

## On "Witness" and "Tradition"

It is clear to me that what I mean by "witness" when I speak of "the Christian witness of faith" is closely parallel to what many Christians and theologians today understand by "tradition."

By "tradition" (= *traditio*) they commonly mean both (1) the *act* of traditioning or handing on, i.e., "active tradition," or "act of tradition" (= *actus tradendi*), and (2) the *content* to be traditioned or handed on, i.e., "passive tradition" (= *traditum tradendum*). Correspondingly, by "witness" I mean both (1) the "*that*," or *act*, of witness and (2) its "*what*," or *content*.

There is the further parallel between "traditions" (= *traditiones*) in the sense of *tradita tradenda* and "witnesses" as the empirically given forms in which the Christian witness is alone accessible to us. The one *traditum* is actually given only in the many *tradita*, just as the one witness is actually given only in the many witnesses. Of course, so far as theological reflection is concerned, the one *traditum* is not datum but object or objective, to be discerned only in and through the many *tradita* that alone are actually given, even as *the* Christian witness of faith is not datum but object or objective, to be discerned and retrieved only in and through the many witnesses that alone are actually data.

But not all *traditiones* are on the same level, any more than all witnesses are. Decisive, indeed, is the *apostolic traditio*—both as *actus tradendi* and *traditum tradendum*—that is formally normative for all other *traditiones*, which are themselves substantially normative only because or insofar as they are authorized by apostolic tradition. And so, too, with the many witnesses, which are substantially normative only because or insofar as they are authorized by the apostolic witness.

But, then, why not get in the swim of things and talk in terms of "tradition" instead of "witness"? Perhaps the best reason is that "tradition" is sufficiently burdened with the results of the Reformation-post-Reformation

controversies concerning “scripture and tradition” to make an alternative way of speaking desirable.

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