One issue that continues to draw a clear line between pre- and post-Vatican II Catholic theology concerns the relationship between Scripture and tradition.

Before the council, many Catholic theologians defended certain teachings of the church that are not found in the Bible, such as purgatory or the Assumption of Mary into heaven, on the ground that there are two sources of revelation, Scripture and tradition. These theologians assumed that the two-source theory had been taught by the Council of Trent in the 16th century.

Many Protestants, on the other hand, argued that there is only one source of revelation, the Bible, and that only those teachings that are explicitly rooted in sacred Scripture can be regarded as belonging to the deposit of faith. Sola Scriptura ("Scripture alone") was one of the battle cries of the Reformation, alongside sola fides ("faith alone") and sola gratia ("grace alone").

It was against this Protestant view that the Council of Trent formulated its teaching on Scripture and tradition. Trent, however, did not teach, as some later thought, that revelation is contained partly in Scripture and partly in tradition. That position, in fact, was explicitly rejected by the council.

Trent simply wanted to renounce the biblical absolutism of the Protestant Re-



essays in theology

By Father Richard P. McBriex

formers who assigned no value at all to tradition.

It should also be pointed out that Trent did not understand tradition in the modern theological sense of the word, that is, as a continuing process that encompasses the whole life of the church, including its worship and other ministerial activities.

Nor did Trent make a distinction, so crucial today, between tradition and traditions, that is, between what pertains to the essence of the faith and those elements that may come and go in the history of the church without any essential effect on the faith.

For example, belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is part of the essential content of faith, rooted explicitly in sacred Scripture. The devotion known as Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, on the other hand,

developed in the early 14th century and received strong impetus after the Council of Trent as a way of affirming Catholic belief in the Real Presence.

Belief in the Real Presence will always be part of the deposit of faith (tradition). Benediction (a tradition) can disappear as easily as it first appeared in the Middle Ages. Indeed, the practice of Benediction has generally declined since Vatican II.

The issue of the relationship between Scripture and tradition was dramatically joined during the first session of the Second Vatican Council (fall 1962) in the initial debates over the "Constitution on Divine Revelation."

The conservative minority defended the post-Reformation view that teachings not found explicitly in the Bible, such as purgatory and the Assumption, can be regarded nonetheless as part of the deposit of faith. The conciliar majority argued that Scripture and tradition form one sacred deposit of revelation.

When it became clear that the debate was getting bogged down, it was decided that a two-thirds affirmative vote would be required to continue the discussion. Less than two-thirds vote would have scuttled the document and left the more conservative, post-Reformation view in place.

Although a majority of the bishops

voted in favor of continuing the discussion, the necessary two-thirds margin was not attained. But the very next day (Nov. 21, 1962), Pope John XXIII himself intervened and ordered the discussion to continue via a new commission which he established.

After a tedious three-year process, the "Constitution on Divine Revelation" was approved on Nov. 18, 1965. The document taught that Scripture and tradition form one sacred deposit of revelation (n. 10), and that tradition encompasses the whole life, witness, teaching, and worship of the church (n. 8). As such, tradition is a living, dynamic reality which "develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit."

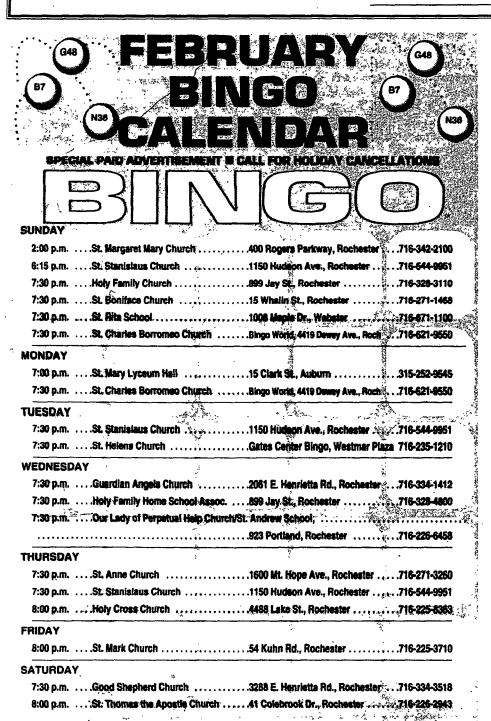
Reflection on the meaning of tradition and on its relationship with Scripture has continued since the council. Catholic theologians today insist that tradition is never independent of Scripture as a source of revelation. If something is not in Scripture, neither is it in tradition — even if it happens to be a legitimate "tradition" of the church.

Tradition, in other words, is not a factfactory. It cannot create biblical "evidence" out of whole cloth. If something is not in Scripture, it is not in Scripture. And if it is not in Scripture, it is not part of the deposit of faith.

An appeal to tradition cannot make it

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