

4. An open transmission

St. Paul also expresses his awareness that his service of transmission extends the transmission of Peter and the other Apostles. Paul was concerned to serve the transmission of Christ with his fidelity to the apostolic tradition. For example, we read in the Acts of the Apostles: “As they went from town to town, [Paul and his companions] delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem” (Acts 16:4). And this transmitted a vital fruitfulness to the communities: “So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily” (Acts 16:5).

And since he started with this humble fidelity, Paul could ask his disciples to accept the apostolic tradition from him too. He writes to the Corinthians: “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you” (1 Cor 11:2). Or to the Thessalonians: “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter” (2 Thess 2:15).

And in this sense St. Paul cautions against those who pretend to live in a Christian way without living in transmission: “Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us” (2 Thess 3:6).

The most illuminating passage on this topic is found in chapter seven of the Gospel of Mark. It is the dispute that the Pharisees get into about the traditions of the elders when they see the disciples eating their meal without washing their hands. Jesus takes the opportunity to condemn their position precisely because it takes possession of the transmission of the word of God, imprisoning it in traditions that are closed in on themselves:

He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, *This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.* You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.

[...] “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, *Honor your father and your mother; and, Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.* But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)– then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.” (Mk 7:6-13)

“You make void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on” (Mk 7:13). This verse expresses the essence of the problem. It should make us reflect when we consider our way of living the monastic life, our monastic tradition,

to see if, yes or no, we remain in a humble and open transmission of a gift, or if we limit ourselves to being just sworn guards of antiquity locked into the fortress of our observance, a fortress, among other things, that gets rustier and rustier. Jesus recalls here that the source of every tradition and transmission is the word of God, or the commandment of God (7:9). He reminds us that the tradition never stays alive if it is not fed from the original and eternal source: God who speaks to human beings, God who reveals to us his will, his truth, his love. Above all God who expresses himself fully in his Word, his only-begotten Son, who becomes flesh and dwells among us.

Yes, we have this terrible power to “make void” this eternal source, simply because, for the Pharisees, the word of God and the commandment of God are nothing but a pretext for sacralizing their own autonomy, the law that they themselves produce, the tradition, as Jesus says, that they transmit.

The great innate corruption in every traditionalism consists in losing the relation with the source of the tradition, losing contact with the word of the living God, losing the connection of the commandments with the will of a God who is, who was, who is to come, to keep a clearly defined tradition under one’s own control, carefully sealed, with neither source nor spread. It is the lamp placed under the basket, of which Jesus speaks: “Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand?” (Mk 4:21). With the expression “is it brought in” Jesus seems to want to indicate the fact that the light does not come from us but comes from elsewhere, from another who we are not.

For the big problem of closed traditions not transmitted by God to the world is that they suffocate, wear out, dry up, go out. Every tradition, every observance, every doctrine that loses its source and its spread, is inevitably destined to die.

St. Paul had an acute sense of this danger, because he had gone through it. In his youth he was closed up in a tradition that the Pharisees were transmitting among themselves and he could not admit that anything new could come and spoil this definitively closed system, where the word of God, the commandments of God, had no other source than the closed tradition itself. No proof, no witness, no spectacle of holiness like the example of St. Stephen, went so far as to trouble the closure of the tradition that Paul was defending mercilessly. Up to the day when the living Source of all tradition, the word of God in person, Jesus, spoke to him personally and, suddenly, Saul realized that the word of God had created a transmission that, so to speak, leaped over his impermeable and unstainable tradition. The Light had now arrived, and he was blind, he let it pass by without seeing it. As St. John writes: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (Jn 1:5). It was Saul, not the Light, that was under the basket.