to give a general, if not intentionally vague, description of how this development happens. The promulgated draft reads,

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (Lk 2: 19, 51), through a penetrating understanding experienced by believers, of spiritual realities, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth.⁸

One may now make some connections between what is present here in the conciliar text and Congar's own writings which were composed during the council itself. In doing so, I simply hope to add some colour and detail to the background of the portrait depicting Newman's influence on this paragraph which expresses the church's general, but nevertheless definitive, teaching on doctrinal development.

Regarding the first main tenet, the active engagement of the believer, we observe that *Dei Verbum* 8 is clearly concerned with those activities which contribute to the church's growth in her understanding of the deposit of revelation. This growth in understanding is the

⁵ For Congar's contributions at Vatican II, see the helpful article by Jared Wicks, 'Yves Congar's Doctrinal Service of the People of God', *Gregorianum* 84 (2003): pp. 499–550.

⁶ Wicks, 'Yves Congar's Doctrinal Service', pp. 533; 524n.

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, 'Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation' in *Commentaries on the Documents of Vatican II. Vol. III*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (London: Burns and Oates, 1969), p. 184.

⁸ *Dei Verbum* 8. (Vatican website's — www.vatican.va — translation with my modifications) The most important clause *ex intima spiritualium rerum quam experientur intelligentia*, has been mistranslated by numerous editors. The important point here is to make clear that the object of *experientur* is *not spiritualium rerum*, but rather *intelligentia*.

result of an active engagement described in terms of contemplation and study, and an 'intimate understanding' of spiritual things.

Congar's awareness of his debt to Newman in this regard is evident in *Tradition and Traditions*. In Congar's amendment of what he considers to be Franzelin's useful but inadequate, distinction between active and passive traditions, Congar emphasises that the reception of the objective content of tradition is performed by a living and active subject. To illustrate the active nature of this reception, Congar quotes Newman's famous fifteenth University Sermon in which Newman, drawing upon St. Luke's words, 'Mary kept all these things in her heart'⁹ describes her as 'our pattern of Faith', who is not satisfied with simply reflecting upon or assenting to 'divine truth' but who actually 'develops it'. In doing so, Newman, says, 'she symbolizes to us, not only the faith of the unlearned, but of the doctors of the Church also, who have to investigate, and weigh, and define, as well as to profess the Gospel.'¹⁰ This passage sets the tone for Congar's entire project on the nature of tradition and its dynamism as it is represented in *Dei Verbum* 8.

When Congar comments on this quotation, he draws attention to the traditional belief that rightness in one's personal life is a prerequisite for rightness in knowledge concerning divine things. In making this claim, Congar highlights the grace-filled and active character of the Christian's reception of tradition.

In this same section, Congar also describes tradition as an apprehension of the divine realities, or as a *grasping* of the treasure which living Christianity has possessed as a reality from the beginning, and which passes progressively, as a result of reflection, from the level of the implicit [*l'implicite vécu*] to that of the expressly known [*l'explicite connu*].¹¹ In a word, this grasping of divine realities, which has holiness as its prerequisite, is a principle of development.

With regard to the second main tenet, the holistic conception of the Church, *Dei Verbum* makes no distinction within the body of Christians whose understanding of the deposit grows. Rather, according to *Dei Verbum*, all Christians — lay, clerical, religious — by virtue of

⁹ Luke 2: 19.

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, *University Sermons*, XV, 3: 'Thus St. Mary is our pattern of Faith, both in the reception and in the study of Divine Truth. She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells upon it; not enough to possess, she uses it; not enough to assent, she develops it; not enough to submit the Reason, she reasons upon it; not indeed reasoning first, and believing afterwards, . . . yet first believing without reasoning, next from love and reverence, reasoning after believing. And thus she symbolizes to us, not only the faith of the unlearned, but of the doctors of the Church also, who have to investigate, and weigh, and define, as well as to profess the Gospel; to draw the line between truth and heresy; to anticipate or remedy the various aberrations of wrong reason', quoted in Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 254.

¹¹ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 363.

their baptism, can penetrate the deposit, contributing to an increased understanding of the mysteries.

The most straightforward aspect of Newman's thought that is scattered throughout Congar's 'Theological Essay' in *Tradition and Traditions* is Newman's patristic conception of the church, in which the church, as an organic whole with its different roles, offices, and functions, includes both the hierarchy and the laity.¹² Newman's inclusive ecclesiology is rooted in the threefold office into which all Christians are baptized. The real and necessary distinction, then, between the *Ecclesia discens* and *docens* does not necessitate a *passive* infallibility of the kind proposed by Franzelin. Congar, rather, subscribes to the idea defended by Newman according to which the *sensus fidelium* is not limited to the act of the magisterium but adds to it its own value as testimony and, possibly, an element of development.¹³ Congar sees in Newman's conception of the *sensus fidelium* not simply an echo or mirror of magisterial teaching, but a locus for potential development. Let us now take a more detailed look at the active nature of the Christian's reception of the faith.

The final text of *Dei Verbum* states three ways in which the church actively contributes to her increased understanding of the deposit of faith: (1) contemplation and study,¹⁴ (2) an experience of an intimate understanding of spiritual things, and (3) Episcopal preaching.¹⁵ The last was added only to the final definitive document as the original draft conceived of development through *only* (1) and (2), and even these were more simply formulated. Hence, according to the original draft, two things contributed to doctrinal development: contemplation (and study) and the intimate experience of spiritual things.¹⁶

Now, is it any accident that a little less than twenty years earlier in 1946, when he was asked to write the dictionary entry on 'theology', Congar wrote the following?:

This effort of perceiving the revealed Object can be done in two different ways, **which are also the two ways of dogmatic progress**. It can be done on the way of supernatural contemplation [*la voie de la contemplation surnaturelle*], based on an affective union with God. Or it can be done by way of theological contemplation [*la voie de*

¹² Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), p. 275.

¹³ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 327.

¹⁴ '*tum ex contemplatione et studio credentium*.' The 'et studio' was added to the original draft, which simply had *contemplatione credentium* standing alone, followed by *tum ex intima spiritualium rerum experientia*. See Francisco Gil Hellin ed., *Concilii Vaticani II Synopsis: Consitutio Dogmatica De Divina Revelatione Dei Verbum* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 64–65.

¹⁵ '*Praeconio eorum qui cum episcopatus successione charisma veritatis certum acceperunt*.' This was added only to the *final* draft, which became the definitive text. See Hellin, *Concilii Vaticani II Synopsis*, 66–67.

¹⁶ 'Original drafts' here refers to the first drafts treating the progress of Tradition: namely, draft no.'s II and III according to the *Synopsis*.

la contemplation théologique], based on activity of knowledge of the rational and discursive type.¹⁷

A few lines down, Congar continues, explaining that in *contemplation surnaturelle*, the soul possesses God in His mystery 'by way of experience' or 'vital connaturality', whereas in *contemplation théologique* the soul does so through cognition.¹⁸ In the latter, the object of faith is penetrated by rational work, whereas in the former the penetration is achieved by charity.¹⁹ Now I contend that this dual motif in Congar's dictionary article mirrors exactly the dual motif in the first draft of *Dei Verbum*.²⁰ The twofold mode of growth in the first draft of *Dei Verbum* corresponds exactly to the Congarian conception of dogmatic progress, which also happens to be identical to the scholastic modes of perception of the divine Object.

The various textual monuments of tradition reveal that *Dei Verbum's* 'intima intelligentia', or Congar's *contemplation surnaturelle*, is attributed to the intellectual gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.²¹ Such an 'experiential knowledge'²² or 'judgment without reasoning caused by love'²³ are, according

¹⁷ Yves M.-J. Congar, *A History of Theology* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968), p. 205 (my emphasis). Original French from Congar's entry, 'Théologie' in Volume XV of *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*. (Paris: Editions Letouzey et Ané, 1946), p. 450.

¹⁸ Congar, *A History of Theology*, p. 205 (my emphasis).

¹⁹ Congar, *A History of Theology*, p. 205. In the case of supernatural contemplation, Congar is quick to add, 'It is not so much that the soul works on the mystery of God, as it is this mystery which works on the soul interiorly rendering it vitally agreeable, conformed, and sympathetic. In the theology of St. Thomas this activity of perception in a vital manner is attributed to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially to the gifts of intelligence and wisdom.'

²⁰ Originally, the dual motif consisted of contemplation and 'intima experientia'. The 'et studio' was added in the second draft in order to better clarify the rational nature of the dual motif's first kind of contemplation, and to solidify the role of theology in dogmatic progress.

²¹ Congar, *A History of Theology*, p. 205. Also see St. Thomas: 'Now rightness in judging can come about in two ways, through the perfect use of reason or through a certain natural kinship with the things one is judging about . . . A correct judgment made through rational investigation belongs to the wisdom which is an intellectual virtue. But to judge aright through a certain fellowship [*quamdam connaturalitatem ad ipsa*] with them belongs to that of wisdom which is the gift of the Holy Spirit.' St. Thomas continues in ad.3: 'The intellect has two acts, to perceive and to judge. The first is guided by the gift of understanding, the second by the gift of wisdom if the judgment is formed according to the divine reasons, and by the gift of knowledge if it is formed according to human reasons.' *ST. IIa. IIae. q.45, a.2*. All texts and English translations, unless otherwise specified, are taken from the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa Theologiae* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963 — 60 volumes).

²² Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 394.

²³ Francis B. L. Cunningham, *The Indwelling of the Trinity: A Historico-Doctrinal Study of the Theory of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Dubuque: Priory Press, 1955), p. 198 (my emphasis).

to Romanus Cessario, 'meant to develop an "experiential", "supra-rational", or "affective" way of laying hold of divine truth in the believer'.²⁴ Such a theological conception has roots extending into the patristic period. Adolphe Tanquerey, for example, in his treatise on ascetical and mystical theology cites numerous authors, both ancient and modern, to illustrate this kind of experiential knowledge and understanding. St. Augustine's 'spiritual senses' is one such example.²⁵

In essence, Congar basically takes St. Thomas's modes of perceiving the divine object — rational and connatural — and extends them as the two principal ways by which doctrines develop.

At this point, however, one may rightly ask on what basis does Congar take this step? What inspired Congar to take St. Thomas's two modes of perceiving the divine object and make them additionally the two modes of dogmatic progress? The answer, I suggest, is Newman's passage in the fifteenth University Sermon, with which Congar was very familiar as we have seen. That doctrinal development progresses as a result of rational penetration of the mysteries was nothing new to either Congar or Newman. Scholastics of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries were already admitting the contribution of deductive argumentation to the development of dogma. But Congar's *contemplation surnaturelle*, or vital connaturality which results from an affective union with God becomes, in *Dei Verbum*, a way to dogmatic progress through, I suggest here, encountering Newman's sermon in which a similar loving affectivity is described. But when Newman describes this loving affectivity, he does so, not in terms of perceiving the divine object, but in terms of *developing it*. According to Newman's Sermon, Mary's reflection stems from 'love and reverence', not from, say, rational principles. Newman points out that she is the model not only for the learned but also for the unlearned; for theologians as well as non-theologians; or, in the words of *Dei Verbum*, for those who 'contemplate and study' on the one hand, and for those who undergo an intimate understanding of divine things, on the other.

Congar's encounter with Newman, then, was a significant contribution to the genesis of *Dei Verbum*. Generally, Newman aided Congar

²⁴ Romanus Cessario, *Christian Faith and the Theological Life* (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1996), p. 170.

²⁵ He makes reference to St. Augustine's 'spiritual senses' of light, melody, fragrance, meat, and embracement. He concludes, 'What must we understand by these spiritual senses? It would seem that they are but functions or operations of the gifts of the Holy Ghost, notably of the gifts of *understanding and of wisdom*'. See Adolphe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* (Tournai: Desclée & Co., 1930), p. 635. Like Augustine, Thomas also likens this supernatural mode of perception to a physical sense, in particular, taste. '*et ideo experiential divinae bonitatis dicitur gustatio...*' Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura in Psal.* 33.

in observing the following three things: 1) that grasping the divine object is active in nature, 2) that this grasping is a principle of development, and 3) that all Christians, by virtue of their baptism, can contribute to this development through living the theological life of grace. Especially important for the genesis of *Dei Verbum* was the intersection between Congar's treatment of Newman in *Tradition and Traditions* and his scholastic description of St. Thomas' divine modes of perception in his dictionary article. *Dei Verbum* 8 emerged when, Congar — like Newman — placed these modes of perception in the context of Luke ch.2. Congar cited Luke *because* he found Newman's ruminations on the same passage so compelling for the task at hand: namely, to demonstrate how it is that the church's understanding of divine truth progresses, with faith as her starting point.

We may never know, but perhaps Congar was also familiar with Cardinal Newman's Meditation on the Kingdom of God, which echoes both his fifteenth Sermon with its Marian reference and, like Congar, distinguishes between the rational and the connatural ways of laying hold of divine truth. So, let Newman have the last word in describing this distinction which is so seminal to *Dei Verbum*:

I need Thee to give me that true Divine instinct about revealed matters that, knowing one part, I may be able to anticipate or to approve of others. Lord Jesus, teach me, like Mary, to sit at your feet, and to hear your word. Give me that true wisdom, which seeks your will by prayer and meditation, *by direct intercourse with you, more than by reading and reasoning.*²⁶

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²⁶ Newman, *Meditations and Devotions of the Late Cardinal Newman* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893), pp. 520–522.