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Tradition as ‘Formative Environment’: Congar and Christian Formation

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Abstract

Although the theology of Tradition of the Dominican Yves Congar was highly influential in drafting the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* at the Second Vatican Council, postconciliar debates neglected some of the most original aspects of this theology. This article proposes a retrieval of the notion of Tradition as ‘*milieu éducatif*’, advanced by the theologian in *Tradition and Traditions*, as a valuable resource for contemporary discussions on Christian formation. It intends to highlight how Congar connected the theological realities of revelation and its transmission by the Church with the concrete practice of Christian life. This notion is, then, put in conversation with contemporary Christian thinkers who have reflected on the practical aspects of Christian formation, chiefly James K.A. Smith. This dialogue aims to show the relevance of Congar’s notion to current discussions. While the theology of Tradition exposed by the French Dominican can be completed and specified by current proposals, it can also offer a new theological depth to those proposals.

Keywords: formation; fundamental theology; James K.A. Smith; *Tradition and Traditions*; Yves Congar

Recently, the topic of Christian formation and discipleship has garnered renewed theological attention. Drawing from the insights of postmodernist thinkers, theologians have tried to explain what it means to be and to become a Christian not only from the perspective of assent to doctrine but rather from the point of view of Christian practice. This approach has the merit of overcoming artificial barriers between dogmatic, spiritual, liturgical, and pastoral theology and presenting a more thorough theological account of Christian identity.¹

However, an area that seems not to have been sufficiently engaged by this trend is the theology of Tradition. Around the time of the Second Vatican Council, Catholic theologians took part in vivid discussions about the nature and the role of Tradition in the Church, discussions that made possible the drafting of the numbers 8–10 of

¹For instance, Medi Ann Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship* (Oxford: Willey-Blackwell, 2013). In this work, the author discusses the accounts of Christian formation and identity of three other contemporary theologians: Rowan Williams, Kathryn Tanner, and John Milbank.

the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, the first magisterial text in Catholic teaching that put forward a description of what is Tradition. A key figure in these debates was the Dominican French theologian Yves Congar, who struggled to present a view of Tradition, informed by ecumenical and historical preoccupations, that would move away from the strictly propositional view that predominated in the late XIX and early XX centuries.²

This article proposes a retrieval of one aspect of Congar's theology of Tradition that is particularly relevant for contemporary theology: his view of Tradition as a '*milieu éducatif*',³ an expression that, in context, could be translated as a 'formative environment'. The theologian develops that notion, particularly in the fourth chapter of his second volume of *Tradition and Traditions*, a text we will explore in this article. Before delving into Congar's text, though, it is necessary to understand what is at stake in the discussion about Christian formation. For doing so, the first part of this article turns to the thought-provoking treatments of the question put forward by the American philosopher James K.A. Smith in his trilogy titled *Cultural Liturgies*.⁴ I will argue that Smith's best insights can be assumed and should be completed by the theology of Tradition of Yves Congar.

I. Christian formation as a practical counter-formation: The insights of James K.A. Smith

In the preface of *Desiring the Kingdom*, which introduces the whole trilogy, Smith asserts that his purpose in writing is to communicate 'a vision of what authentic, integral Christian learning looks like'.⁵ He writes from his experience in Christian academic institutions, but his approach is not compartmentalized and touches the whole life of the Church. Smith draws from a variety of sources: Augustinian and Calvinist theology, a political theology in the line of Hauerwas' post-liberalism or Milbank's *Radical Orthodoxy*, the sacramental theology of Alexander Schmemman, and anthropological views taken from Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Pierre Bourdieu.⁶ He aims to clarify what is the purpose of a specifically Christian education.

²Between 1959 and 1965, Congar wrote abundantly on the subject of Tradition. His main work on this topic is the two-volume book *La Tradition et les traditions*, which we quote here in its latest French version, published not long ago: Yves Congar, *La Tradition et Les Traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010). McMillan published the first English version of this text in one volume in 1967. During these years, Congar also wrote some articles about Tradition, which summarized contemporary discussions and engaged with them. He participated actively in the conciliar debates that led to drafting the numbers on Tradition in *Dei Verbum*. See his recent biography: Étienne Fouilloux, *Yves Congar 1904-1995* (Paris: Editions Salvator, 2020), pp. 225–78. Also, the doctoral thesis of Andrew Chase, *Tradition in the Theology of Yves Congar and Joseph Ratzinger* (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2019), pp. 81–98.

³Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, p. 132.

⁴*Cultural Liturgies* is composed of three books: *Desiring the Kingdom* (2009), *Imagining the Kingdom* (2013), and *Awaiting the Kingdom* (2017). Here we will focus on the first book: James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

⁵James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 11.

⁶Smith references already several of these authors in the preface, pp. 11–12. The appropriation by MacIntyre of the Aristotelian and Thomistic notion of *habitus* is explored in pp. 55–57. The Augustinian theme of our ultimate love as a defining feature is central for the first chapter, mostly on pp. 46–52. Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu are discussed in chapters 1 and 2 of the second book, James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

Smith opposes a view of education whose sole purpose is to imbue the minds with information. He deems the idea of a Christian ‘worldview’ insufficient because it is too narrowly rationalistic. Education must not stop at ideas but needs to reach for the ‘heart’. In his own words: ‘Christian education shapes us, forms us, molds us to be a certain kind of people whose hearts and passions and desires are aimed at the kingdom of God’.⁷ How can education then accomplish this transformation of hearts, passions, and desires?

By employing the notion of *habitus*, Smith argues that such an education is not accomplished by the assimilation of ideas but rather by repeated practices that conform the orientation of our hearts in a certain direction.⁸ He calls those formative practices *liturgies*.⁹ A liturgy is, thus, every practice that carries an implicit view of human flourishing and instills that view in its practitioners. The usage of a religious vocabulary to refer to these practices is not accidental, since Smith judges that what people ‘worship’ in liturgies equals their fundamental orientation, that which they love upon all other things.¹⁰

The first insight found in Smith’s work, then, is his denunciation of a merely intellectualist conception of formation. He breaks away from the Cartesian model of the human being as a ‘thinking thing’ to offer, instead, a broader consideration, including love, *habitus*, and imagination among the human faculties touched by formation. That is why the last two chapters of *Desiring the Kingdom* focus on Christian liturgical celebrations. These practices form the heart to desire God’s Kingdom. They are not illustrations of what Christians believe, but they transmit, through their performance, the vision of human accomplishment that is proper to Christianity. ‘Worship is best understood on the order of action, not reflection’, he argues.¹¹

From this realization, a second insight flows. If ideas might be universal, the practice, especially liturgical practice, is always particular. Against modern abstract conceptions of formation, Smith defends an incarnated form of Christian liturgy bound to its historical forms.¹² In a footnote, he explains why the Church should not abandon its historical-situated criteria for regulating worship in favor of an endless adaptation to new cultural contexts:

These criteria are ‘transcultural’ not because they are a-cultural or ahistorical realities that dropped down from heaven, but precisely because they are part of the church as a distinct culture. They are contingent, historical, cultural formations – the fruit of human *poiēsis* like all other cultural phenomena – that the Spirit takes up and embraces. The incarnational God is not scandalized by such particularity; rather, the God who becomes flesh is the same God who embraces such historical, cultural contingency and takes it up into the life of the body (...) affirming the logic of Incarnation requires affirming this scandal of the church’s cultural particularity as a peculiar people.¹³

⁷James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 18.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 55–57.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 46–52.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 166–67.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 153, footnote.

Finally, a third insight gathered from *Cultural Liturgies* is that Christian formation does not occur in a cultural vacuum. Indeed, Christians live in a world full of competing liturgies that aim to instill a different vision of the Kingdom in its worshipers. From the critical perspective he shares with the *Radical Orthodoxy* tendency, Smith endeavors to show how contemporary ‘secular liturgies’ (consumeristic capitalism, American nationalistic-militarism, and socialization in university campuses) are idolatrous attempts to ‘capture our heart with a particular vision of good life’.¹⁴ Since these secular liturgies shape the culture of a post-Christian society, Christian formation must work as a ‘counter-formation’.

If we take these three insights seriously, Christian formation in our age appears as a counter-formation through practice aimed at shaping our hearts to desire God’s Kingdom. Smith insists that traditional Christian liturgical practices are the best means for this formation. However, he does not develop the theological underpinnings of this affirmation. Here, the deep understanding that Congar’s theology of Tradition offers on God’s revelation and its transmission by the Church can provide these insights with a solid foundation. In the next section, we will consider Congar’s view of Tradition as education. The last section, in turn, will show how this view can offer the basis for a richer understanding of the task of Christian formation.

2. Tradition as a ‘formative environment’ in the work of Yves Congar

In the late 1940s, Tradition resurfaced as a pressing theological subject. The dogmatic proclamation of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in 1950 prompted Catholic theologians to discuss how a Tradition stretching back to the Apostolic Church can give origin to ‘new’ dogmas.¹⁵ Furthermore, the ecumenical dialogue with Protestantism obliges both sides to reconsider the relationship between Scripture and Tradition.¹⁶ Finally, the historical-critical consciousness acquired in the nineteenth century challenges the notion of an unchanged Tradition.¹⁷ That is the context of Congar’s reflections on the subject.

Motivated by his ecumenical interest, Congar weighs in on these questions. Nevertheless, he aims to present a deeper view of Tradition ‘as the life of the Church in the communion of faith and worship, Tradition as the warm environment where the

¹⁴Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁵One of the main supporters of the dogmatic proclamation, the Italian priest Giuseppe Filograssi, wrote a lengthy article discussing this question. Giuseppe Filograssi, ‘Traditio Divina-Apostolica et Assumptio B.V.M.’, *Gregorianum*, 30 (1949), 443–89.

¹⁶In this period, the theologians Edmond Ortigues and Josef Geiselman proposed a reading of the decree of the Council of Trent about the transmission of revelation by Scripture and unwritten traditions (*Decretum de libris sacris et de traditionibus recipiendis*, Sessio IV, 8 April 1546 – DH 1501), which would allow for a Catholic notion of the sufficiency of the Scripture. A summary of these discussions can be found in Jacob Schmutz, ‘Edmond Ortigues, théologien entre deux conciles’, *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, 173 (2016), 51–71, and in an article by Congar himself, Yves Congar, ‘Traditions apostoliques non écrites et suffisance de l’Écriture’, *Istina*, (1959/3), 279–306.

¹⁷A doctoral thesis published in 1954 presents a synthetic version of this debate in Catholic theology since the so-called ‘modernist crises’ at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lúcio da Veiga Coutinho, ‘Tradition et histoire dans la controverse moderniste’, *Analecta Gregoriana* 73 (Rome: Éditions de l’Université Grégorienne, 1954).

Catholic sense is formed, expressed, and kept'.¹⁸ To do so, Congar moves away from the predominantly conceptual view of Tradition put forward by the theologians of the nineteenth century, such as Giovanni Perrone, who defined Tradition as a 'set of truths or teachings'.¹⁹

In the first volume of *Tradition and Traditions*, the Dominican theologian analyses how the notion of Tradition developed throughout the Christian centuries. This historical essay prepares the ground for the second volume, the theological essay. Here, Tradition is placed 'within the whole communication of the divine mystery to men'.²⁰ At its initial point, Tradition and revelation coincide,²¹ and the whole Church receives, keeps, and transmits this revelation through the activity of the Holy Spirit.²² Congar carefully distinguishes the different meanings in which the word 'Tradition' is employed,²³ but he is aware that those distinctions are all contained within one complex reality. Therefore, in chapter IV of this second volume, he offers a broad consideration of Tradition, understood as 'ecclesial life'.²⁴

To better understand what he means by 'ecclesial life', we must turn to the notion of communion, central for Congar's ecclesiology.²⁵ Since his first ecclesiological writings, the Dominican theologian has strived to break away from a conception of the Church unilaterally focused on its juridical aspects. His reading of *Die Kirche als Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, a book by German theologian, Arnold Rademacher, will provide him with a useful theological distinction. Writing a review in 1932, Congar summarizes Rademacher's thought: 'While *Gemeinschaft* designates the community in that it represents spiritual and collective life, forms an original whole irreducible to its parts, and finds its analogy in an organism, *Gesellschaft* designates the visible society between individuals, and finds its analogy in a machine'.²⁶

For Congar, both aspects are necessary for the Church, which is 'a communion in the form of society'.²⁷ However, he wants to underline the spiritual dimension of ecclesiology, both because it is the most fundamental one and because it counterbalances an overemphasis on the external aspect of authority.²⁸ What are the implications of this ecclesiology for the theology of Tradition? If the fundamental reality of the Church is

¹⁸Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, p. 132.

¹⁹Cf. Giovanni Perrone, *Praelectiones Theologicae* (Roma: Typis Collegii Urbani, 1840–1842), v. Iib, p. 293. Perrone's influence on Catholic theology in the nineteenth century has been highlighted by Charles Michael Shea, 'Faith, Reason, and Ecclesiastical Authority in Giovanni Perrone's *Praelectiones Theologicae*', *Gregorianum*, 95 (2014), 159–77 and Charles Michael Shea, 'Giovanni Perrone's Theological Curriculum and the First Vatican Council', *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique*, 110 (2015), 789–816.

²⁰Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, p. 15.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 76.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 65–74.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 111–36.

²⁵Cf. Alain Nisus, 'La genèse d'une ecclésiologie de communion dans l'œuvre de Yves Congar', *Vrin*, 94 (2010/2), 309–34, where the author analyses the development of this notion in Congar's works.

²⁶Yves Congar, *Sainte Eglise. Études et Approches Ecclésiologiques* (Paris: Cerf, 1964), p. 460, quoted in Alain Nisus, 'La genèse d'une ecclésiologie de communion dans l'œuvre de Yves Congar', *Vrin*, 94 (2010/2), 309–34, 312.

²⁷Nisus notes several times when Congar writes this expression: Alain Nisus, 'La genèse d'une ecclésiologie de communion dans l'œuvre de Yves Congar', *Vrin*, 94 (2010/2), 309–34, 316.

²⁸Cf. Yves Congar, 'L'ecclésiologie, de la Révolution française au Concile du Vatican, sous le signe de l'affirmation de l'autorité', *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, 34 (1960), 77–114.

spiritual, that which she transmits must also be a spiritual reality embodied in concrete forms. That reality is ‘something else than a written expression of thought’,²⁹ and it is rather ‘coextensive and fundamentally identical to the Christian life communicated from the Apostles in the Church’.³⁰

If Congar conceives the Church mainly as *Gemeinschaft*, the life of each Christian must participate in the ‘spiritual and collective life’ of the whole. It is this life in common that the Church received from Christ and the Apostles and that she keeps and transmits by Tradition:

Faith – we must even say: Christian life – is something entirely interior and personal; however, it is absolutely not an individualistic principle of life, but a corporative principle, something received, to which we join and communicate. It is necessary to believe and to live how others believed and lived before us, since the Apostles and since Jesus Christ. The true religious relationship consists in believing and living with brothers, for brothers, through brothers.³¹

The image of a *milieu*, an environment, is best suited to express the transmission of spiritual reality through life in common.³² Congar intends to demonstrate that the whole Church – hierarchy and lay faithful alike – by living the faith constitutes an environment that forms each Christian through the assimilation of practice.

This practice is embodied in the Church’s liturgy, discipline, and moral life. Congar remarks that the ancient philosophers and the Fathers of the Church used the verb *παρὰδίδουσαι* (to transmit) as a synonym for ‘teaching’. However, the kind of teaching signified by this verb implied the ‘personal contact with the master’s life’ that would render someone ‘more of a disciple than a student’.³³ Indeed, Congar writes that an environment leads to the ‘formation of attitudes, spontaneous reactions, and a group ethics’.³⁴ It gives ‘less of particular precisions and more of a synthesis or the meaning of a synthesis’.³⁵ He argues that this is the mode by which Tradition teaches: it communicates a reality by forming human and spiritual dispositions. This mode of formation, argues the theologian, is fully adequate to our human nature. Education, for a person (mainly for a child), is done less by ‘the intimation of rational principles than by adaptation to the life of more developed beings’.³⁶

The theologian offers some examples, taken from the life of the Church, to illustrate this idea: religious life, the esteem of chastity, the sacraments, and the sense of the Church. In each of these cases, a lived reality educates the faithful before they would formulate any theoretical affirmations about it.³⁷

²⁹Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, p. 130.

³⁰Ibid., p. 131.

³¹Ibid., p. 21.

³²Cf. Ibid., pp. 131–36.

³³Ibid., p. 130.

³⁴Ibid., p. 133.

³⁵Ibid., p. 134.

³⁶Ibid., p. 131.

³⁷Ibid., p. 134.

This formative action of Tradition is eminently visible in the liturgy, to which Congar dedicates several pages.³⁸ The liturgy, he writes, ‘delivers the religious relationship in its reality and totality’.³⁹ What we receive in the celebration of the sacraments is not intellectual content but the reality of grace, the object of divine total self-giving. This gift surpasses our capacities of understanding and expression: ‘The liturgy contains, delivers, and expresses in its own way the totality of the mysteries of which intelligence and dogma itself have only formulated certain aspects’.⁴⁰ Congar assures that he owes to celebrating the liturgy at least half of what he came to understand in theology, but he also affirms that, ‘the responses of the liturgy to requests for conceptual precision are relatively disappointing’.⁴¹ We are dealing with a different mode of formation, proper to an environment. Through its prescribed rites, the liturgy teaches us how to receive and answer to God’s Word.⁴² It becomes for us, then, ‘a sacred instruction, a preceptorship of holy life, a kind of spiritual matrix where the Christians are formed’.⁴³ We see here a strong affinity between the approaches of Congar and Smith.

This emphasis on concrete transmission through Christian life does not mean that Congar dismisses the notional formulas by which the Church expresses and communicates its teaching. Indeed, he points out that one of the weaknesses of the notion of Tradition advanced by Maurice Blondel is its insufficient attention to the *locutio formalis* (formal expression) already contained in Tradition.⁴⁴ Revelation and its transmission are not identical to the texts that attest and testify to it. Nevertheless, these texts remain necessary for knowledge of revelation. Among those, the Scripture has the first place since it has the absolute warrant of divine authority. The dogmatic definitions of the Church as an act of reception and interpretation of Scriptures under the guidance of the Holy Spirit are also warranted by this authority, although differently.⁴⁵ All the other enunciations of the faith, provided as explanations by the Church’s magisterium or the Catholic doctors, do not possess the same authority. However, Congar considers them an authentic deployment of the divine truth revealed in the Scriptures.⁴⁶

The immediate sources and references of Congar’s theology of Tradition are the thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who stressed the spiritual and communitarian nature of the Church and those who tried to envisage ways of explaining doctrinal development. We already mentioned the importance of Arnold Rademacher,

³⁸Ibid., pp. 117–21, pp. 183–91.

³⁹Ibid., p. 190.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 117.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 120.

⁴²Ibid., p. 117.

⁴³Ibid., p. 120.

⁴⁴The French philosopher Maurice Blondel proposed an original view of Tradition in response to Alfred Loisy’s biblical criticism in three articles published in 1904 and gathered in a book in 1904. For a recent French edition, see Maurice Blondel, ‘Histoire et dogme’, in *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Maurice Blondel (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), pp. 387–409. Congar discusses this text in Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, pp. 123–29.

⁴⁵Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, p. 207.

⁴⁶Cf. Yves Congar, ‘Tradition et Sacra Doctrina chez Saint Thomas d’Aquin’, *Église et Tradition*, ed. Johannes Betz and Heinrich Fries (Le-Puy-Lyon: Xavier Mappus, 1963), pp. 157–94, pp. 188–89.

to whom we must add Friedrich Pilgram,⁴⁷ for his ecclesiology. His initial discussions of Tradition follow the works of Edmond Ortigues, Josef Geiselmann, and George Tavard, even if he keeps a critical distance.⁴⁸ In *Tradition and Traditions*, he relies on Maurice Blondel,⁴⁹ John Henry Newman,⁵⁰ and, most importantly, Johann Adam Möhler.⁵¹ But Congar, in a truly traditional fashion, purports to show the consonance of his theology with the understanding of classic – Patristic and Medieval – theologians. Particularly, being a Dominican friar, he cannot avoid engaging with the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas. There are three insights found in the texts of the *Doctor Angelicus*, which Congar employs creatively.

The first one is Aquinas' very idea of *Sacra doctrina*, which for Congar corresponds to the notion of Tradition.⁵² God communicates himself to humankind, and this communication deploys itself in a 'sacred teaching' through the activity of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The second one is the manner of this teaching. Saint Thomas writes that 'as the most excellent of teachers, (Christ) should adopt that manner of teaching whereby His doctrine is imprinted on the hearts of His hearers'.⁵³ Congar develops this idea to affirm that the aim of divine teaching is a transformative action touching the human 'heart', understood as the 'see of intellectual, affective, moral, and religious life'.⁵⁴ Finally, a third insight comes from Aquinas' discussion of the essence of the New Law of the Gospel, where he affirms that this essence is 'chiefly the grace itself of the Holy Ghost, which is given to those who believe in Christ', and all other things that instruct the faithful by both word and writing are 'of secondary importance' (*quasi secundaria*) and oriented toward the fruitful reception of this grace.⁵⁵ Congar interprets this text, within the context of a larger tradition, in the sense that what Christ delivers to his disciples is essentially a spiritual reality capable of forming their hearts.⁵⁶

⁴⁷Cf. Alain Nisus, 'La genèse d'une ecclésiologie de communion dans l'œuvre de Yves Congar', *Vrin*, 94 (2010/2), 309–34, 313.

⁴⁸Yves Congar, 'Traditions apostoliques non écrites et suffisance de l'Écriture', *Istina* (1959/3), 279–306.

⁴⁹He offers a lengthy comment on Blondel's 1904 *History and Dogma* in Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, pp. 123–30.

⁵⁰Cf. Andrew Meszaros, 'Haec Tradition Proficit: Congar's Reception of Newman in *Dei Verbum*, Section 8', *New Blackfriars*, 92 (2011), 247–54.

⁵¹Congar often quotes the German theologian. The Dominican is partly responsible for retrieving Möhler's ecclesiology at the end of the 30s. Cf. Étienne Fouilloux, 'Le moment Möhler de la théologie française (1938–1939)', *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 105 (2021/4), 677–703. Congar will admit that his reading of Möhler was essential for forming his views on Tradition. Cf. Yves Congar, 'Preface', in *Church and World in the Plan of God: Aspects of History and Eschatology in the Thought of Pere Congar, O.P.*, ed. Charles MacDonald (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1982), p. vii, quoted in Andrew Meszaros, *The Prophetic Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 15. In his 1825 book *The Unity of the Church*, Möhler refers already to the Tradition as *kirchliche Erziehung*, 'ecclesiastical education'. Johann Adam Möhler, *Die Einheit in der Kirche* (Tübingen: bei Heinrich Laupp, 1825), p. 57.

⁵²See Yves Congar, 'Tradition et Sacra Doctrina chez Saint Thomas d'Aquin', in *Église et Tradition*, ed. Johannes Betz and Heinrich Fries (Le-Puy-Lyon: Xavier Mappus, 1963), pp. 157–94, p. 189. The second volume of *Tradition and Traditions* begins with a reference to this article: Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, p. 15.

⁵³Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III pars, q. 42, a. 4.

⁵⁴Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, pp. 133–34.

⁵⁵Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II pars, q. 106, a. 1.

⁵⁶Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, p. 248.

In this section, we have seen how Congar describes Tradition as a ‘formative environment’ in dialogue with classical and contemporary theologians. For the Dominican friar, the Church receives, keeps, and communicates divine revelation not only as a set of doctrines but as a living spiritual reality. This reality embodies itself in the concrete forms of the Christian life, through which each Christian attains communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit in the Church. This communion forms, then, their innermost selves. In the last paragraphs of this article, we must draw some specific conclusions for the task of Christian formation of this theology of Tradition.

3. Tradition and Christian formation: Some conclusions

From the perspective of Yves Congar, which we tried to briefly expose in the previous section, Tradition and formation are not two separate entities. The whole Church – as the community of the faithful – is the subject of Tradition. She forms new Christians by handing down to them what she has received from previous generations and, ultimately, from Christ himself. Christian formation corresponds to the active sense of Tradition, the act that communicates the spiritual reality of the Gospel. From that affirmation, we can draw some conclusions based on Congar’s theology of Tradition and Smith’s insights about formation.

First, we should avoid reducing Christian formation to a specific time, activity, program, or set of contents. The whole Christian life and its practices constitutes a ‘formative environment’. Therefore, Christian communities – families, parishes, schools, and religious communities – must be aware that formal times of articulated catechesis are effective only when inscribed within a context of lived Christianity. The notional teaching is the intellectual articulation of a reality that needs to be received in the formative environment of Tradition. This conclusion respects Smith’s first insight and Congar’s presentation of Tradition as ecclesial life.

Second, the fact that Tradition is given through specific forms advises a cautious approach when changing and adapting practices. Tracey Rowland deplored what she deemed a ‘tendency in post-Conciliar thought and practice, especially in the fields of catechetics and liturgy, to attempt a transposition of Catholic doctrine and practice into “modern” and “contemporary” idioms’, by stating that such transposition ‘has been naive and has risked a diminution of the rich complexity of the narrative tradition’.⁵⁷ Indeed, from Congar’s theology of Tradition, we can understand that, although the Tradition is not identical to the traditions, the practice of Christian life always contains more than what can be conceptually understood and expressed.⁵⁸ Therefore, an instrumental account of Christian practices that states the possibility of limitless change, as long as the ‘original meaning’ is preserved, is naive and misinformed.

Congar himself did not draw this conclusion, remaining committed to a hermeneutical approach of a duality between form and content,⁵⁹ a position under severe

⁵⁷Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition – After Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 122.

⁵⁸Congar remarks that the reality delivered by liturgical practices always surpasses our understanding of it. Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, pp. 190–91.

⁵⁹Cf. Thomas Guarino, *Foundations of Systematic Theology* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), pp. 145–52. The theologian traces the origin of this distinction, its embrace by Congar and other contemporary theologians, and the more cautious approach to it of more recent theological texts, including the ITC document we quoted.

criticism after Gadamer's hermeneutical studies.⁶⁰ Smith's insight about the 'particular' nature of Christianity allows to embrace the conclusion we propose here. In divine revelation, we do not receive universal concepts that can equally be communicated in any cultural form, but revelation shapes culturally situated languages to express itself. The International Theological Commission explained this point forcefully in its 1989's document 'The Interpretation of Dogma'. It affirms that 'it is not possible to make a neat distinction between content and form of expression. The symbolic nature of language is not simply an item of apparel, but in some way, truth itself incarnate (...). For that reason the images and concepts used are not interchangeable at will'.⁶¹ It does not imply a complete fixity of the forms of liturgy, discipline, and other practices in the Church: they remain relative in relationship to the mystery they embody, namely, divine revelation. But it should lead us to a careful and reverential approach. Such caution is all the more necessary if we recognize, as in Smith's third insight, that contemporary cultural forms are not neutral but embody an ethos and a view of human beings in many aspects divergent from those of the Gospel.

A last conclusion is that Christian formation in Tradition is a thoroughly spiritual process. According to a Pauline image, the goal of this process is that 'Christ be formed' in each Christian (Galatians 4,19). Congar's theology connects Tradition and holiness: '*Sacra Pagina, Scientia Sacra, Sacra Doctrina*. We are dealing with something holy, which is celebrated and presupposes a foundation of prayer, fasting, and availability to the Spirit. Tradition itself bears witness in this sense: it lays down its conditions as a law of holy life'.⁶² Elsewhere, he affirms that those who 'carry the Tradition with a superior authority' are precisely the saints.⁶³ Christian formation, then, is formation for holiness.

Recently, Lewis Ayres proposed a sacramental understanding of Tradition within the broader sacramentality of the Church. He argues that the 'act of *tradition* (...) is an effective sign of and may effect the gradual restoration of the intellect that is intrinsic to life in Christ'.⁶⁴ The theology of Tradition of Yves Congar allows for grounding and expanding that affirmation. Christian formation in Tradition restores the intellect, but more fundamentally, the whole person, chiefly the 'heart'. This restoration is a deployment of divine revelation of the action of God the Father, who, through Christ in the Holy Spirit, gives us access to Him and invites us to share in divine nature.

Yves Congar's notion of Tradition as a 'formative environment' allows for a seamless connection between the theological reality of God's self-giving in revelation and the practice of Christian life. It focuses on the lived aspect of faith without minimizing

⁶⁰Cf. Vincent Holzer, 'Le renouvellement du Principe Dogmatique en Théologie Contemporaine', *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 94 (2006/1), 99–128, specially p. 111, where the author refers specifically to Congar.

⁶¹International Theological Commission, 'The Interpretation of Dogma', III, 3. Text available in <https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1989_interpretazione-dogmi_en.html> [accessed 07 December 2023].

⁶²Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), v. II, p. 122.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁶⁴Lewis Ayres, 'Totius Traditionis Mirabile Sacramentum: Toward a Theology of Tradition in the Light of Dei Verbum', in *Dogma and Ecumenism: Vatican II and Karl Barth's 'Ad Limina Apostolorum'*, ed. Matthew Levering, Bruce L. McCormack, and Thomas Joseph White (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), pp. 54–80, p. 54.

its notional content as preserved in Scripture and the Church's doctrine. It can be completed and contextualized by the contemporary accounts of Christian formation, such as the one put forward by James K.A. Smith, with which, I argue, it is fundamentally consonant. At the same time, it grounds these accounts in a theological reality understood as the continuous action of the Holy Spirit in the Church. For these reasons, current discussions of Christian formation can benefit from engaging with Congar's theology of Tradition.

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