# The Rule and the Tradition: A Personal Journey

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Some sixty years ago, not long after my first profession, I was—without any prior experience—appointed to learn the craft of making monastic habits. Ever since, with occasional intermissions, I have been the community's tailor. The result of this has been a certain *déformation professionnelle*. Whenever I meet a monk or nun of Benedictine lineage, I compulsively but covertly examine their monastic habits, noting their distinctiveness.

I have been told by a Franciscan friend—I don't know whether it is factual—that at the Generalate of the Friars Minor there is an ancient habit purporting to have belonged to Saint Francis—If so, I don't know what he was buried in—which has, through the centuries, served as a kind of pattern from which modern habits are made. In contrast, there is no normative Benedictine habit. There has been, and still is, great variety in form, fabric, and colour. Different groups have opted for their own distinctive styles and, of course, the habits of monks and nuns are different. In more recent times, pockets and buttons and zips have been added, and newer fabrics outlast anything our ancestors may have worn. Needless to say, usage of the habit varies considerably.

Benedict did not go into precise details about the cut of the habit—although, interestingly, Hildegard did—but simply says that it should fit the wearer: *mensurata*, made to measure. He insists that monks (and nuns) should not

make an issue about the colour or quality of their clothing, but simply accept whatever is available in the province where they are, and is not expensive (RB 55:7).

As you have probably guessed, I am using the phenomenology of the Benedictine habit as a metaphor for the tradition of which it is a part. As far as we can judge, regarding the form and function of monastic clothing, there is a visible continuity from the time of Saint Benedict until the present, but there has also been considerable change or development, usually dictated by external circumstances. This is a possibility envisaged by Benedict: *secundum locorum qualitatem ubi habitant vel aerum temperiem*; the habit is to be adapted according to the kind of place they are in and the climate. (RB 55:1).

We live in an era which, despite its vociferous claims to absolute freedom, often manifests a tendency to fundamentalism in interpretation and either rigidity or false antiquarianism in practice. Such an approach presupposes that the documents from which inspiration is being drawn or the practice being followed was established with a view to complete and permanent adherence. However, no serious legislator would expect such eternal exactitude, especially when the law itself was deliberately left open.

I entered the Cistercian monastery at Tarrawarra in 1960, a mere five years after its foundation. Benedictine monasticism had found its way to the Australian colonies in the first half of the nineteenth century. John Bede Polding, a monk of Downside became the first Archbishop of Sydney and,

although the monastery of monks he established fell victim to ecclesiastical politics, the community of nuns and a congregation of sisters he founded remain to this day. And, in Western Australia, in 1846, Rosendo Salvado established the monastery of New Norcia, also remaining, but more than 3,000 kilometres distant, farther than Rome is from Moscow.

The practical effects of this were that monasticism was implanted in Australia without much opportunity for mutual support, without the formative influence of ancient buildings and centuries-old practice, without the expectations of populations long-accustomed to living against the backdrop of a monastery, albeit a ruined one. And, because of its upside-down location, our seasons did not coincide with what the Rule prescribed. We were compelled to be creative. There was little cultural support either from civil society or from the Church for the implantation of monasticism.

My own initial exposure to the Rule of Saint Benedict was life-based rather than text-based, mediated by the experience of our founders. The Rule was sung in Latin, in the daily chapter, but it was applied to the local situation by a short reflection on the text that had been read. The Rule was considered to be something that was lived rather than an object of study. I now realise that this seems to have been Saint Benedict's approach also. In his final chapter he proposes that first we observe the Rule and only then we will be in a position to profit from the study of its sources. It seems to have been a case of education by immersion.

Our Irish founders were humane, humorous and humble. Although their heads were in heaven their feet were on the ground—to quote the motto of our mother-house. They never tried to make the foundation an Irish colony, but aspired to make provision for a form of life that was not only true to our Benedictine and Cistercian lineage, but was also authentically Australian.

As with every other Benedictine endeavour in Australia, adaptation was an essential component of continuance. The Trappist foundation of Beagle Bay in the Kimberleys, in the late nineteenth century, faltered because of an unwillingness on high to allow the necessary modifications that monastic life in that primitive region demanded.

Following the Second Vatican Council, we were given the mandate to combine a return to the sources with an attention to the signs of the times. The notion of **orthopraxy** advanced by Edward Schillebeeckx was important in leading to the conclusion that the validity of an interpretation is to be assessed by its liveability, and its capacity for producing *honestas morum*, as Benedict notes, and at least the beginning of an authentic monastic lifestyle. Life authenticates the interpretation of the text.

It was also at this time that I began to appreciate the need not only for a close reading of the text but also the necessity of source criticism and—with regard to the *Regula Magistri*—some level of redaction criticism. But I felt there was still something lacking in really coming to grips with the profound reality that lay hidden beneath the surface of the text.

In 1971 I was sent to Leuven to study New Testament and had the opportunity to acquire some elements of exegetic method from Professor Frans Neirynck, who also acted as supervisor of my thesis. Part of the requirements was that other courses had to be taken outside one's area of specialisation. I chose to take a course by Herman Berger on Hermeneutics (needless to say there were a few jokes made by the students on the Herman-Hermeneutics conjunction). What a challenge: the material was very dense, the lectures were held after lunch from 14.00-16.00—not the best time for alertness—and the professor's crackling voice indicated a lifetime of heavy smoking. But most of my friends agreed that the content of the course was sensational, even life-changing. Certainly, it gave us a new way of connecting what we were studying in other courses with our personal philosophy of life, avoiding the alienation that comes from spending too much time on something that has little to do with everyday existence.

What he did was to take us by the hand and lead us through the pages of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. It was not a picnic, but as the year passed it became vastly meaningful. What I gained from it was a sense that a text is a part of a living whole. It can be understood not only by what preceded it, but also by what follows it. To the extent that a text is influential, its meaning is conveyed also by its reception, and the different life-situations of its receivers highlight different aspects of what has been received. Text and tradition cannot be separated.

Writing and reading belong together, therefore the message of the text is modulated according to the **experience** of the reader. This approach is similar to Saint Bernard's method of reading the Bible. It is like watching a tennis match. In one hand is the Book of the Word, in the other is the Book of Experience (*liber experientiae*). We alternate between one and the other. Our experience helps us to understand what the text is communicating; the text helps us to come to grips with our experience, past and present and conveys a challenge for the future. Text and experience interact and alternate with a view to producing a harmonious concordance.

I was so enthralled and enamoured of this approach that I wanted to apply it to the reading of the Rule of Saint Benedict. Using the occasion of a regional seminar in Ireland in July 1972—50 years ago—I gave an impenetrable conference later published as two articles, "Community and Tradition" and "The Hermeneutics of Tradition". In the course of the last half-century I have returned to these themes, half a dozen times or more, approaching them from different angles and nuancing my language. But, in my own mind, I have been merely circling a fundamental principle of textual interpretation, looking at it from different angles.

## Text and Tradition

Perhaps I should say something about my evolving understanding of how a text is inserted within the stream of tradition.

We can understand something of tradition through what Alfred Shutz has termed its "monuments"—the time-marked attempts to embody thought in social institutions. These traditions are important and significant, but more significant and more important are the texts which emerge from within the tradition, each of which, from its singular standpoint, gives expression to aspects of the tradition not universally acknowledged. As Roland Barthes wrote in his 1967 essay *The Death of the Author*: "The text is a tissue of quotations… a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and crash."

The error of fundamentalism, it seems to me, is to limit a text to a single moment of its history, when it is captured definitively on the printed page. It is possible to perform a highly detailed autopsy on the dead text and gain some insight into it, but that does not exhaust the possibilities of penetrating beyond the obvious. We need to step back from the text to assess the context which provoked it and that which has received it. We need to be aware of how the flow of thought from ages past lapped around the writer as pen was put to paper. Mysteriously a text usually contains more than what the writer intended. Even the dialect or accent or idiom used gives information of which the author is unaware and, we all know, what is left unsaid sometimes speaks more loudly and eloquently than protracted verbiage.

In a 1919 essay on "Tradition and the Individual" the English-American poet T. S. Eliot reflected on the manner in which the poet's work somehow re-expresses what the poet has received from the past. Each genuine poem must be considered as "a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been

written". "The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together."

This is true of most writing and the flow takes every new reading in its embrace. Authors are not only dependent on the present contents of consciousness, they are nourished by deep currents from their past, of which they are only sporadically aware. American novelist Don de Lillo describes how switching off, wasting time, is an important component of good writing.

> A writer takes earnest measures to secure his solitude and then finds endless ways to squander it. . . But the work itself, you know — sentence by sentence, page by page — it's much too intimate, much too private, to come from anywhere but deep within the writer himself. It comes out of all the time a writer wastes. We stand around, look out the window, walk down the hall, come back to the page, and, in those intervals, something subterranean is forming, a literal dream that comes out of day-dreaming. It's too deep to be attributed to clear sources.

And this sense of subliminal inspiration leads the Australian novelist David Malouf, to make the point that in any body of writing the earliest work already contains the **seeds** of what later becomes explicit. In a sense, it is all there, from the very beginning.

> Your work is a whole and until it's all there, then none of your books are absolutely complete. But that's having a very holistic notion of what your body of work is. I think if you're serious, as you go on in

> your writing, that's what you discover: that the work is a whole and until it's all there, it's not there.

Each authentic literary creation is a recreation of tradition; tradition is alive and active whenever the Muse is at work. Eliot insists that the poet is a medium and not the author of the work. The poet's task is to be silent so that the tradition may speak.

It seems that for most of my life I have been interacting with ancient texts from our tradition, finding in them sources of guidance and inspiration.

While I was working on my doctoral thesis on Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, I discovered another mode in which tradition comes alive. It involved more than a weary adaptation to changing circumstances. He embraced tradition in a dazzling way that is utterly frustrating to diligent writers of footnotes. His content was original only in two or, perhaps three, areas. It was his mode of expression that made him distinctive and attracted attention. He added a sparkle to the tradition. Sometimes he pulled forth from memory a particular text *tout court*, sometimes he combined texts seemingly drawn at random, sometimes he misused a text to draw a smile from the reader. He even had a way of drawing attention to a text by not quoting it. He was a master of counterpoint. His distinctive Latin was marked by the fluidity borrowed from the emergent Romance languages; his vocabulary and syntax were markedly dependent on them. And his contemporaries appreciated his writings. Despite the ravages following the French Revolution and the depredation of monastic libraries done at the behest of Austro-Hungarian

Emperor Joseph II, there remain extant some 1,500 manuscripts of his writings dating from his own lifetime. He was, above all, a man of his time.

Tradition is not a thing of the past; it belongs to the present. It is the means by which the past reaches out beyond itself and interacts with the present. When I say "interacts" I am evoking the idea of a dialogue or even a dialectic in which the energies of the past reach into the concerns of the present--but as a stranger or even as an enemy. Tradition contends with our certainties either to confirm or to challenge; it is not merely wallpaper to decorate our present convictions.

Too often the term "tradition" is interpreted as being something unchanging and even stodgy. Some see it as quaint in its own way because it seems to come from another more cultured age, and so has less to do with brash, contemporary reality. Certainly, it seems to many as more conservative than progressive. It values what is received from the past, but it is not tethered to it.

Sociologists talk about a repeating cycle of internalisation, externalisation, objectivation, within the process of socialisation. A tradition is received and internalised by assimilation, it then stamps itself on whatever is done; it is externalised where—in its new form—it becomes visible: a suitable object to be perceived and received by others. This is how tradition works: through human agency, through an ongoing process of reception, assimilation, and

re-expression. To stop the cycle and make tradition merely an object of study or affection is to deprive it of life.

The term *traditio* or *paradosis* is more like a verb than a noun; it refers to the **act** of handing something on, not to whatever it is that is transmitted. Inevitably, whatever is passed from one person to another, from one generation to the next and to each new culture, is **re-formed** (with a hyphen), taking its new specificity not from the past but from the situation in which it now finds itself. Benedictine tradition has kept itself alive by relentless inculturation, forming coalitions wherever it arrived with whatever was already there. It was as much at home in the High Middle Ages as it was in the missionary expansion of the nineteenth century, in the citadels of high culture as in the newborn colonies of Australia. Tradition is, fundamentally, the transmission of life. Its precise form is dictated by its target. In each of its incarnations it is unique, even though there is continuity stretching back more than a millennium.

Spiritual tradition is more than a sociological phenomenon – ultimately its energy derives from the self-revelation of God. In fact, "energy" is a near synonym for such tradition. It is the act of passing on something of transcendent value, allowing it to mutate to suit the condition of those who receive it. Ultimately a spiritual tradition, in the Christian sense, is the communication of the Good News. The "news" is "good" not primarily because it contains valuable information about morality or metaphysics, but

because it communicates the capacity and the energy to re-incarnate what has been received, and to do this in a new conformation.

The Benedictine tradition is more than a specialised vocabulary or a code of conduct – however admirable. It is the transmission of life. While continuity is of its essence, its mission is incomplete unless it becomes an agent of change – unless it makes a difference to those who receive it. It is an ongoing history of a complex of beliefs, values and practices that crystallised in the sixth-century text known as "the Rule of Saint Benedict". Beyond its objective content there is a person-to-person element that is at the heart of its power to begin a process of transformation. The tradition does not exist apart from persons. It cannot be bottled and preserved. It is electric; the spark leaps from one person to the other. This is probably what was meant by the catechetical mantra of the 1960s: "Religion is caught, not taught".

The Cistercian re-formers of the twelfth century are often regarded as examples of what Rembert Weakland termed "neo-primitivism"—the attempt to remove oneself from the present to former times, and to observe the Rule literally and completely. Of course, any claims they made to this were mostly a matter of marketing. Why the Cistercians made such a splash in their time was not because they embodied the past but because their stated aspirations corresponded so completely to what their contemporaries were seeking. They were an example of what Archbishop Polding identified as the fundamental attitude of Benedictinism: a "susceptive and responsive attitude of soul". Instead of imposing the past on the contemporary world,

they accepted the reality of the present and crafted a response to it that was new, but in a creative fidelity to what had gone before.

Responsiveness involves adaptation and innovation. In the novel establishment of an annual General Chapter, the Cistercian Order institutionalised re-formation. Beyond its executive and judicial functions, the Chapter had the power to legislate, to keep fine-tuning monastic observance in response to changing circumstances. From the twelfth century until the French Revolution there were 365 Chapters, resulting in some 4,000 pages of *statuta*, spread over seven volumes. Sometimes explicitly stated, but always implicit, was the desire to maintain the ideals set forth by the founders against the backdrop of plagues, wars, climatic change, ecclesiastical politics, schisms, and whatever else Europe contrived to throw up during these turbulent five hundred years.

It seems to me that the Order was at its strongest when it was most willing to intervene on the basis of a "susceptive and responsive attitude of soul", not merely reacting, not exhibiting an entrenched resistance to change, but opening itself to the energies inherent as the tradition unfolded. Unfortunately, because the abbots assembled were human beings, the General Chapter often failed to do this, sometimes with disastrous outcomes.

Embracing the tradition and learning how to interpret it in life-affirming ways seems to me the key not only to the survival of a monastic charism, but also a pathway to its further flourishing.

## Reading the Tradition

As we have already noted, the great exponent of active, as distinct from passive, interpretation of ancient texts has been Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) and his seminal book *Truth and Method*. By "active interpretation" is meant that, in the light of tradition, the interpreter contributes something to the transmission of the integral message of the text, and is not merely an archaeologist who unearths the meaning it had at the moment it was originally committed to writing. In fact the later reader may perceive more in a text than its original author. As we have already noted, writers are habitually unaware of all the influences that mould their thought; what to them seems self-evident may well have a discernible lineage to the perceptive commentator. Any text potentially contains more than its author consciously gives it. We see this in the realm of law, especially constitutional law, when subsequent applications of the law to new situations expand the scope of the written text by reference to a presumed *mens legislatoris*, and such re-readings are assayed and institutionalised through judicial precedents. In music the notes on a page are one thing: talented conductors and musicians bring their own experience, passion and history to produce new versions of the same music for each generation. As Gadamer notes:

> Every assimilation (*Aneignung*) of tradition is historically different: which does not mean that every one represents only an imperfect understanding of it... This means that assimilation is no mere repetition of the text that has been handed down, but it is a new creation of understanding.

We may even aver that the act of writing is incomplete until what is written is read. And when it is read, the reader brings something to the text which complements the "original" meaning that the author intended. Tradition comes alive in the act of transmission which itself is incomplete until what is being handed on is received.

Gadamer regards consciously standing within the tradition to which the text belongs as an important factor in reaching an integral understanding of it. When we read a text we are exposing ourselves to a mere part of a fuller reality: the tradition in which both the writer and the writing stand. The meaning of a text is more than the meaning consciously intended by the author: "the sense of a text in general reaches far beyond what its author originally intended." This tradition transcends the persons who embody or express it. For this reason, the text is most fully interpreted when it is read in the fuller context of its tradition. "To stand within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge, but makes it possible." We may well come to the conclusion that observant monks and nuns already have a foot in the door when it comes to understanding what Benedict meant.

Gadamer is adamant that to interpret a text adequately in our own historical context we must bring to it our personal **experience,** and work to achieve a "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*). It is like a necessary conversation with a stranger; we must begin by finding a common language and a common ground on which to stand. Then dialogue, learning and mutual enrichment become possible. As with any fruitful conversation the key element is respect. We respect the otherness and even the strangeness of the text and do not try to reshape it according to our own personal or cultural preferences. We also respect the particularity of our own situation and do not aspire to leave it behind.

From Gadamer's work we may compile a list of seven qualities which characterise sound interpretation of a traditional text and, thereby, of tradition itself.

1) **The experienced reader approaches the text with humility**, not seeking to master it, but to enter into dialogue with it.

2) **This dialogue presupposes a degree of self-knowledge**, which implies an experience of human finitude: a deep awareness of the limitations of humanity probably best learnt through suffering. Self-knowledge comes not only from acting, but also from being acted upon.

3) **To understand a text the reader must try to establish a common language with the text**. This means accepting the relativity of one's own culture and acquiring the discipline of understanding reality from a different perspective. In practical terms this will often mean learning new languages and appreciating a different culture. In the case of the Rule it means knowing something of sixth-century Latin and appreciating the state of affairs in Saint Benedict's world.

4) **The reader must have the fundamental openness of a listener**. "The hermeneutical experience also has its logical consequence: that of uninterrupted listening." Note this phrase: "uninterrupted listening"; something we find also in current discussions about synodality.

5) **This openness to experience means that the reader needs to be "radically undogmatic"**; the reader must be detached from antecedent expectations of what the text contains, somewhat ready to be surprised. "The claim to understand the other person in advance performs the function of keeping the claim of the other person at a distance."

6) **The reader must accept that listening to tradition involves accepting that "some things are against myself"**, and will therefore challenge my complacency. The text cannot be made into the servant of the *status quo*; it is, rather, an agent of change. Integral reading

demands that the text retains its independent voice and that includes the capability to challenge the reader's prior convictions.

7) Every **understanding reached must be subjected to testing**. The reader needs repeatedly to return anew to the text to verify that the message received is concordant with the objectivity of the text. As in conversation, the only way to guarantee that the message has been heard is to paraphrase it and check with the speaker the accuracy of what has been understood. Also, like conversation, interpretative reading needs questioning and continual cross-checking. Often clarity emerges from successive approximations.

The thought of Gadamer is profound and not always immediately accessible, but it does provide a method of maintaining fidelity to the thought of Saint Benedict while recognising the necessary nuances imposed by living in a different time and place. It sounds almost like a method for *lectio* divina! Perhaps this sense of dialogue is no more than Saint Benedict himself envisaged when he set rule and abbot in tandem; the rule to express the traditional philosophy and practice of monasticism, the abbot to adjust and adapt it to the situation in which the tradition was actualised. The key phrase "fusion of horizons" is one that may serve both as a guide to our reading of the Rule and as an ideal that will keep us safe from the dangers inherent both in fundamentalism and eclecticism.

## Adaptation and Change

The active and actualising interpretation of the Rule of Saint Benedict will necessarily lead to adaptation and change. We can apply to monastic tradition the words which Cardinal Newman used to describe the development of doctrine. Tradition is "not merely received passively in this or that form into many minds, but it becomes an active principle within them, leading them to an ever-new contemplation of itself, to an application of it in various directions, and a propagation of it on every side" (I, §4). And: "It changes with them (external circumstances) in order to remain the same. In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often" (II, §7).

Genuine tradition—as distinct from escapist nostalgia—is simultaneously conservative and progressive. It derives its energy both from the past and the present. The most alluring heresy has always been to attempt to lock the products of tradition in a secure stronghold to prevent it escaping, or to place it in an archive for the information of experts, or in a museum to arouse the wonderment of the masses. Not so. Authentic tradition is living and active. Because it is not wholly determined by either past or present, there is a wildness about it that makes it less susceptible to institutional control. It may be suppressed for a generation or two, but may well return with a vengeance taken up by new prophets and witnesses, and expressing itself in new ways.

Benedictine history is an example of this. I have often observed that no other religious order has been so often and so variously reformed. From which I infer that there is an inherent tendency to deformation—probably due to

decentralisation of authority and local autonomy. It is undeniable that the prospect of multiple local adaptations over an extended period is dangerous, and some deviations are almost inevitable. What demonstrates that the tradition is alive is its capacity to recognise aberrations and to offer corrections. Tradition is neither infallible nor impeccable; it is human, and nothing that is human is foreign to it—including the weakness, blindness and malice of sin. But there is also an energy contained within it that transcends the individual and the group, which draws its strength from the great cloud of witnesses who, through the centuries, have lived by it and died in its embrace.

Let me return to the image of the monastic habit. There is always something pleasant about putting on a brand new and well-fitting habit. Even though we know that it will not remain in that crisp condition forever, unless we hang it up and lock the wardrobe. If we wear it, it will begin to show the marks of its usage, some coming from inside, some from its interaction with the outside world. But it can be laundered and, although not really as good as new, it fulfils its purpose. The monk who taught me tailoring used to say that after a while, the habit began to take its shape from the wearer—just as each agency that receives the Benedictine tradition reshapes it so that it can be responsive to the only reality: the present moment. Monastic tradition has survived by changing; it has achieved stability by being constantly on the move. That is for us, a mandate for the future.

This address is based on many essays I have written over the past half-century. Documentation for the assertions it makes will usually be found in the following articles.


1. "Community and Tradition." *Tjurunga* 4 (1973): 4, 45–58
2. "The Hermeneutics of Tradition." *Tjurunga* 5 (1973): 39–50
3. "Principles of Interpretation and Application of the Rule of Benedict." *Tjurunga* 14 (1977): 33–38.
4. "Orthopraxy and Interpretation." *Regulae Benedicti Studia* 14/15 (1985/86): 165–72.
5. "The Book of Experience: The Western Monastic Art of *Lectio Divina*," *Eye of the Heart* 2 (2008), pp. 5-32.
6. Integrity in Interpretation: Listening for the Authentic Voice of Saint Benedict, *New Norcia Studies* 20 (2012)
7. "The Word Became Text and Dwelt Among Us." *Tjurunga* 86 (2014): 27–39.
8. "Tradition, Interpretation, Reform: The Western Monastic Experience," ABR 69.4 (Dec 2018), 400-428.