

Lived experience leads to ongoing change

In a recent discussion about my article, "The Pastoral Exercise of Authority," a person said, "When we talk about tradition in the church, we can not look only at snapshots. We need to look at the whole video."

I thought the analogy well-taken. It offers us the reminder that we can tend to define the tradition of the church through limited lenses. We can do that by equating the church's tradition with our personal understanding or experience of it. We can also do it by assuming that the church's self-understanding and pastoral practice in a given era are expressive of the church's deepest, lasting traditions and, therefore, valid for all ages.

In other words, we can tend too easily to say "it's always been **this way**" about things of relatively recent vintage; or to say "it must be **this way**" about pastoral practices or forms of governance that can change or have changed in the course of our history.

I am not referring, of course, to the deeper, essential truths of our faith tradition. These remain the same in all ages although they, too, have been understood and expressed in different ways throughout the history of the church.

I think, for example, of the mystery of the three persons in the one God, of the true humanity and true divinity of Jesus, of the redemptive power and beauty of Christ's paschal sacrifice. In order to appreciate these mysteries as fully as we can, the church continually probes them. This is done in technical, systematic fashion by theologians who reflect on the tradition, compare insights, explore new understandings. It is done by bishops and other pastors in the church who attempt to witness to the faith by

along the way



BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

preaching and teaching the faith in ways that speak to the hearts of each generation.

Countless faithful believers gain new insight and understanding of the faith through the ups and downs of daily living and through their service to others in the name of Christ.

In this fashion and over time the church's self-understanding changes and so do its ways of understanding and speaking about some of the elements very close to the heart of Catholic life. Change of this kind is not a rejection of past truth. Rather, such development usually flows from continuing study, new experience or the press of circumstances that impel the community to revisit, some times revise earlier understandings.

We can probably all think of ways in which developments in the Church's self-understanding has resulted in notable changes in its pastoral practice. I remember the time when we could not worship in a Protestant church. And if for some extraordinary reason, e.g., the funeral or wedding of a relative, it was deemed acceptable to be there we were discouraged from giving any visible sign that we were praying with the assembly.

In those years Catholics and people of other faiths who wished to marry could not

do so in the church building. They were usually married in the parish house.

Back then there was also much less congregational participation in the Eucharistic Liturgy than there is today, the language of the liturgy was Latin and the presiding priest celebrated with his back to the assembly most of the time. Lay people would never touch the Host with their hands.


All of those practices have changed. They did not change because earlier generations failed. They changed for one or several reasons like the ones mentioned above. We developed a renewed appreciation of baptism and of the Eucharistic Liturgy. Our community came to new insights into freedom of conscience and religious freedom.

It is also true to say that the movement toward reform and renewal in these instances was born in the lived experience of faithful people, the systematic work of the theologians and the ongoing reflection by pastors on the challenges and opportunities they met in the course of their ministry. That has been the history of reform in our church. Rarely does it begin with church leaders and work its way through the faithful.

Sometimes I wish the rarer way were the more common one. It seems easier, faster, clearer and more efficient. In addition, we would probably avoid the tensions that seem always to attach to the slower, from-the-grass-roots-up way in which such changes usually emerge. What it would lack would be the touch of ordinary people bringing their lived faith experience to bear on the life and mission of the church. That would be a great loss.


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Sr. Margaret
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My vocation was a gradual process. It began with a recurring idea that God was calling me to something more. I prayed for guidance, asking Our Blessed Mother's assistance through her rosary, attended daily Mass and Holy Communion, and made two Holy Hours weekly. I also did a lot of spiritual reading. Several articles on "older vocations" encouraged me to explore my vocation.

I was initially attracted to this Community by the fact that the Sisters cared for the patients themselves. When I visited, I saw the loving concern and joyfulness of the Sisters, and their strong prayer life.

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