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Forum: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Classic Texts: Revelatory, but not Normative

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CLASSIC TEXTS: REVELATORY, BUT NOT NORMATIVE

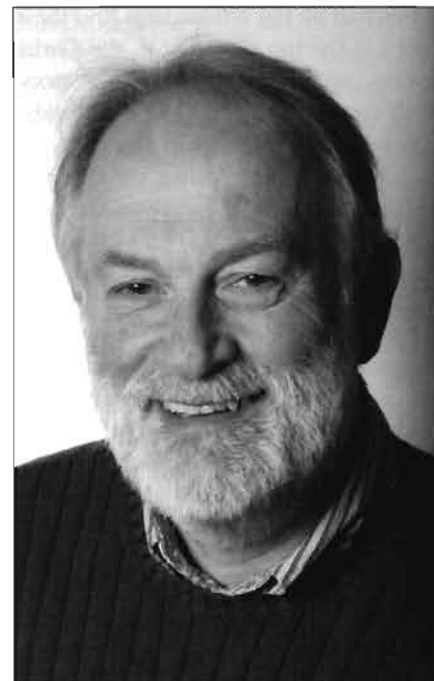
Paul Lakeland

The temptation to stick with the *traditum* and skip the *traditio* is one that Jesuits schools have on the whole resisted. From their very beginnings, Jesuits schools were distinctive both by their “way of proceeding” and by their inclusion of classical literature and the performing arts in their curricula. Today we would address the same dialectical tension between what is contained in the tradition and the means by which it is maintained throughout the centuries in the language of content and process. But there is a more fundamental level to all this. How is the pedagogical process of Jesuit schools faithful to the Catholic intellectual tradition when the content it communicates does not largely consist of the classic great books of that tradition? Can we indeed find a way to say that it may be more faithful to the *traditio* by being less attentive to the *traditum*?

The great works of the Catholic tradition should always have a place in the curriculum of the Jesuit college or university, but they can no longer be, as they were in a more classical age, the texts which form and shape that curriculum. Classics will always speak to us; they are texts that in the words of Frank Kermode are “possessed of a plurality of ambiguities, enlarged by the action of time.” But just because we treat them today, as Bernard Lonergan said of scripture and tradition itself, as “not premises but data,” they can be revelatory without being enshrined as normative. They inform us, but we are not obliged to emulate them.

In a more empirical age we do not think of any texts as normative apart from the process of transmission, interpretation and reception that constitutes the *traditio*. Everything is data, nothing is premises. To say this is not to demean the texts of the Catholic tradition or indeed to level all texts, Catholic or otherwise, as if all data are equally useful. The texts of the Catholic tradition are worth studying not only for their beauty but also for the light they shed on how the process of tradition works. To be Catholic is to be as open and alive to the new as we are respectful and appreciative of the old. The sacramental imagination is not bound to find its inspiration within confessional boundaries.

Traditio is the ongoing assimilation of the truth that will set us free. Thus, the Jesuit schools that cherish the wisdom of the Catholic tradition while exploring the truth of other traditions and the achievements of the secular imagination are only being faithful to the Catholic conviction that faith and reason are compatible and that the Spirit of God moves where it will, not where we tell it to show up. Thus, the Jesuit commitment to finding God in all things is as fine an expression of the Catholic intellectual tradition as we could ever encounter. As intellectual explorers, we are in continuity with a past that was itself always the search for deeper appreciation of the truth, not some complacent hugging of the convictions of recent history. Whoever really was the first to say that “tradition is the living faith of the dead” while “traditionalism is the dead faith of the living” got the Catholic intellectual tradition exactly right.



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In the religiously polarized world of American Catholicism today the commitment of our Jesuit schools to the openness that is a precondition for true wisdom can lead them to be misunderstood as woolly-minded liberals, sometimes even as traitors to the tradition. But this is only possible when the tradition itself is misperceived as a closed body of texts and a fixed set of ideas. How boring our academic institutions would be if there were nothing new to discover, and how uncatholic it would be not to be part of the adventure of learning. The excitement of Jesuit education today is testimony to how well it performs the Catholic intellectual tradition as Liddy so ably lays it out. ■

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