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Risk of Tradition: With de Certeau toward a Postmodern Catholic Theory

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TRADITION IS NOT USUALLY ASSOCIATED with risk. However, as one gets into the business of defining what tradition is, theologically speaking, complex tensions come to light. Take the following statement by Yves Congar: "Tradition, then, comprises two equally vital aspects: one of development and one of conservation."[1] Post-Newman, it is uncontroversial to assume that tradition possesses an element of development. But how much development? What kind of development? What kind of conservation? How are development and conservation related? The risk inherent in the interplay of development and conservation is not only that there could be "too much" of one or the other; it is also that their relationship may be misconstrued altogether.

The tension with the notion of tradition is reflected in the division between "progressive" and "liberal" positions on the one hand and "traditionalist" and "conservative" ones on the other. It is found in the division between enthusiastic supporters of Pope Francis and those who look back longingly at the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, between those who see a need to implement the reforms of Vatican II more fully and deeply and those who view the council with a degree of caution, not to say suspicion. The division has found expression recently in different interpretations and opinions regarding the encyclical *Amoris Laetitia*, which appears to change the Church's teaching on the status of divorced couples living in second unions.[2] It would be easy to continue this list, but it would be an unedifying task. For, there is a risk to these divisions. Writing from an Irish perspective, from a society profoundly marked by the "death of God" that

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[1] Yves Congar OP, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 117

[2] The controversy has focused, in particular, on two footnotes. The first, no. 329, intimates that it may not always be best for divorced couples in a second union to live "as brothers and sisters," while the second, no. 351, suggests that it may be appropriate for such couples to receive the Eucharist. Welcomed by some as an opening of Church teaching to people struggling with difficult situations, others have viewed *Amoris Laetitia* as a dangerous departure from tradition. In 2016, Cardinals Brandmüller, Burke, Caffarra, and Meisner issued a document of *Dubia* ("doubts" or "questions") in relation to *Amoris Laetitia*; this document mentions footnote 351 explicitly.

Nietzsche announced over a century ago, I am convinced that the Church is no longer able to afford the luxury of internecine struggles.[3] Moreover, tradition is neither a conservative nor a progressive phenomenon; it undercuts this opposition. Tradition is, rather, the space in which these discussions are able to take place. This is what I argue in the following reflections.

I begin by sketching some philosophical background that is necessary to understanding the dynamics of Christian tradition, which—I submit—takes its point of departure in an "event" (in the language of Martin Heidegger), a "saturated phenomenon" (as Jean-Luc Marion would say), or an "inaugural rupture" (following Michel de Certeau, whom I am going to treat in detail). De Certeau is going to be the key theoretical resource as I endeavor to articulate the dynamics of Catholic tradition, but it will become clear that de Certeau, for all his insights, requires correction and supplementation.

The State of Philosophy in the Wake of Kant

The notion of the "event" is one of the major advances in twentieth-century philosophy. It emerged as a constructive response to Kant's claim according to which human beings do not have access to the world as it is in itself; rather, the world that we experience is the result of formative action which the human mind brings to bear on sense data that it processes by means of "forms of sensibility" (namely, space and time, which Kant does not believe to be objective properties inherent in things) as well as twelve "categories" creatively adapted from Aristotle. While Kant postulates that there must be some "thing in itself" which precedes such human processing, accessing it would require stepping out of the structures of human perception and cognition. That route is not open to us.

Kant's thesis, if true, renders impossible any natural theology that aims to establish fundamental truths about God by reasoning "upward," so to speak, from the created order to a creator. Should the fundamental structures of the cosmos be those that the human mind itself has injected into it, then tracing these structures to their source will lead us to the human mind and not to a creator-God. By the same token, Kantian transcendental idealism undermines the possibility of a moral system that derives its justification from natural law. Again,

[3] The current state of the Catholic Church in Ireland is not a secret. The titles alone of the following four books paint an unmistakable picture: (1) D. Vincent Twomey SVD, *The End of Irish Catholicism?* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003)—an in-depth historical and theological analysis of the state of the Irish Church; (2) William King, *A Lost Tribe* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2017)—a moving, semi-autobiographical novel by a parish priest from Dublin; (3) Joe McDonald, *Why the Irish Church Deserves To Die* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2017)—a passionate plea for reform by another Dublin priest; (4) David Quinn, *How We Killed God ... and Other Tales of Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Currach Press, 2017)—a collection of articles by a well-known Catholic journalist.

if the structures of nature are ultimately our own, they cannot provide insights about how to live in such a manner as to respect a larger cosmic order, one willed by a transcendent creator.

Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that Catholic thinkers of a more conservative bent reject Kant's transcendental idealism, instead holding on to versions of a realism often associated—rightly or wrongly—with Thomas Aquinas.[4] Transcendental Thomists, on the other hand, have attempted to marry Aquinas and Kant. Let us leave this metaphysical and epistemological debate to one side. I submit that there is one sense—a historical one—in which there can be little doubt about the accuracy of Kant's theory: it captures how we actually live in the modern world, even more so today than in Kant's own time. It would be difficult to maintain that most of us are in touch with reality in the fairly direct and unmediated fashion that characterized human interaction with the world in the preindustrial age. Consider something as basic as water. We rarely, if ever, encounter water outside of human structures that reduce it to a state which Heidegger has termed "objectlessness":[5] subterranean pipes carry water from a treatment plant to our homes and businesses, where it is automatically made into ice cubes, sits in water heaters, is stored in toilet tanks waiting to be flushed away, operates inside dishwashers, and circulates in radiators. Occasionally, we still allow it to touch or enter our bodies, but even then, it is experienced as a cleaning or hydrating agent. Compare this with an older, preindustrial experience of obtaining water directly from a river or a well, feeling its weight, smelling it before it is chlorinated and fluoridated, and tasting it while it is still fresh.[6]

It would not be difficult to argue that the objectlessness of a world in which everything has become resource—the human being itself included—is at the root of our ecological crisis. Furthermore, if we live in a world which gives us the impression that we ultimately encounter only our own structures, then there is no room left for the possibility of divine revelation; thus, the "death of God" which Nietzsche prophesied appears inevitable. Kant's philosophy captures this world perfectly and presciently.

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[4] I am saying "rightly or wrongly" because I do not believe that Thomas was a realist of any straightforward kind, if only because for a Christian thinker this world can never be more than the shadow of a reality that much exceeds it. I have presented my interpretation of Thomas's thought in *Omne ens est aliquid: Introduction à la lecture du "système" philosophique de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Louvain: Peeters, 1996).

[5] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," trans. William Lovitt, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 307–341 (at 324 and 332). The German term is *das Gegenstandslose*.

[6] I expand on this example in "The Holy Well as a Window onto Irish Life—Pre-Christian, Christian, and Post-Christian," *The Furrow: A Journal for the Contemporary Church* 71 (2020): 131–136 and 195–201.

The preceding remarks place us in a position to appreciate the significance of the discovery of the event in the philosophy of the twentieth century. In the event, post-Kantian philosophy has rediscovered the initiative of the real; that is to say, the fact that human beings are not the ultimate makers of the world and not even of the structures within which the world is experienced. In the Heideggerian version of this idea, the transcendental constitution of experience by the human mind is preceded and undercut by the simple "being given" of reality. The agent of this gift is not personal for Heidegger, as one who conceives of the event in terms of time and historical process. In this regard, the title of *Being and Time* already pointed in the direction that was to remain decisive in his later thought. Heidegger's move does not amount to a simple repudiation of Kant, a reactionary and no doubt futile attempt to return philosophy to a pre-Kantian state. Rather, Heidegger maintains that the transcendental structures, which according to Kant the human mind imposes upon the world, are themselves given by historical process. For Heidegger, being was "sent" differently to the Greeks than it was to the medievals or than it is to us.[7]

The Event in Catholic Thought: Jean-Luc Marion

In recent years, Jean-Luc Marion's notion of the "saturated phenomenon" has become the object of intense interest and discussion in Catholic thought. With the idea of the saturated phenomenon, Marion develops the concept of the event and ultimately applies it to the phenomenon of revelation. In essence, Marion argues that, if one thinks to its logical conclusion what givenness implies, revelation appears as its paradigmatic example. The point here is not to prove philosophically that God had to reveal God's self but rather to show that "the Other showing himself as icon" is a perfectly intelligible possibility once the structure of phenomenality is properly understood.[8] In other words, if careful analysis even of everyday experience demonstrates that, whenever the world shows itself to us, a gift of givenness underlies our experience—a gift that eludes our control and constitution but precedes them—then we can imagine the possibility of a givenness that shatters all our horizons.

Lest our discussion become a little too abstract, consider the paradigmatic example of revelation in the Scriptures: Moses on Mount Sinai. On Mount Sinai, the Lord reveals himself to Moses—by not revealing himself. Moses certainly never sees God's face (Exodus

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[7] I have termed Heidegger's move a "historicization of the transcendental"; see "The Historicization of the Transcendental in Postmodern Philosophy," in *Die Logik des Transzendentalen: Festschrift für Jan A. Aertsen zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Martin Pickavé, Miscellanea Mediaevalia 30 (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2003), 701–713.

[8] Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 234.

33:20); the most he may have caught a glimpse of is God's "back" (Exodus 33:23).[9] The risks that are associated with God's descent onto the mountain are depicted in graphic detail, in a scene full of terror. Thunder and lightning accompany the theophany as the whole mountain shakes violently; on several occasions the people are warned that coming too close to the mountain will kill them (Exodus 19:12–13, 21, and 24). To be clear here, approaching the Lord too closely, overstepping the "limits," let alone seeing God's face, means death. Elaborate preparations are necessary to facilitate even a mediated theophany: these range from washing one's garments to abstaining from sexual relations (Exodus 19:14–15). The Lord inter-rupts people's lives, ir-rupts into them, breaching their horizons of what to expect by overwhelming them with the divine presence—saturating their horizons of experience, as Marion would say, to the point of breaking them. At the same time, God's presence remains overshadowed by absence, because its unmediated presence would break not only people's boundaries of cognition but their very being. The result of this earth-shattering encounter is the reception of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) as well as the Lord's detailed instructions for the establishment of the tabernacle where the Lord is going to dwell among his people (Exodus 25–31).

The Mount Sinai episode, then, details how the Israelites' frames of expectation are first destroyed, only to be rebuilt according to new rules of conduct. In this process, God's people are gifted with fresh structures for how to live in and experience the world. The Mount Sinai episode tells the story of an "event," a "saturated phenomenon."[10]

The Event in Catholic Thought: Michel de Certeau

"However it is taken, Christianity implies a *relationship to the event* which inaugurated it: Jesus Christ." Thus begins a lecture that Michel de Certeau delivered at St. Louis University in 1971 under the title, "How is Christianity Thinkable Today?"[11] There are several dimensions to this inaugural event or inaugural rupture.[12] One is cer-

[9] Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.

[10] I offer a more detailed interpretation of the Mount Sinai episode in *Charred Root of Meaning: Continuity, Transgression, and the Other in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 26–33.

[11] Michel de Certeau, SJ, "How Is Christianity Thinkable Today?," in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 142–155. (The quotation is on 142; emphasis original.) The lecture is largely based upon a French text published in the same year, which is available in Michel de Certeau, SJ, *La faiblesse de croire*, ed. Luce Giard (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), 209–226.

[12] The latter term, *rupture instauratrice*, appears in the French title of the essay (*La faiblesse de croire*, 208).

tainly the fact of the Incarnation itself, in which God—the God of Israel who called Moses to ascend Mount Sinai—shows God's face: God *is* the man Jesus. "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14). One can look Jesus in the face and not die. More radically still, in the Last Supper, Jesus offered us his body and blood as means to enter into even more intimate communion with him, indeed to be incorporated into him. There is, if not rupture, then undoubtedly an immense deepening here in relation to the God of Israel who spoke to Moses from a cloud. And yet, the greatest "stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23) is the death of the Lord on the Cross, where the son of God in an ultimate act of self-emptying and solidarity with the human condition died the abject death of a Roman slave.[13] Finally, the resurrection shattered the assumptions even of Jesus's closest followers regarding the finality of his death. With its violent earthquake, the angel appearing like lightning, and the guards shaking with fear, the story of the empty tomb as narrated in Matthew (28:1–7) recalls familiar aspects from the Mount Sinai episode.

These are, however, not the dimensions of the Christ-event which attract de Certeau's attention. He focuses on what he believes underlies and makes them possible: "The praxis of Jesus (which has its fulfillment in the silence of his death) is the point of articulation between these two languages of Old and New Testament. It is, between the two halves of the Bible, the opening up of an *action*."[14] (The French text is more graphic here, speaking of the "white [space]," *le blanc*, of an action.)[15] Furthermore, de Certeau asserts, the Christian faith at its core is a practical movement whose structure conforms to the conversion of the Old Testament into the New.[16] So, then, to be Christian means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, whose promise that he has come to fulfill, not to abolish, the Law or the prophets (Matthew 5:17) gives us the key to understanding the rhythm of Christian action. This action or praxis takes place in the space between a status quo (signified figuratively by the Old Testament) and an adaptation of that original position to new circumstances (signified by the New Testament). De Certeau explains:

> Jesus does not cease to hold to the uniqueness of the Jewish institution, while he creates the beginning of another meaning for it. His act

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[13] See Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

[14] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 153 (emphasis original).

[15] De Certeau, *La faiblesse*, 222.

[16] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 153: "By that double movement alone it [i.e., Christian praxis] conforms to the way in which the entire Christian faith is articulate in the conversion of the Old Testament into the New Testament."

> is a "distance" with respect to the old law; it brings about a displacement which gives birth to a new law. A new practice of the "letter" of the old law opens up that letter to a spirit from which another scripture (another "letter") is now set forth. Globally, this New Testament Scripture does not mean a replacing of the former truth by a new one.[17] Jesus does not replace one religion with another. It is always the same religion. But a new practice changes the nature of the relationships of that religion with its institutions, laws, or texts. This type of conversion inaugurated by the act of Jesus is to be continued indefinitely ….[18]

So, then, if to be Christian means to be in a relationship with the inaugural event of Jesus Christ, it follows that this relationship occurs in the space opened up between the "letter" of a current position and the "spirit" of its future meaning. This spirit will eventually congeal into another letter, which will need to be vivified once again—and so forth. This, according to de Certeau, is the rhythm of Christian tradition.

If this sounds too vague, threatening the dissipation of the "essence" of what it means to be Christian in an endless series of reinventions and rearticulations, it is worth emphasizing that de Certeau insists on the need to be "*faithful* to the inaugural event" even while "being *different* from these beginnings."[19] He is no friend of a type of openness that leads to dissolving the uniqueness of the Christian way of living: "Today," he writes, "a Christian group protects itself often by hiding its particularity, by speaking as the testimony of all good wills, by identifying itself with positions held in common, by announcing only the insignificant truths of every man. This poor universalism is a mask; it is a compensation against the fact of the Christian particularity."[20]

This having been said, de Certeau is a thoroughly postmodern, post-Kantian thinker. Just as for Kant there is no "thing in itself" that we could access, so too for de Certeau there is no essence of Christianity to which we could hold on as we attempt to find our way into the future. The inaugural event opens up a space, a horizon within which Christian thinking and living are able to occur. De Certeau uses the term "permission" to express this idea, which he illustrates with an everyday example: an aesthetic experience such as watching a movie can render possible "another type of relationship to the world."[21] It

[17] The French text is more precise here: "Globalement, cette écriture néo-testamentaire n'avait pas pour signification d'être *la* vérité *à la place* de la précédente …" (*La faiblesse*, 223). Note, in particular, the italicized article *la*: "…this New Testament scripture did not have as its meaning to be *the* truth *in the place of* the preceding one …."

[18] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 154–155.

[19] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 142 (emphasis original).

[20] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 150.

[21] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 143.

modifies our perception, giving us a new "gift of seeing."[22] So, likewise, authors such as Marx or Freud are best understood not as originators of a specific set of doctrines but, rather, as events "authorizing" a particular type of discourse. Who Marx or Freud was, what they really meant to say, completely recedes behind the discursive spaces that the "epistemological break" associated with their names has established.[23]

De Certeau believes that Jesus is an "author" in the sense just explained. The fact that he did not actually write anything serves to throw into high relief the manner in which the "Jesus event" functions. De Certeau's reflections on this topic hark back to the tradition of negative theology, with which de Certeau was intimately familiar from his studies of mysticism. (It has been argued that the key to understanding de Certeau lies in his writings on Jean-Joseph Surin, the saintly Jesuit mystic associated with the possession at Loudun.[24]) Thus, even though God has revealed himself in the Son, this revelation is accessible only indirectly, always being permeated by a fundamental absence. This does not mean that there is no truth, or that the Incarnation did not occur. Yet the truth shows itself only in its effects; the reality of the Incarnation is testified to by the way in which it opens the hearts of the faithful to new possibilities of thinking and living.

At a first level, one can see this dialectics of presence and absence in the Gospels. These texts "specify … the *meaning* of the initial 'break'" as well as "the *rules* of a fidelity that is defined in terms of compatibility and incompatibility."[25] The four Gospels witness to the concrete fashion in which the presence—the life, death, and resurrection—of Jesus has shaped the thought and lives of his faithful followers. "But this fidelity," de Certeau continues, "is not of an objective kind. It is linked with *the absence of the object* or of the particular past which inaugurated it."[26] There are no objective facts in the past in which Christian language and practice could be anchored; for the "event is lost precisely in what it authorizes."[27] De Certeau's point here is not to deny that Jesus existed, was crucified, or even that there was an empty tomb; it is the specifically Christian dimension of these

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[22] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 143.

[23] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 143. De Certeau is drawing here upon ideas first formulated in Michel Foucault's influential essay, "What Is an Author?," trans. Josué V. Harari, in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, vol. 2: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 205–222. In that essay, Foucault uses Marx and Freud as examples of "founders of discursivity." It is a bit strange that de Certeau does not acknowledge Foucault.

[24] See Henri Laux SJ, "Michel de Certeau lecteur de Surin. Les enjeux d'une interprétation," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 136 (2004): 319–332.

[25] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 144.

[26] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 145 (emphasis original).

[27] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 145.

facts that remains elusive, a matter not of the historical record but of faith. More than that, the Jesus event is present only in the spaces between the practices that it produces; the Word speaks in the words of the four Gospels, but nowhere can it be "nailed down" as immediately present truth. One could say that it speaks between the lines or that it is an "*inter-locution*: something *said-between*, implied by all the Christian languages but given by none of them."[28]

Another, very telling way in which de Certeau couches his insight comes—so he tells us—from Heidegger. To express the absent presence of Jesus in the space opened up by the event of his existence between the two Testaments, de Certeau has recourse to the phrase "not without." "Not without" implies neither presence nor absence, but something that resides between these two poles. The Christian experience could not be without Jesus.

In the English version of the essay, the reference to Heidegger remains vague: "The category of 'not without' was suggested by Heidegger. It enters in a hundred ways into the functioning of the Christian experience."[29] No footnote enlightens the reader who is wondering where exactly in Heidegger's oeuvre de Certeau discovered this phrase. Fortunately, the French text is more explicit: "The 'not without,'" we read there, "*nicht ohne*, was suggested by Heidegger apropos of the relationship of Being to a neuter giving subject (*es*) that posits it."[30] A footnote refers to the essay "On Time and Being," which Heidegger published in France (though writing in German), in a festschrift for his friend Jean Beaufret. "On Time and Being" is devoted to the question of what "gives" Being. To approach this question, Heidegger characteristically takes his cue from language. Reflection on the German expression *Es gibt Sein* ("there is Being" in idiomatic translation, but literally "it gives Being") takes him into a discussion of Being in relation to that which gives it, time. In the course of this discussion, the philosopher asks whether time could be without the human being. The answer is negative: "There is no time without man." "But what," Heidegger continues, "does this 'not without' mean?" Answer: "Time is not the product of man, man is not the product of time."[31] There is co-determinacy here, such that human beings always already finds themselves within time—it has always already been given—yet the giving of this gift also requires ones

[28] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 145 (emphasis original).
[29] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 146.
[30] De Certeau, *La faiblesse*, 213: "Le 'pas sans'—*nicht ohne*—a été suggeré par Heidegger à propos du rapport de l'être à un sujet neutre et donateur (*es*) qui le pose …" (my translation).
[31] Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 16.

who receive. Being, time, and human beings find themselves co-implicated in a process which, in "On Time and Being," Heidegger calls "event" (*Ereignis*).[32]

Before we complete our discussion of de Certeau by asking the question of how his essay can help in the task of conceiving a postmodern theory of Catholic tradition, we need to cover two final elements in "How is Christianity Thinkable Today?" The first is de Certeau's emphasis on the importance of risk, to which the final section of the essay is devoted. Taking risks involves the courage of "converting" one moment in the unfolding of Christian life and thought into another, new one, just as Jesus converted the Old Testament into the New. Since the past is elusive—since the Son withdraws behind the space of Christian life that he has made possible—the past is not a place of univocal security. Stepping forward therefore requires an imaginative, faithful leap, a "repetition" (as Heidegger would say) which actualizes possibilities inherent in the past—and possibilities that careful research may have to uncover in the first place.[33] "It is impossible," writes de Certeau in the final sentence of his essay, "to be Christian without a common risk, without the creation of a new divergence in relation to our past and to our present, without being alive."[34]

The willingness to take risks includes embracing the Jesus event as something that permits a polyphony of possibilities. The scope of the event is particularly—"singularly," says de Certeau—misunderstood by "moralizing reductionisms"[35] that fail to acknowledge the rich variety of faithful expressions of Christianity which the inaugural rupture permits or lets be.[36] "*[T]he 'kenosis' of presence gives rise to a*

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[32] What de Certeau's reference to Heidegger demonstrates is that his reflections on the event of Jesus Christ do not fit only vaguely or indirectly into the turn towards the event in post-Kantian philosophy. On the contrary, they represent a conscious transposition onto theological terrain of the late Heidegger's philosophy of Being and time, a philosophy centered upon the concept of the event. Further investigation on the precise manner of de Certeau's appropriation of Heidegger's philosophy of the event would be worthwhile. There is clearly not simply adoption, but adaptation. It is revealing, as well, that de Certeau associates the phrase "not without" with the gift of Being. While this is true in a general sense, the precise context of the phrase in "On Time and Being" is the relationship between the human being and time. (The phrase "not without" appears only once in that essay.)

[33] The last sentence already represents my own adaptation of de Certeau's theory. I have treated the role of "repetition" in Catholic tradition in *Charred Root of Meaning*, 161–164.

[34] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 155.

[35] This remark occurs only in the French text: "Singulièrement appauvrie pas des réductions moralisatrices, la permission peut retrouver aujourd'hui son poids épistémologique et historique" (*La faiblesse*, 210).

[36] De Certeau refers to the German word *lassen* ("How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 143). It is surely not an accident that this is a key term in Heidegger's late thought. For an overview with references, see the entry "Gelassenheit (Lassen)," in Helmuth

plural, communitarian language"—all in italics, the only whole sentence in the essay to be highlighted in this manner.[37] De Certeau elaborates:

> Through all its history, the relation of the beginning of the Jesus event to its verification has no other form but a plural one. The structure of the manifestation is pluralist, in its Scriptural form just as in the form of the community. Indeed, there is the disappearance of the "idol" which would freeze our view and give us the truth in a singularity. There is a fading away of any "primitive" object capable of being delimited by a knowledge and possessed as in an ownership. There is a *loss* of anything "essential" immediately given in the image or in the voice.[38]

Already in the New Testament books, which reflect the different backgrounds and personalities of their authors, as well as the variety of contexts in which they were writing, one can see how the Jesus event, from its very beginning, lets multiplicity be. The complex network of these witnesses, their *complexio oppositorum*,[39] is irreducible to the univocity of an idol that could be grasped in a frozen essence. This is why genuine Christian authority is always composed of a plurality, never being reducible to uniformity.

WITH DE CERTEAU TO A THEORY OF CATHOLIC TRADITION

Despite some enthusiastic voices of support, it is fair to say that de Certeau's essay has not been well received.[40] One of the first critics was his revered teacher and Jesuit confrère Henri de Lubac, who reacted with "singular violence" to a footnote in which de Certeau

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Vetter, *Grundriss Heidegger. Ein Handbuch zu Leben und Werk* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2014), 276.

[37] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 147. In the French text, we read "scripture" in lieu of "language," a reference to the plurality of Gospels that Jesus's kenosis has permitted (*La faiblesse*, 214).

[38] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 147. Again, the French text differs in a subtle but significant way. In the French version, the second sentence reads: "Elle est de type scripturaire plutôt que visionnaire, si l'on entend par là que la multiplicité l'emporte sur la singularité, ou l'union sur l'unité"—"It [i.e., this relation] is of the scriptural rather than of the visionary kind, if one understands by this that multiplicity wins over singularity, or union over unity" (*La faiblesse*, 214; my translation).

[39] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 148.

[40] One of the more favorable, even enthusiastic readers of de Certeau was the young Fergus Kerr, who published a sympathetic appreciation of some of the post-1968 essays (including the one we have been discussing) in *New Blackfriars* not long after they appeared; see Fergus Kerr OP, "The 'Essence' of Christianity: Notes after de Certeau," *New Blackfriars* 54, no. 643 (1973): 545–556. Kerr sees similarities between de Certeau and Wittgenstein, to whom he was later to devote his well-known book *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

claimed de Lubac's work as an inspiration.[41] The footnote accompanies a statement that is at the very heart of de Certeau's argument: "[T]he entire Christian faith is articulate [i.e., is expressed] in the conversion of the Old Testament into the New Testament. The praxis of Jesus … is the point of articulation between these two languages of Old and New Testament."[42] The footnote (which does not appear in the English version of the essay) reads as follows:

> In this perspective, one may reread the admirable chapter of Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 1/1 (Paris: Aubier, 1959), pp. 305–363, on the "unity of the two Testaments," or his remarks on the analogy of faith, vol. 2/1 (1961), pp. 90–93.[43]

De Lubac saw himself obliged to reject his star pupil's acknowledgment with almost brutal directness:

> Because of grave ambiguities that an article published in *Esprit*, end of 1971 ("The Inaugural Rupture" by Michel de Certeau), has occasioned on this subject, I have to declare that to reread this chapter "in the perspective" that this article recommends means going against all of my thought.[44]

The "grave ambiguities" that de Lubac had in mind are related to de Certeau's use of the notion of Christ's "conversion" of the Old Testament into the New. In regarding this conversion, or fulfillment, as an event that can serve as a model for the Church's relationship to its past (thus, ultimately, to the Jesus event itself), de Certeau obscures the difference between revelation and the living out of revelation. In other

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[41] For an excellent account of de Certeau's relationship with de Lubac, on both the intellectual and the personal level, one may read François Dosse, *Michel de Certeau. Le marcheur blessé*, Sciences humaines et sociales 245 (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2007), chap. 2: "Un disciple indiscipliné du père de Lubac" (47–58). The expression *violence singulière* occurs on p. 55. Also insightful: Johannes Hoff, "Mysticism, Ecclesiology, and the Body of Christ: Certeau's (Mis-) Reading of *Corpus Mysticum* and the Legacy of Henri de Lubac," in *Spiritual Spaces: History and Mysticism in Michel de Certeau*, ed. Inigo Bocken (Louvain: Peeters, 2013), 87–109.

[42] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 153. For the French text, see *La faiblesse*, 222.

[43] De Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 222, n. 35: "On peut relire dans cette perspective l'admirable chapitre de Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale. Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, Paris, Aubier, t. 1/1, 1959, p. 305–363 sur l'«unité des deux Testaments», ou ses notations sur l'analogie de la foi, t. 2/1, 1961, p. 90–93."

[44] Henri de Lubac SJ, *Les Églises particulières dans l'Église universelle* (Paris: Aubier, 1971), 142 n. 2: "En raison de graves équivoques occasionnées à ce sujet par un article paru dans *Ésprit*, fin 1971 («La rupture instauratrice» de Michel de Certeau), je dois déclarer que relire ce chapitre «dans la perspective» où cet article le recommande est aller à l'encontre de toute ma pensée."

words, while Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament, the life of the Church in the present cannot be conceived as a fulfillment of the New Testament. There is no further fulfillment or "conversion" after Jesus, just a participation in the fulfillment that has already occurred.

De Lubac regarded de Certeau's (mis-) use of the notion of conversion as a textbook example of neo-Joachimism, a heresy that he viewed as sufficiently dangerous to devote two volumes to it.[45] In the twelfth century, Joachim of Fiore prophesied the dawn of a third age, an age of the Spirit that would complete the ages of the Father in the Old Testament and of the Son in the New Testament. This third age, for Joachim, held the promise of the Kingdom on earth. Along with other contemporary scholars, de Lubac saw in Joachim of Fiore's thought nothing less than the harbinger of secularism, understood as the position according to which the eschaton becomes immanent as we seek fulfillment through progress in this life. Did de Certeau allow himself to be carried away by his sympathies for the events of 1968, interpreting the revolution in the streets of Paris as a call for a "new age" in the Church? There may be some truth behind this question.[46]

Since de Lubac's criticism is not without foundation, we must treat de Certeau's use of the notion of conversion with caution. It is able to serve its function as a key to the workings of tradition only if we conceive of the Church's relationship to the New Testament not as a second fulfillment but rather as a participation in or an extension of the one fulfillment that has occurred in the Jesus event. De Certeau himself may well have attempted to foreclose the neo-Joachimite interpretation of his essay by emphasizing that even the "New Testament Scripture does not mean a replacing of the former truth by a new one." Just as there was no replacement of "one religion with another"[47] in the Jesus event, so the objective of his essay is clearly not to establish "another" Christianity. However, these remarks are not quite enough to defuse de Lubac's criticism.

Admittedly, other aspects of de Certeau's argument are disconcerting as well. The emphasis on God's absence is not as such heterodox, being a well-known and uncontroversial theme in the tradition of negative theology; indeed, it is an integral aspect in the faith life of every believer. If the Son himself cried out on the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)—a phrase, moreover, that Matthew reports in the original Aramaic, emphasizing its authenticity—then it cannot be a surprise that there are similar moments in

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[45] It is in the second of these volumes that de Lubac characterizes de Certeau's thought as a *modèle rêvé* and *modèle parfait* of neo-Joachimism; see *La postérité spirituelle de Joachim de Flore*, vol. 2: *De Saint-Simon à nos jours* (Paris: Lethielleux; Namur: Culture et vérité, 1981), 447.

[46] Dosse pursues this line of inquiry in detail in chapter 11 of *Michel de Certeau* ("L'événement 68," 157–171).

[47] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 154–155.

the life of Jesus's followers, moments when they feel forsaken, unable to see the Lord's guiding hand in their lives. What is troubling, however, about de Certeau's adaptation of the theme of the hidden God (Isaiah 45:15) is his exclusive emphasis on God's absence or on what he calls the way in which the truth of the Jesus event is "alienated" in the effects that it renders possible.[48] By using this Hegelian and Marxist term, de Certeau suggests that presence is entirely canceled out by absence; there is nothing that mediates between these two. If the Jesus event is not immediately present in the Gospels, if all they offer is a series of mediated accounts, then Jesus is simply "absent" from them. But is this true? Is re-presentation tantamount to absence? The Christian tradition has always attempted to balance negative and positive theology, and more than balance them, it has held that God transcends the opposition. This crucial insight appears lost in de Certeau.

A third defect in "How is Christianity Thinkable Today?" follows from the second. The reader of this essay—and of other writings by de Certeau from this period—is struck by his merely formal, contentless description of the Christian faith. One commentator asks: "[W]here is Christianity in all this?"[49] Another complains: "For Certeau, then, Christianity is not a timeless *content* that has been handed down from Christ but an increasingly diverse set of *forms* that seek to reveal Him by His very absence."[50] The conclusion: "It goes without saying that Certeau's definition of Christianity is theologically heterodox …."[51] To locate the Jesus event in the space between the Old and the New Testaments, and then to define Christianity as our relationship with this event, represents a brilliant insight that captures an important truth. This formal approach, however, is insufficient on its own. The Gospels report—or, more accurately, they re-present—Jesus's acts and words, just as the Old Testament witnesses to the presence of the Lord in the life of the Israelites. In the Old Testament, this presence crystallizes in the Ten Commandments and in the laws surrounding the tabernacle, whereas in the New Testament words are ultimately subsumed into the person of Jesus. The Word becomes flesh; the Son of Man becomes the ultimate medium to communicate God—

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[48] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 145.

[49] This is a question Marc De Kesel asks twice in his careful reading and interpretation of a slightly later essay by de Certeau, a write-up of a radio discussion from 1973: "Faith in Crisis: Reflections on Michel de Certeau's Theory of Christianity," *Coincidentia: Zeitschrift für europäische Geistesgeschichte* 3 (2012): 415–438, at 434 and 435.

[50] Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 53. Emphasis original.

[51] Bradley, *Negative Theology*, 54.

hence the institution of the Eucharist.[52] An attempt to make Christianity "thinkable today" cannot abstract from these (and other) core aspects of the faith.

Given these shortcomings in de Certeau's approach, why take the risk of using it as the anchor point of a theory of tradition? From the earliest times, Catholic thought has always maintained its openness toward secular knowledge, viewing the genuine fruits of such knowledge as a reflection of the Logos. In the thirteenth century, for instance, elaborating a system of Christian theology, a *summa theologiae*, in dialogue with the likes of Aristotle, Averroës, and Maimonides faced serious risks, such as the risk of getting it wrong (as did Siger of Brabant and other "radical Aristotelians"), as well as the risk of incurring condemnation from those who were more cautious and, perhaps understandably, skeptical of such a bold approach.[53] Like the non-Christian sources upon which the Fathers of the Church and the scholastic doctors drew in their reflections, postmodern philosophy is full of genuine insights. One of these is precisely the idea that reality is a network of relationships—structures—which, in an important sense, precede that which they structure. If Catholic thought must at its core be Trinitarian, and if Trinity means the relationship of three divine Persons who are constituted by their relationships, then the reality we inhabit is much closer to a postmodern than to an Aristotelian understanding of it. De Certeau's attempt to articulate Christianity as a network of relationships is therefore not fundamentally wrong; it is incomplete. To complete it, we need to do two things: we need to fill de Certeau's overly formal account with content, and we must overcome the unmediated opposition which de Certeau posits between absence and presence.

Before we move on, however, a word on neo-Joachimism is in order. Just like ancient philosophy and postmodernism, the genuine insights of Joachim of Fiore, too, are salvageable within Catholic orthodoxy. To demonstrate this was the object of Joseph Ratzinger's "second dissertation," his *Habilitationsschrift*, which was devoted to *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*.[54] The book argues how Bonaventure in some sense invented a Christian future by rethinking Joachim's "three ages" and transposing them into an orthodox frame. It

[52] This is the argument of Eckhard Nordhofen, *Corpora: Die anarchische Kraft des Monotheismus,* Second Edition (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2018).
[53] On the tensions in the philosophical movement of the thirteenth century, see the classical account by Fernand Van Steenberghen, *Thomas Aquinas and Radical Aristotelianism* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1980).
[54] Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes, OFM (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971).

is well known that Ratzinger's theses were not welcomed at first, almost costing him his academic career.[55] The unabridged version of *The Theology of History* appeared only decades later, in a volume of Ratzinger's complete works.[56] In an irony of history, the book that the future pope once had to purge of offending material now carried a preface signed by Pope Benedict XVI. Let us take this as an indication that, for the sake of tradition, it is sometimes necessary to run risks.

BETWEEN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT AND THE PAULINE "AS THOUGH"

A short essay is not the place to attempt a summary of the content of the Christian faith, or even of some of its core "doctrines" (a word that de Certeau would abhor). However, what we can do is sketch how a fuller account naturally grows out of de Certeau's narrow formalism. So let us start again from the core of the essay: "[T]he entire Christian faith," declares de Certeau, "is articulate [i.e., is expressed] in the conversion of the Old Testament into the New Testament. The praxis of Jesus … is the point of articulation between these two languages of Old and New Testament."[57] That the entire Christian faith is expressed in the conversion of the Old Testament into the New is evident in the readings of the daily liturgy, which juxtapose selections from the two testaments to guide our lives as we attempt to fill Jesus's fulfillment with meaning for our own time. It is true, as well, that Jesus's practice in living his Jewish heritage is key to understanding the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New. Jesus's practice is narrated in the four Gospels, but in addition to his practice, there are of course his words—which de Certeau does not emphasize, or even mention, since he was suspicious of writing (like Plato in the *Seventh Letter*).[58] However, to elide Jesus's teachings is a very strange move within Christian orthodoxy.

There is hardly a place in the Gospels where the conversion of the Old Testament into the New is performed more explicitly than in the Sermon on the Mount. Typologically, the mountain from where Jesus addresses his followers repeats Mount Sinai, where Moses received

[55] Ratzinger tells the story of "The Drama of My *Habilitation* and the Freising Years" in chapter 8 of *Milestones: Memoirs 1927–1977*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 103–114.
[56] Joseph Ratzinger, *Offenbarungsverständnis und Geschichtstheologie Bonaventuras. Habilitationsschrift und Bonaventura-Studien*, Gesammelte Schriften 2 (Freiburg in Beisgau: Herder, 2009).
[57] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 153 (French: *La faiblesse*, 222).
[58] As De Kesel explains ("Faith in Crisis," 417): "Writing is able to wipe out—to forget or to repress—the hesitations, misunderstandings, slips of the tongue or whatever escapes the conscious intentions of the speaking subject. It fixes both the uttered meanings and the place from where they are uttered; what one is saying and the locus from where this is said. This is why writing is rather blocking the truth than giving access to it."

the Law from the Lord.[59] The Sermon on the Mount also includes the central hermeneutical key for the transposition of the Law into the life of Jesus's eschatological community, namely, the "fulfillment" verse, Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Having pronounced these words, Matthew's Jesus continues his carefully composed sermon:

> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:18–20)

The language used here to capture the meaning of the Law's fulfillment is one of excess. The Greek verb behind the translation "exceeds" is περισσεύσῃ, which is the verbalized form of the adjective περισσός; this, in turn, derives from the preposition περί, one of whose meanings is "before, above, beyond."

Matthew illustrates this logic of excess in the six so-called "antitheses" that follow in verses 21 to 48. Perhaps the term "hypertheses" would be more appropriate to describe these juxtapositions between what was said in the Old Testament and Jesus's injunction to move toward greater righteousness.[60] Each of these "hypertheses" not only contrasts traditional Jewish moral law with the kind of conduct that Jesus expects from the "blessed ones" who are looking forward to the coming of his kingdom; each "hyperthesis" expresses how far beyond the expectations of the Old Law the fulfillment lies that Jesus pronounces. It is therefore entirely appropriate that the list of six culminates in the seemingly impossible demand, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). This verse identifies a mystical aspiration, in which the human being is deified in union with the Father, transcending the limitations of our fallen state. Modern Western commentators have a tendency to tone down the meaning of Matthew 5:48, taken aback by what they regard as "an impossible

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[59] For a more detailed discussion, see Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 185.

[60] "Hypertheses" is a term suggested by Benedict T. Viviano, "The Gospel according to Matthew," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Ronald E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 641.

ideal for human beings to attain."[61] They reduce Jesus's radical call to divine perfection to the more manageable directive "to serve God wholeheartedly, to be single-minded in devotion to the one God."[62] Writing from within a tradition in which *theosis* is central, Eastern theologians can help us avoid this reductionism.[63] The verse really means what it says.

Still, would it not be quite risky to follow the Sermon on the Mount literally? Examining just one of the six "hypertheses" suggests demands that are impossible, even dangerous. For instance, following Matthew 5:40 to the letter ("if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well") would result in "public nudity and arrest," as Eugene Boring cautions, "in anarchy and the multiplication of all the evil held in check by the legal system." So, therefore, while "[t]hese commands of Jesus must be taken with utmost seriousness," Boring opines that "any attempt to take them literally as casuistic laws leads to absurdity."[64] One does wonder, apropos of such a remark, how taking the commands "with utmost seriousness" is compatible with construing them as literally absurd. As a matter of fact, the Christian tradition offers examples of Matthew 5:40 being followed to the letter. The most famous case of public nudity in the name of Christ is that of St. Francis, who renounced his inheritance—and his clothes—as he appeared naked in front of the bishop of Assisi, where his father had dragged him over a monetary dispute.[65] He is reported to have proclaimed, "Up to now I have called you my father on earth; yet from now on I can safely say, 'Our Father, who art in heaven,' in whom I have set my entire store and placed all my trust and hope."[66] Francis, then, did take Jesus's command with the utmost seriousness, in an act of radical conversion to the Father. His act did not lead to absurdity, but to the foundation of the Franciscan order.

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[61] M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al., vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 195–196.
[62] Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," 196.
[63] See, for example, Norman Russell's discussion of Gregory of Nyssa in *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. 227 (on Matthew 5:48). This is not to say that there is no Western theology of deification, but it seems less central and more easily forgotten. For a helpful recent reminder, see *Called to be Children of God: The Catholic Theology of Human Deification*, ed. David Vincent Meconi, SJ, and Carl E. Olson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016).
[64] Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," 197.
[65] For a scholarly discussion of this episode, see Richard C. Trexler, *Naked before the Father: The Renunciation of Francis of Assisi* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).
[66] Bonaventure, *Legenda maior*, Analecta franciscana 10/5 (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1941), 557–652, at 564–565: "Usque nunc vocavi te patrem in terris, amodo autem secure dicere possum: Pater noster, qui es in caelis (Mathew:6-9), apud quem omnem thesaurum reposui et omnem spei fiduciam collocavi" (my translation).

The Gospels contain numerous "impossible" commands, even outside the Sermon on the Mount. To stay within Matthew, one could cite the pericope 10:34–39, on the cost of discipleship, where we are told, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37–38). Luke frames the same idea even more starkly: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26–27). The language of hate is disconcerting, to be sure. It is quite possible that we are dealing with "Semitic hyperbole" in Luke 14:26, as Alan Culpepper surmises.[67] The Greek word for "hate," μισεῖ, has to be read against the background of the Old Testament term it translates in the Septuagint, שׂנא (*sane*), which carries a range of meanings around the concepts of hate and rejection.[68] Important nuances of meaning aside, it is clear that the verses in Matthew, but even more so in Luke, are intended to shatter the horizon of all normal expectations of what human life should be: honoring one's parents (and family more generally), marrying and having children, endeavoring to build a good life free of unnecessary suffering and hardship. The community of followers of Jesus is different. Even in the incipient kingdom the natural ties of blood and family are superseded by spiritual kinship: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:40). At the same time, carrying the cross takes precedence over the pursuit of earthly happiness. In this manner, the community of Christians looks forward to, and prepares the way for, the arrival of the kingdom in its full glory, where there will be no marital bonds (Matthew 22:30), and hence no family ties.

How could anyone possibly live the kind of life urged on us here? The answer is that some have, by God's grace, attempted such radical fellowship of Jesus—a fellowship *sine glossa*, as St. Francis demanded in his testament, that is to say, without interpreting away the fundamental conversion that it requires, the establishment of an entirely new horizon.[69] Already in the New Testament, however, the realization emerged that not everyone has the gift to make this type of commitment. St. Paul's treatment of married life in the First Letter to the Corinthians is a good example.

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[67] R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 292.
[68] See Otto Michel, "Miseo," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 4:683–694.
[69] "Testamentum S. Francisci," 4, in *Die Opuscula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi. Neue textkritische Edition*, ed. Kajetan Esser OFM, Spicilegium bonaventurianum 13 (Grottaferrata: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1976), 444.

A member of the young Christian community at Corinth wrote to Paul, putting to him his conviction that "it is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Corinthians 7:1). Paul's reflections on this topic take up most of chapter 7. In essence, he agrees with this statement, although he concedes that different people have different gifts, or charisms: "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift (χάρισμα) from God, one having one kind and another a different kind" (1 Corinthians 7:7). Despite this concession, Paul is clear regarding his preference for the unmarried state: "The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided" (1 Corinthians 7:32–34). Again, the demand formulated here is radical enough to breach our expectations of a normal life. But that is the point. And again, biblical commentators add their *glossae* to "gloss over" what is an uncomfortable passage. In light of the verses just quoted, it is difficult to conclude, as J. Paul Sampley does, that "Paul did not devalue marriage. … [M]arriage did not have any direct or necessary bearing on one's relation to God."[70] What Paul is saying is that his own, unmarried state is closer to what he understands Jesus's message to be, but that not everyone is called to that state. It is not impossible to serve God in the married state, but it is more difficult. Paul posits a hierarchy, which is challenging for us democratic people who believe in nothing more than equality. Paul points to a legitimate diversity of vocations but to a hierarchy also.[71]

Over time, the recognition of the value of marriage as an authentic vocation, divinely instituted (Matthew 19:4–6), has deepened in the Catholic tradition. The most important stages of this deepening are marked by the definition of marriage as a sacrament in the twelfth century and, much more recently, by John Paul II's theology of the body.[72] These are authentic developments of biblical notions; interestingly, they involve a re-validation of the Old Testament belief in the importance of physical offspring (Genesis 1:28) over against the New Testament emphasis upon spiritual community. At the same time, it seems difficult to deny that there is a tension between the theology of the body and Jesus's radical call to conversion in his "impossible" commands.

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[70] J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 870.

[71] Sampley gestures in this direction by drawing a distinction between matters that are "indifferent" to Paul, and types of conduct that he "prefers."

[72] The turning-point in the twelfth century is Peter Lombard's treatment of marriage in the *Book of Sentences*. I discuss this treatment, in all its revealing ambiguity, in "Peter Lombard," in *Christian Theologies of the Sacraments: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb and David A. Johnson (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 59–80.

The tension, however, is not unmediated. Paul introduces a very interesting idea as he ponders the best course of action for those who are already married, and therefore should remain married, taking seriously their commitment to their spouses:

> I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29–31)

"As though not" (ὡς μὴ): it is as if Paul wanted to put the world "under erasure," as Derrida would say, creating a world in which we still live, but which is beginning to fade away. Derrida borrowed the practice of crossing out philosophical key terms from Heidegger, who used it to indicate the need to question the ordinary conception of Being in terms of a metaphysical super-being, a thing superior to all other things.[73] The Christian connotation of the big cross that he placed on top of the word "Being" can hardly have escaped the philosopher. The effect of Paul's "as though not" is just such a "crossing out" of the world. Thus, in the words of a commentator, in order to prepare ourselves for the Lord's return, we must practice "detachment from the values and entanglements the world offers."[74] In Paul's own language, as the "schema" (σχῆμα, translated as "form" in the NRSV) of the present world is passing away, the new order that we are expecting is foreshadowed by the "good schema" (εὔσχημον) of Christian living (1 Corinthians 7:35).

The agent of the transition from the schema of the present world to the schema of the new, from σχῆμα to εὔσχημον, is the Lord himself. Ultimately, the "as though" is God's own tool to put the present world under erasure. This becomes clear in a passage in the Letter to the Romans where Paul explains how, under the new covenant, the promise which God made to the people of Israel who were living under the Law is now extended to all who have faith. In this context, Paul describes God as "the one who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were (καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα)" (Romans 4:17, NIV). Just as God has the power to turn death into life, so his

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[73] For a short introduction to the Derridean/Heideggerian practice of writing "under erasure" (*sous rature*), one may read Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface," in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), xiii–xviii. Heidegger distinguished between "striking through" (*Durchstreichung*) and "crossing out" (*Durchkreuzung*), practicing the latter but not the former, which he considered to be a merely negative cancelation.
[74] Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," 887.

call is able to bring about a new schema reversing wisdom and foolishness, power and weakness, high birth and low (1 Corinthians 1:26–29). In living out the "as though not," we are therefore participating in the eschatological movement that God himself has initiated. It is a step toward *theosis*.

We have now taken some small steps toward filling de Certeau's formal definition of Christianity with content. De Certeau attempts to capture the meaning of the faith by conceiving of it as "a *relationship to the event* which inaugurated it: Jesus Christ"; he then goes on to frame Jesus's practice as the "point of articulation" between the languages of the Old and the New Testament. In other words, the meaning of being Christian turns around the way in which Jesus performed the conversion of the Old Testament into the New; being Christian is nothing other than being in a relationship to that performance. Moreover, we are called to react to new situations by taking Jesus's conversion of the Old Law into the New as a model, re-enacting it in our own way.

We have now seen that this re-enactment is aimed at a very precise eschatological goal: imitation of the Father's perfection (*theosis*). Pursuing this goal requires radical conversion, a letting go of the things of this world in favor of a better "schema," realized in the already dawning new spiritual community. As long as this community exists only incipiently, the world is placed under erasure to minimize its power to distract us. We should deal with the world as though we had no dealings with it.

On the basis of the biblical passages that we have interpreted, and of many others, we could go into much further detail in sketching out the "good schema" of Christian life. But we do not have to undertake such a task; this is essentially what tradition does. It spells out the εὔσχημον in exhaustive detail—yet without ever being univocal. Christian life takes place in the space between the Jesus event and us, in the space between the Old Testament and the New, in the space between *theosis* and a world already under erasure. It takes place in the space between the life of the hermit, who has renounced all to live a life of singular focus on the Lord, and life of the married person who, in the expectation of the eschaton, has put his or her life in this world under erasure, knowing it to be only a faint image of the life to come. Both the hermit and the married person are taking risks, each according to his or her charism. Tradition itself is risk, the risk that stems from our having been given "permission" to lead a Christian life.

Tradition as Translation

"How is Christianity Thinkable Today?" suffers, I have contended, from an insufficiently nuanced conception of the relationship between presence and absence. Perhaps the notion of "not without" points in

the right direction, suggesting that the event of Jesus is not simply absent from its re-presentations in Scripture and the tradition but is rather situated somewhere in between presence and absence. However, this space "between" needs to be spelled out more clearly.[75]

As Alasdair MacIntyre has compellingly argued, tradition is essentially translation.[76] Even etymologically, the terms are close, with *traditio* (from *tradere* or *trans-dare*) signifying a "giving over" and *translatio* (from *transferre*) a "carrying over." (The French for "translation," *traduction*, suggests a "leading across," *trans-ducere*.) Tradition requires that an event first be remembered, which means re-presented in words (images, sounds …)[77] and that this memory then be "carried across" time and space so that it remains accessible to those who were not first-hand witnesses to the event. Such carrying across is always a form of translation, in that the original event has to be rendered intelligible to groups who no longer share the original horizon in which it occurred. We can see this dynamic in the Gospels, which translate the Jesus event in accordance with the different horizons of their respective authors and audiences. This is why, for Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses, whereas for John he is the Word made flesh. There is no reason to conclude from these differences that translation causes the Jesus event to disappear, like an erased and overwritten palimpsest. Rather, its presence becomes mediated—but increasingly so as the tradition continues. The word "tradition" carries a telling ambiguity which encapsulates the insight that there is a critical point at which the "carrying across" may have removed itself so far from the original event that the path of translation is getting lost in the wilderness. For, "tradition" can mean "betrayal," both in Latin and in English. Consider these sentences from the *History of Christianity* by the nineteenth-century English theologian Henry Hart Milman: "The consecration of a bishop guilty of tradition was the principal ground on which his election was annulled," or "Both denounced their adversaries as guilty of the crime of tradition."[78] Here "tradition" signifies the betrayal of the Christian community during the period of persecution under Diocletian, when some bishops, under threat of death, handed over sacred books and liturgical vessels. Historians of the

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[75] The notion of the "between" (Plato's τὸ μεταξύ) is central to the thought of William Desmond, who has published numerous books in which he develops a "metaxological" metaphysics. See, for example, *Being and the Between* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

[76] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), chap. 19.

[77] Even remembering is already an act of translation.

[78] Henry Hart Milman, *The History of Christianity, from the Birth of Christ to the Abolition of Paganism in the Roman Empire* (London: John Murray, 1840), 2:369 and 371.

Church still use the word in this sense.[79] When tradition risks turning into betrayal, it becomes necessary to retrace its steps, so to speak, attempting to recover something of the elusive event which it was meant to re-present. The texts have to be read afresh, *sine glossa*, their precise historical settings reconstructed, earlier practices of the Church reconsidered, and layers of perhaps not always helpful interpretations de-constructed.[80]

All translation of the Jesus event takes place in the space opened up among the Gospels (and between the Gospels and the apostolic and Catholic letters), between the Old Testament and the New, and indeed between the Father and the Son. For, God is the first translator. The Incarnation is the translation of the divine nature into (almost) humanly intelligible terms: the person of Jesus.

The act of translation occurs between two poles. Since antiquity, translators have distinguished two methods of rendering a text composed in a foreign language: "word from word" (*verbum e verbo*) and "sense from sense" (*sensus de sensu*). The word-for-word method was considered to be particularly suited for legal texts, in which every word matters, and for sacred texts. In the case of the latter, the entire text—including the order in which its words were arranged—was considered to be a reflection of God's mystery. This is why St. Jerome preferred a literal and therefore perhaps difficult rendering to a perfectly lucid, but univocal paraphrase: the latter risked foreclosing the richness of God's meaning.[81] In the words of the Syriac scholar Sebastian Brock, "To translate an inspired text *sensus de sensu* would be to imply that the *sensus* of the impenetrable mysteries of scripture had been fully grasped by the translator."[82] This understanding of literal translation implies that fidelity to the materiality of the original text does not necessarily result from the naive belief that the literal translation is able to bring the reader closer to the original event and indeed to God. Rather, the literal translation emphasizes mystery and inexhaustible depth.

And yet, the objective of a translation is to "transfer" meaning from one language and cultural horizon to another. Such transfer is not accomplished when an entire text remains an inexplicable mystery. This

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[79] The *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), s.v. "tradition" (II.4.b.), documents a 1989 use in an essay by the English Church historian W. H. C. Frend.

[80] On deconstruction as a necessary element of tradition, one may read chapter 5 of my book *Charred Root of Meaning*, 145–164.

[81] See St. Jerome, "Letter LVII: To Pammachius on the Best Method of Translating," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Second Series, vol. 6 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), 112–119.

[82] A quotation from Brock's classic piece, "Aspects of Translation Technique in Antiquity," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 20, no. 1 (1979): 69–87, at 79.

is why a balance of the *verbum e verbo* and *sensus de sensu* approaches is appropriate. As de Certeau might put it, a translation must be "*faithful* to the inaugural event" of God's inspired words even while "being *different* from these beginnings" in order to keep the words accessible as horizons of intelligibility change.[83]

It may be useful to discuss a few examples of the two translation techniques to illustrate the manner in which they mediate the absence and presence of the inaugural event. Above, we quoted from the First Letter to the Corinthians (7:29), "I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short …." Checking the Greek, one finds the following text: "Τοῦτο δέ φημι, ἀδελφοί, ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν." The first point which leaps to the eye is that the New Revised Standard Version has added the words "and sisters." This is a rather astonishing change, which seems to go against the spirit of the principles that, according to Bruce Metzger, were adopted by the translation committee: "Of course the several parts of the Bible arose in a patriarchal society that has left its imprint on the literary expression of the original text, and a faithful translator will not wish to falsify history by removing such indications."[84] On the other hand, one understands the intention behind the addition, which is to remove a "stumbling block" that might prevent contemporary readers from taking seriously St. Paul's message, and even the Scriptures more generally. They were composed within a cultural horizon in which the full inclusion of women in all aspects of society was well-nigh unthinkable. The addition "and sisters" expresses the translators' conviction that the logic—the spirit as opposed to the letter—of the Christian faith demands this inclusion, which cultural limitations prevented Paul from expressing in his letter to the Corinthians. Hence the need to translate *sensus de sensu*, for the deep sense of the Gospel message cannot involve the exclusion of women from its audience.

We note the addition of another word in the passage under discussion. The translation of καιρός as "appointed time" is an attempt to capture the difference between καιρός from χρόνος. Earlier versions were averse to adding any words, explanatory or otherwise, to the Greek text. Thus, the Douay-Rheims Bible translates the verse under discussion as "This therefore I say, brethren; the time is short." Apart from the addition of the word "I," which is implicit in the Greek verb but not in its English equivalent, the number of words in the Greek and English texts has been kept identical; indeed, even the English word order is as close as one can get to the original without creating an ungrammatical sentence.

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[83] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 142 (emphasis original).

[84] Bruce M. Metzger, "The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible: Its Making and Character," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 135, no. 3 (1991): 368–381, at 373.

The most radical kind of literal, *verbum e verbo* translation is transliteration. In this case, the letters of a foreign word or phrase are transcribed from one alphabet into another while no attempt is made to transfer the meaning of those letters. There are examples of transliteration in the Scriptures, but the words and phrases treated in this fashion are not numerous. In Matthew 27:46, the translation of Jesus's cry on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is preceded by the Aramaic phrase that the Lord spoke when he died: "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" Since a translation accompanies the phrase, what is the purpose of conveying it in its Aramaic original? There are no doubt several reasons. One may be to emphasize the authenticity of the report, but it cannot perform the jump from language to reality. (Only God is capable of that.) Aramaic quotation or not, we do not know if these are the actual words that Jesus spoke. Furthermore, Jesus's last words, at least according to the author of Matthew, repeat the first line of Psalm 22; providing them in Aramaic stresses the way in which Jesus's life and death fulfill the Hebrew Bible: the Lord's last words are a quotation, whose new context gives the words a fresh and "fuller" meaning. Finally, the appearance of foreign words produces a startling disruption in the flow of the Greek text. The listener or reader is woken up, forced to focus on the enormity of what is being narrated: God's death on the Cross! Just as in the case of the theophany on Mount Sinai, the sacredness of the event pulls the natural world into its disruptive logic: the curtain of the temple is torn, the earth shakes, rocks are split, and tombs open (Matthew 27:51–52).[85]

A much more frequent example of a transliterated word in the Bible is the particle "amen." We have already quoted the crucial "fulfillment" passage, Matthew 5:17–18:

> Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

This, at least, is the translation that appears in the New Revised Standard Version. It is "correct," of course, except for the fact that one word in the source text is not Greek but Hebrew or Aramaic. Here is the Douay-Rheims version:

> Do not think that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For amen I say unto you, till heaven

[85] For a fine interpretation of Jesus's cry on the Cross, see Gérard Rossé, *The Cry of Jesus on the Cross: A Biblical and Theological Study*, trans. Stephen W. Arndt (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

> and earth pass, one jot, or one tittle shall not pass of the law, till all be fulfilled.[86]

In this translation, the word "amen" is preserved, but we may still not experience it as foreign because it has become an integral part of our Christian language, including the language of the liturgy. However, who actually knows what "amen" means, precisely? The answer is that, on the one hand, only biblical scholars have the technical expertise to discuss the exact meaning of "amen," which may have Egyptian roots.[87] On the other hand, every Christian knows what it means even if he or she may be unable to spell out exactly what this meaning is. In some sense, our entire Christian language is centered on an obscure sacred term—a term, more precisely, whose sacredness is conveyed through its very obscurity. It is as though God's mysterious transcendence is captured in this particle that Christians utter every day. We can assume that Jesus himself would have spoken the term "amen" frequently, given its occurrence in the Old Testament and its use in Jewish liturgical practice. Thus, "amen" wonderfully combines a sense of immediacy, authenticity, and presence while preserving respect for the unfathomable sacredness of the divine. "Amen" operates in the space between absence and presence.

CONCLUSION

All of tradition operates in this space. Tradition is an attempt to spell out and live out—one could even say, give a body to—our relationship with the event of Jesus. Its presence is now always re-presentation.[88] The "between" which characterizes tradition in the many

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[86] The translators of the Douay-Rheims New Testament have left us a detailed justification for their decision to leave "amen" untranslated. It is contained in the preface to the 1582 edition: "For example, we translate often thus, Amen, amen, I say unto you. Which as yet seemeth strange, but after a while it wil be as familiar as Amen in the end of al praiers and Psalmes, and even as when we end with Amen, it soundeth far better then So be it: so in the beginning Amen Amen must needes by use and custom sound far better than Verily Verily. Which in deede doth not expresse the asseveration and assurance signified in this Hebrue word; besides that is the solemne and usual word of our Saviour to expresse a vehement asseveration, and therfore is not changed, neither in the Syriake nor Greeke nor vulgar Latin Testament, but is preserved and used of the Evangelistes and Apostles them selves, even as Christ spake it, proper sanctiorem authoritatem, as S. Augustine saith of this and of Alleluia, for the more holy and sacred authoritie thereof. li. 2 doct. Christ. c. 11." ("Preface to the Rheims New Testament, 1582," in Hugh Pope OP, *English Versions of the Bible*, rev. by Sebastian Bullough OP [St. Louis and London: Herder, 1952], 639–640).

[87] For this hypothesis, see Klaus Seybold, "Zur Vorgeschichte der liturgischen Formel 'Amen,'" *Theologische Zeitschrift* 48 (1992): 109–117, esp. 110–111.

[88] This is not true of the Eucharist, although in the Eucharist, Christ appears to us veiled in the accidents of bread and wine. On this topic, see my article "Postmodern

ways that we have discovered in this essay makes the space where Christians have permission to live, think, and worship. The fact that tradition opens up a space, rather than defining a univocal path, allows for faithful development, but it also carries risks. On one side, there is the risk of not being bold enough in translating the message of the Gospel into a language that remains intelligible today and of thus failing to emulate the translator's own boldness. On the other side, the translator runs the risk of losing sight of the particularity of the Gospel by reducing it to "positions held in common," as de Certeau puts it, and "by announcing only the insignificant truths of every man."[89] Thus, issues such as gender equality and climate change can certainly be approached from a Christian angle; they are not what is at the heart of the Christian tradition. At the heart of the Christian tradition is the relationship between the Old Testament and the New, that is to say, the fulfillment which Jesus lived. This fulfillment follows a logic of excess, of "impossible" commands, of a world treated as though it had already been erased—a logic of *theosis*.

This logic puts under erasure the conflicts between liberal and conservative interpreters of the Christian tradition. Take, as an example, the battles that have erupted in the Church around the topic of sexuality. On the one side, one finds "liberals" whose translation of the Jesus event involves an agenda that includes admitting couples in secular second marriages to the Eucharist, extending the sacrament of marriage to gay people, and calling for the abolition of mandatory celibacy for priests in the Latin Church. On the other side, "conservatives" espouse a theology that regards spousal intercourse as nothing less than a sacrament of Trinitarian life, mirroring the self-giving of the divine Persons and drawing the spouses into God's inner life. Intercourse becomes a way to *theosis*. This, too, is a translation of the Jesus event into contemporary language—namely, the language of sexuality, which has since the nineteenth century come to dominate Western discourse regarding the meaning of the self. Both positions, the liberal as much as the conservative one, stem from the same root, which is the fairly recent tendency to place sex at the center of what it means to be human.[90] Certain aspects of the Christian tradition can perhaps be articulated in this language, but it may be well to remember that the Gospels also contain a radical counter-language that calls for "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12). This call is not addressed to everyone, and answering it carries risks. However,

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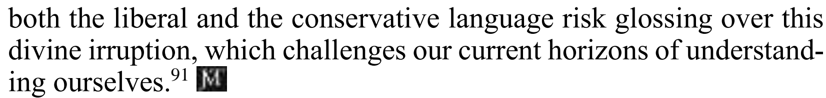
Philosophy and J.-L. Marion's Eucharistic Realism," in *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, ed. Peter M. Candler, Jr., and Conor Cunningham, Veritas (London: SCM Press, 2007), 84–110.

[89] De Certeau, "How Is Christianity Thinkable?," 150.

[90] Michel Foucault's ground-breaking theses on this topic always remain worth reading: *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

both the liberal and the conservative language risk glossing over this divine irruption, which challenges our current horizons of understanding ourselves.[91] 

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