

## What does Pope Francis Mean by Saying that Doctrine Progresses?

By Mark F. Fischer, St. John's Seminary (Retired)

O'Reilly Hall, St. Maximilian Kolbe Church  
5801 Kanan Rd. Westlake Village, CA 91362

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[2] In reciting the creed every Sunday we profess our faith. We say that we believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. The word apostolicity means that our church goes back to the apostles who received the Spirit of God from Jesus himself. There is an identity between the church of today and that of the apostolic age. We are somehow one with the apostles who, after the resurrection, trembled in the upper room, afraid that they would meet the same fate as Jesus.

[3] Above all the New Testament writers, St. Paul testified to the church's apostolicity. Speaking of the Eucharist, he said, "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you" (1 Cor. 11:24). He urged the Thessalonians to "stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught" (2 Thess. 2:15). We Christians are to remain true to the gospel that Jesus gave us.

[4] Remaining true, however, is complicated. Jesus himself warned his followers not to make the teachings of the past an end in themselves. We should not be like the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus said, who "have nullified the word of God for the sake of tradition" (Mt. 15:6). By clinging to the letter of the law, they neglected the spirit and ignored God's very word.

[5] Apostolic tradition poses a problem. We are to hold fast to it, but not at the expense of God's word. Pope Francis recently brought the problematic aspect of tradition to our attention. In August of 2023, he reportedly criticized Catholics who "look backward" and long for the church of yesteryear. He was speaking about those who, in their commitment to a particular understanding of church tradition, rule out the possibility of change. Speaking to Jesuits in Portugal on the occasion of World Youth Day, he said:

[6] I would like to remind those people that *indietrismo* [being backward-looking] is useless and we need to understand that there is an appropriate evolution in the understanding of matters of faith and morals as long as we follow the three criteria that Vincent of Lérins already indicated in the fifth century: doctrine evolves *ut annis consolidetur, dilatetur tempore, sublimetur aetate*. In other words, doctrine also progresses, expands and consolidates with time and becomes firmer, but is always progressing. Change develops from the roots upward, growing in accord with these three criteria.<sup>1</sup>

The church's understanding of Catholic doctrine, said the Holy Father, evolves. He distinguishes between Catholic tradition ("matters of faith and morals") and our understanding of it. There is a difference, Francis says, between our understanding and tradition itself. It remains constant, but our understanding of it deepens and grows. With these words, Pope Francis gives us an

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Spadaro, SJ, "'The Water Has Been Agitated': Francis in Conversation with Jesuits in Portugal," *La Civiltà Cattolica*, August 28, 2023, [accessed online](#) on September 7, 2023.

important clue about how to solve the problem of tradition. We must not confuse tradition and our understanding of it.<sup>2</sup>

[7] My argument is that this distinction between the reality and our grasp of it is more than a quibble. By means of this distinction, we Catholics hold to our traditions while remaining able to change. **In a few moments, I will give you a chance to discuss this distinction.** To make it, we need to plunge into the branch of philosophy known as metaphysics. Metaphysics enables us to see the reality of Catholic tradition, and to recognize that our understanding of it is less than the reality itself. But let us begin with the words of Francis.

### Understanding Francis

[8] The pope said that doctrine evolves properly according to three criteria. First, it consolidates itself. What was once confusing becomes clear. Second, it progresses over time. This progression requires discernment. And third, it becomes more firm. As things become clear to us, we affirm them. These criteria come to us, said Pope Francis, by way of a fifth-century theologian, St. Vincent of Lérins. Vincent famously said that Christian faith is what the church teaches “everywhere, always, and by all” (*Commonitory*, chap. 2). He underlined the constancy of faith. But he also compared the understanding of doctrine to the human body. From childhood to adulthood and old age, the body develops but the identity of the person remains the same. The same can be said of faith. It develops but the spirit of Christ remains constant. Vincent then applied this insight. He understood tradition as both constant and developing. Let us examine his exact words:

[9] In like manner, it behooves Christian doctrine to follow the same laws of progress, so as to be consolidated by years, enlarged by time, refined by age, and yet, withal, to continue uncorrupt and unadulterate, complete and perfect in all the measurement of its parts, and, so to speak, in all its proper members and senses, admitting no change, no waste of its distinctive property, no variation in its limits.<sup>3</sup>

Here Vincent elaborates his comparison of doctrine to a person. We live in our bodies. Similarly, we dwell in tradition, but never grasp it fully. That is the meaning of Vincent of Lérins, a meaning affirmed by Pope Francis.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis’ 2014 distinction between the “reality” of faith and our “idea” of it (*Evangelii Gaudium* 231-33) suggests a commitment to philosophic realism. See Caetano Piccolo, SJ, “La realtà è superiore all’idea. Il pensiero contemporaneo torna a essere realista?” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 111 (Aug.-Sept. 2017): 298-304. Translation: Gaetano Piccolo, “Reality Is Superior to the Idea: Pope Francis and the Primacy of Reality,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, English edition, October 14, 2017: vol. 1, no. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitory: For the Antiquity and Universality of the Catholic Faith Against the Profane Novelities of All Heresies*, chapter 22, no. 56, translated by C.A. Heurtley, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 11, Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894), revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, accessed at the [New Advent website](#) on September 9, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Quasten’s *Patrology*, vol. IV (the Italian original of vol. IV was published in 1978, translated into English, 1986; Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1992) stated: “Paradoxically, this teacher of the immutability [of doctrine, sc., Vincent] is revealed as the theologian of the laws of the development of dogma” (p. 549). He depended on Irenaeus and Tertullian. “Without changing the deposit of faith in any way, the church [as Vincent said] explores its richness more deeply and expresses its content more clearly” (549).

[10] The constancy of doctrine is due to God. God is trustworthy, and faith corresponds to that trustworthiness. God constantly invites human beings to accept a share in the divine life. This deserves a word of explanation. God's invitation is present, I want to say, in all the decisions we make. At every moment of our lives, we are given a choice. Of our many choices, some are better than others. We distinguish them means of the conscience. Becoming a parent is a good example. Mothers and fathers constantly respond to their children. The children want something, they need something, they make demands. Responding to them is not easy. We can treat our children with love, understanding, and support, or we can become irritated by them. As we choose, God's invitation is present. We can respond as we know we should, led by our native wisdom, by the good example of others, and by the teaching of the church. Or we can ignore what our conscience says and take a way that may seem easier and more attractive. Parents are supposed to respond to their children in love. That is what I mean when I say that, in every decision we make, God invites us to share in the divine life. By accepting that invitation, we accept God. We welcome the grace God offers.

[11] As we welcome God, our understanding of the faith evolves. St. Vincent of Lérins said that Christian doctrine is "consolidated by years, enlarged by time, and refined by age." The many elements of faith grow in us. They progress. They become clearer and firmer. Like God, our Christian faith is constant. Our understanding of it, however, changes. It can weaken or grow stronger.

[12] Let us stop for a moment and take stock. We began by looking at the New Testament record. St. Paul urges us both to hold on to the traditions that we have been taught and to pass them on to others. On the other hand, the Gospel of St. Matthew warns that we are not to ignore the word of God out of a blind adherence to tradition. Last fall, Pope Francis brought this dilemma to our attention. There is an appropriate evolution in the understanding of matters of faith and morals. They are as constant as God, but our understanding of them changes. The understanding progresses, expands and consolidates with time and becomes firmer. Change, said the Holy Father, develops from the roots upward.

[13] This is a good moment to reflect. I invite you to turn to your neighbor and consider a couple of questions. They are about constancy and change in faith. First, I ask this: **In what way can you say that your faith has never changed?** Then I ask: **In what way can you say that your faith has "evolved" – in other words, that it has expanded, that its elements have become consolidated, and that it has become firmer?** Take a few moments to discuss those questions.

### Tradition without Metaphysics?

[14] Pope Francis is a bridge-builder who makes the unity of the church his priority. He is rightfully concerned about backward-looking Catholics. He worries about those who absolutize a limited understanding of faith and morals. Backward-looking Catholics, in their desire to remain faithful to tradition, deny growth and development. But what about forward-looking Catholics? They are concerned about the relevance of faith. Forward-looking people want to explain how doctrine develops. And that too is a challenge. If we uncautiously leap to a model of evolutionary development, we might contradict the principle of apostolicity. We may lose sight of what the apostles taught us. Apostolicity is important, but it is not easy to explain how the church of today is identical with the early church. Pope Francis, however,

has given us a clue about how to do this. It is his distinction between the constancy of tradition and our growing understanding of it. I called this distinction “metaphysical” without really explaining what I mean.

[15] Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that has to do with the mystery of being. Seminararians, for example, study metaphysics in order to better understanding the difference between what seems to be true and what is really true. We do not have time this evening to outline metaphysical philosophy. But we can get a good idea of what metaphysics means by looking at thinkers who try to philosophize without it.

[16] Tonight I want to focus on three theological approaches to the topic of Catholic tradition. The three are expressly anti-metaphysical. The approaches can be called non-foundational, pragmatic, and postmodern. Applied by theologians who are motivated by faith, each one examines the theology of tradition critically. They want to rescue it from what they call fundamentalism. They deny metaphysics because they say that it holds Catholic theology back:

- Non-foundationalism claims that metaphysics rigidifies tradition and ignores its constant changes by clinging to the false foundation of an imaginary past.
- Pragmatism accuses metaphysics of imagining a mental world beyond the senses and ignoring the concrete and pragmatic faith of the community.
- Postmodernism criticizes metaphysics is no longer appropriate in a postmodern world that is rightly suspicious of ideologies that masquerade as tradition.

These are abstract concepts but essential. We said that non-foundationalism, pragmatism, and postmodernism attempt to avoid metaphysics. They claim that it undermines the development of doctrine. The theologians who use these approaches would undoubtedly affirm Pope Francis’ insight that doctrine progresses “from the roots upward.” But they reject Francis’ distinction between tradition and our understanding of it. They regard it as a distinction without a difference.<sup>5</sup> Tradition, they would say, is nothing other than how we understand it.

[17] Theologians who use the three anti-metaphysical approaches undercut, I would say, their own legitimate insights into the development of doctrine. To be sure, non-foundationalism, pragmatism, and postmodernism yield valuable insights. In a moment, I will sketch each one. At the end of each sketch, **I will ask you to name a legitimate insights that stems from them.** Ultimately, however, I disagree with the three approaches because they ignore metaphysics. But I want you to see why many thinkers embrace them.

#### A. Tradition and Nonfoundationalism

[18] Let us begin with the anti-metaphysical approach to tradition called “non-foundationalism.” The approach is taken by John Thiel, a Catholic professor at Fairfield University in Connecticut. Thiel’s book from the year 2000, *Senses of Tradition*, opposed metaphysics as part of his commitment to Christian non-foundationalism.<sup>6</sup> Let me give you an

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<sup>5</sup> In this they differ from Anne M. Carpenter, *Nothing Gained Is Eternal: A Theology of Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), who presents a “metaphysic of tradition,” p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). In Thiel’s discussion of “Arguments without Foundations” (pp. 116 ff.), he sketches his own position, “Nonfoundationalism” (which is also the title of a book that he published in 1994).

idea of what non-foundationalism means, and what it has to say about tradition. **In a minute, I'll ask you to identify its positive contribution.**

[19] Non-foundationalism rejects the distinction between tradition and our understanding of it for an apparently straightforward reason. People today recognize that knowledge is limited. They justify their beliefs on the basis of experience. No one can read the minds of thinkers in the past, for example, or magically transport themselves from one era to another. We know the apostles, for example, from the New Testament record. That record is made up of a vast number of interpretations. Catholics tradition, the non-foundationalists say, consists of interpretations of the past. In their view, tradition is nothing other than a vast, fragile tissue of interpretations. Each interpretation depends on another. All compete for attention and legitimacy.

[20] No one interpretation of Catholic tradition can be the final word, according to non-foundationalism, because that would make the interpretation something that it is not. No interpretation, they say, is an unshakeable foundation. The only true foundation is God. Not even interpretations by the pope and bishops can take God's place. Such teaching itself, non-foundationalists allege, is nothing other than an interpretation. Catholics may attribute infallibility to it, but history shows that supposedly infallible teaching has changed over the centuries. For that reason, metaphysical distinctions (such as the Pope Francis' distinction between the understanding of faith and faith itself) become suspect. Non-foundationalists doubt that tradition and faith are as constant as God.

[21] We Catholics claim to possess "divine faith." By it, we mean that we are invited to share in God's own life, and we have accepted the invitation. But such a claim might wrongly imply, according to the non-foundationalists, that we know the mind of God. Those who claim to know God's mind are arrogant, say non-foundationalists. It is arrogant to assume that knowledge of God is a "given," a fact that cannot be criticized. People rightly question interpretations that pretend to be absolute. For non-foundationalists, the prospect of knowing God with certainty is pretentious.<sup>7</sup> A metaphysical distinction between faith and our understanding of it, they imply, represents mythical thinking. For Christian "non-foundational" thinkers, there are no "givens." There is no unshakeable foundation but God.

[22] Non-foundationalism, by this account, is an extreme form of skepticism. It puts apostolicity in doubt on the grounds that there can be no single understanding of the teaching of the apostles. Metaphysics, we shall see, offers a reply to this objection. It suggests that, although teaching changes, such teaching reflects something unchangeable, namely, the constancy of God. **But before we get to that, let us consider the teaching of non-**

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Nonfoundationalism is indebted to analytic philosophy's critique of "The Myth of the Given," the title of a 1956 lecture by Wilfrid Sellars. No foundation, not even God, should be considered a "given," that is, accepted without critique. *Senses of Tradition* is also related to postmodernism. Thiel indirectly embraces the postmodern critique of epistemology (53), offers a concept of "postmodern allegory" (96), and speaks of Catholic theology in Postmodernity as preferring epistemology to ontology (197).

<sup>7</sup> Thiel, *Senses of Tradition*, 121: "To the degree that nonfoundationalist sensibilities work to expose exaggerated and finally unsustainable claims for the justification of belief, and foster an understanding of the workings of reason true to our actual beliefs and practices, they are indispensable for appreciating the conduct of right reasoning." Thiel refers to Wilfrid Sellars' "myth of the given" on p. 118.

**foundationalism. To be sure, it is anti-metaphysical. But what truths do we see in the claim that God alone is a foundation, in comparison to which everything else is relative?**

## B. Pragmatic Tradition

[23] We have seen in outline form the argument of non-foundationalism. It argues that God alone is the foundation of faith. Everything else is subordinate. Now let us consider a second argument against the Francis' distinction. The second argument has to do with the historical record.

[24] How can tradition be reliable, people ask, when history displays a record of constant change? Terrence Tilley, a professor at Fordham University, proposes a version of this argument in his book from the year 2000, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*.<sup>8</sup> It claims that tradition is, in a specific sense, an invention. Tilley does not mean that tradition is a fabrication or a random evolution. No, he means that tradition – which we might imagine to be stable, orderly, and consistent at every stage – results from negotiations and compromises. Tilley calls himself a constructivist.<sup>9</sup> He believes that Catholics construct their tradition.

[25] Traditions do not endure because they never change, according to pragmatism, but because the community constructs them by passing them on. The word “practices” means that reality lies in what people do, not in what they say. **Pragmatism does not accept Pope Francis' distinction between faith and our understanding of it, but it does widen our thinking. In a minute, I'll ask you to identify its positive contribution.** Let me now bring out a problematic feature.

[26] Terrence Tilley is a pragmatist. We see what he means when he discusses “transubstantiation” and “real presence” to describe the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Before Vatican II, says the pragmatist, the focus of the Eucharist was on the sacrifice of Christ. His body was crucified and his blood was shed as a ransom for humanity. After Vatican II, priests began to face the congregation across the altar understood as “the table of the Lord.” To pragmatists, the actions of the community changed the Eucharist. They say it had come “to signify a communal meal more than a sacrifice.”<sup>10</sup> Catholics still speak of transubstantiation and real presence, say the pragmatists, but the mass has changed. The community's actions have made it less the prolongation of the sacrifice of Christ and more a reenactment of the Last Supper.

[27] References to transubstantiation and Real Presence falsely suggest, to Christian pragmatists, that tradition is constant and unchanging. A metaphysical distinction like that of Pope Francis distinguishes “tradition itself” from the community's changing practices. To

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<sup>8</sup> Terrence E. Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> On p. 37 of *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, Tilley aligns himself with those “rare” postmodern theorists who write about tradition as “constructs.” “All traditions are in some ways constructed,” he writes, “by those who participate in them” (16).

<sup>10</sup> Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, 69. Tilley even goes so far as to say that the continued use of the terms “transubstantiation” and “real presence” amounts to a “linguistic discipline”: “The problem is that Church leaders and theologians who call for such linguistic discipline have not noticed that the concept of the Real Presence *as it is received and understood in the community* shifts its meaning as the ritual shifts” (73).

suppose such a thing, the pragmatists say, requires the acceptance of a fantasy. The fantasy is that there exists a reality, Christian faith, apart from the commitment of believers. For pragmatists, faith exists only in the community's actions and tangible testimonies.

[28] A pragmatic approach to tradition reflects a specific philosophy. It can be summarized in this way: actions speak louder than words. Over the centuries, the meaning of words changes. What a word meant in one century may not be its meaning in another century. Meaning is thus pragmatic and depends on action. Tradition exists, not as a spirit expressed in concepts or verbal formulas, but in the community's changing practices. Their meaning evolves over the centuries and is assigned by convention. Metaphysical thought, as we shall see, has an answer to this pragmatism. The answer has to do with transcendent truth and its presence in the concrete. **Before we get to that, I ask you to reflect on the light cast by pragmatism. What is the advantage of focusing, not on the words we say to describe faith, but on the actions we take?**

### C. The Exposure of Hidden Interests

[29] Now let us consider a third and final anti-metaphysical approach to tradition, that of postmodernism. Our witness for the postmodern approach to tradition is the Belgian theologian, Lieven Boeve. In 1999 he published a book titled *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*.<sup>11</sup> Boeve's thesis is that tradition lends itself to fundamentalism. Boeve's fundamentalists (like Pope Francis' "backward-looking" Catholics) cannot tolerate ambiguity. They dread the "existential uncertainty" of the postmodern condition and prefer traditionalism, an unapologetic adherence to the tradition as such. They fear the process by which individuals mature from adolescence to adulthood. In that process, Christians inevitably discover that they do not simply adhere to tradition. Instead, they both identify with tradition and distance themselves from it.<sup>12</sup> If Christian believers are to mature, Boeve argues, tradition must be "interrupted." Unconvincing aspects must be recontextualized or abandoned. Mature believers do not adhere blindly to tradition but follow the example of Jesus. His dealings with gentiles showed that he was willing to break with tradition. **In a moment, I'll ask you about what this understanding of Jesus gives to us.**

[30] Postmoderns want to interrupt tradition in the name of Christian maturity. Whose interests are served, they ask, by the idea of a supersensible tradition, supposedly created by God but for which there is no empirical evidence? The postmodern answer is this: the distinction benefits the custodians of tradition, namely, the pope and bishops. In the postmodern mind, they wield enormous power by claiming to be able interpret tradition as it really is. Postmoderns allege that the magisterium advances an illusory idea of Christianity that purports to answer all

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<sup>11</sup> Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, translation by Brian Doyle of *Onderbroken traditie. Heeft het christelijke verhaal nog toekomst?* [Dutch: *Interrupted tradition. Does the Christian story still have a future?*], No. 30 in the series *Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs*, originally published in Kapellen by Pelckmans, 1999 (Louvain, Belgium and Dudley, Massachusetts: Peeters Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Boeve writes, "If Christianity still has a role to play, then it is only as a disintegrated and fragmented collection of cultural *values* and *goods* which are available on the cultural market and from which one is free to choose as one goes about the business of constructing one's own identity" (56).

of life's questions. The illusory idea resembles a "master narrative," say postmoderns. It is a story that trumps all other narratives.

[31] For postmoderns, the master narrative is a key concept.<sup>13</sup> Vatican II, they say, expounded Christianity as a master narrative. Postmoderns call it an attempt to coerce believers. Coercive authorities dictate the terms in which Christianity is believed. To the postmodern mind, the authorities pretend that the idea of Christian faith is more real than the faith as actually believed. A metaphysical distinction between the idea and the practice of faith, once exposed as a power-play, loses credibility.

[32] Postmodern Christians rightly want faith to mature. For the postmodern, Jesus is the model "interrupter" of tradition. His willingness to accept gentiles interrupted Jewish tradition and opened up the kingdom of God. A metaphysical distinction between faith and our understanding of it, according to the postmodern, turns tradition into a master narrative. But metaphysics, as we shall see, has an answer to postmodernism.

[33] Before we get to that, however, let us consider the positive contribution of postmodernism. Its anti-metaphysical bias, I have said, prevents it from distinguishing metaphysically between faith and our understanding of it. But we can learn from postmodernism. **What are the advantages that postmodernism presents by understanding Jesus as the "interrupter" of tradition?**

[34] Let us sum up our analysis. We have considered three types of argument against the distinction between tradition and the evolution in our understanding of it. Christian non-foundationalists avoid Pope Francis' distinction because it makes tradition a "given," an unassailable foundation, which everyone must accept and no one can criticize. Pragmatism argues that Catholics "invent" or "construct" tradition by constantly adjusting it. It critiques the metaphysical distinction for failing to recognize tradition in the changing actions of the community. Postmodernism, our third type of argument, holds that tradition must be "interrupted." It condemns the metaphysical distinction for turning Christianity into a master narrative. These critical approaches would call the idea of tradition itself something unscientific, unhistorical, and improperly motivated. Now let us present a metaphysical rebuttal.

### 3. Affirming the Metaphysical Distinction

[35] We started with Francis' metaphysical distinction between tradition and our understanding of it. Every Christian knows that faith is a dynamic relationship with God. The relationship is always changing, but the one with whom we have the relationship is constant. God constantly offers us a share in the divine life. The offer comes to us through a historical medium, namely, tradition. Christians receive the offer through the church, understood as a sacrament or sign of salvation. In the 1860s, Samuel John Stone wrote a hymn that we still sing today: "The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord." Although we say that God alone is the foundation of faith, nevertheless we know God through the humanity of Jesus. God's offer

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<sup>13</sup> In Boeve's view, Vatican Council I presented Christianity as the "great anti-modern counter narrative" (47). When Vatican II "grafted the Christian narrative onto modernity" (47), however, Christianity itself became "a modern master narrative" (48). The phrase "master narrative" translates the *grand récit* of Jean-François Lyotard.



never fails. Our response to the offer occasionally does. Christian common sense, aided by metaphysical thought, can detect the difference. That was our first argument.

[36] A second argument supports the metaphysical distinction. The second argument hinges on the deeds of Christians. Pragmatists argue that our deeds are more important than our words. Concepts are less important, say the pragmatists, than tangible realities. But the very change in formulas and practices, if we rightly understand it, indicates an unseen and underlying reality. It is the idea of tradition as a medium of revelation. This teaching, once expressed at the Council of Trent, signifies God's historical offer to share the divine life. Believers can receive the offer, measure their words and deeds by it, and so bring them into accord with it. Christians change their words and deeds precisely to maintain faith with the God whom they have met in tradition. Undoubtedly faith is expressed in changing historical terms. But faith is also, as metaphysical thought suggests, a transcendent reality.

[37] A third argument in favor of our metaphysical distinction concerns the motives of those who make it. Postmodern critics say that the motives of the ecclesiastical magisterium, in defining some teachings as tradition, may be far from disinterested. They regard church teaching as a form of coercion. But metaphysics aids us here as well. The metaphysical distinction between faith and our understanding of it suggests that every teaching, even the most authoritative, is shaped by history. Every teaching is expressed in language and history. To be sure, they are not the faith. Through them, however, through tradition, the transcendent comes to expression. This takes place with the help of the ecclesiastical magisterium. The pope and bishops define doctrine and liturgy and preserve scripture. Without them, God's offer to us would remain an abstraction. That is a third answer of metaphysics to postmodern skepticism.

[38] We began with Pope Francis' affirmation of "an appropriate evolution in the understanding of matters of faith and morals." Francis distinguished between faith and morals, on the one hand, and our understanding of them, on the other. To support this distinction, he quoted Vincent of Lérins. Vincent said that Christian doctrine is "consolidated by years, enlarged by time, [and] refined by age." These words support Francis' rebuke of those who look backward and wax nostalgic for a Christian tradition frozen in time and immutable.

[39] Backward-looking Catholics are not the only ones who fail to make the distinction of Francis. We examined the arguments of nonfoundationalism, pragmatism, and postmodernism. These arguments reject the idea of tradition separate from individual traditions. They do so, in part, because they reject metaphysics. That branch of philosophy, they say, does not accord with ordinary ways of empirical thought. It ignores the flux of history, they assert, and conceals the interests of those who maintain the existence of tradition as an idea. Metaphysics, they say, turns faith into fundamentalism.

[40] We take a different position. We say that the distinction between tradition and our understanding of it reflects our Christian conviction. Our conviction is that tradition mediates revelation. Through tradition – that is, through the Church as a sacrament of salvation – we recognize God's constant offer to share with us the divine life. Church practices are historical and tangible. They change over time. They can be studied empirically. But they also provide something essential. They mediate God's offer to save us. That offer resists empirical analysis. It is more than a slogan or formula. History mediates the offer but the offer cannot be reduced to history. The particulars of history cannot encompass all of tradition. It is not just history, but a medium. Through it, God speaks to us. We do not understand everything in God's word, but we

do understand it. That is the importance of Pope Francis' metaphysical distinction between a transcendent Christian tradition and our imperfect understanding. Although there is always more to hear, God has spoken. We are listening.