Christian Tradition Understood Two Ways

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My next-door neighbor, Angelo, is a man of Greek extraction. He is a member of St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church. Once a year his church sponsors a festival. I have never attended it myself, but Angelo always participates. He usually brings my wife and me Greek pastries from the festival, honey-filled *baklava* and almond and walnut *katïfi*. They are delicious. When I was in Greece in 2015, I bought Angelo and his late wife Demetra a little souvenir from the monasteries of Meteora.

I even visited Angelo's church, St. Demetrios Church in Camarillo, when it opened in 2015, and I pass the church every time I drive to Highway 101. Sometimes St. Demetrios has banners on display. Recently one banner said, "You don't have to be Roman to go to the Roman Catholic Church, and you don't have to be Greek to go to the Greek Orthodox Church." I thought that it was a novel way of inviting Christians who have no worshipping community.

Another banner said, "The Greek Orthodox Church is pre-denominational." I had to think about that. The statement may refer to Greek-speaking Jewish Christians described in the Acts of the Apostles. Saul persecuted them before his conversion, and afterwards he traveled the Mediterranean world, building up Greek-speaking congregations. The Greek Orthodox Church traces itself back to Apostolic times. Is it pre-denominational? We know that divisions began in the time of St. Paul. At that time, Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christians separated themselves from Greek-speaking Jewish Christians. Are divisions "denominations"? The question about whether the Greek Orthodox Church is really pre-denominational is one for specialists.

Most Americans would agree with the sentiment, "You don't have to be Greek to go to the Greek Orthodox Church." But not many know the difference between Greek Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Few of us were ever taught about the "Great Schism" that happened in the year 1054. That was when Pope Leo IX excommunicated the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius.[1] In return, the Patriarch, who had closed down the Latin-rite churches in Constantinople, promptly excommunicated the Pope. The Greeks denounced the use of unleavened bread at Mass. The Latins declared the Pope supreme over the Patriarch. There was no love lost on either side.

For most Catholics today the Great Schism of 1054 is little more than an historical footnote. Part of it has to do with Trinity. Roman Catholics affirm in the creed that the Holy Spirit "proceeds" from the Father and the Son. The Greeks, by contrast, believe that the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father. They rejected the addition of the phrase, "proceeds from the Son."[2] The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* briefly notes the difference between the Greeks and the Latins. It explains that, if the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, then it proceeds from the Son as well, because Father and Son are united (248). Today it is hard to find a theologian who can make a spirited argument for the rightness or wrongness of the procession

[1] Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners* (first edition, 1997), third edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 116-117.

[2] Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* 1952), edited in English by James Canon Bastible (1955) and translated by Patrick Lynch, fourth edition (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1974), pp. 62-63.

of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son.[3] The decision of the Roman Catholic Church to accept the *filioque* – the Latin phrase meaning "and the Son" – is just part of our tradition. Tradition separates us from the Greek Orthodox, and tradition is my theme tonight.

My Argument about Tradition

We Catholics honor the concept of tradition by saying that the gospel comes to us in two media or sources, Scripture and tradition. That was the teaching of the 16th-century Council of Trent.[4] But how do we define tradition? To answer this question with legal precision, the Roman Catholic Church developed in the 19th century a theology of tradition. We say that the authority to define tradition rests with the bishops under the pope. This is the precise and legal aspect of tradition. We implicitly invoke it when we speak of the Great Schism of 1054, when our Church parted ways with the Greeks. In the General Councils of Lyons in 1274 and of Florence in 1439, the Catholic bishops affirmed doctrines different from Greek Orthodoxy.[5] Catholics separated from them on account of tradition in a precise and legal sense. Tradition can be known with juridical precision when the pope and bishops define it.

There is, however, a much more common and widely held understanding of Christian tradition. In this more general sense, tradition refers to all the ways that Christianity is transmitted from Christ and the Apostles until today. We sometimes refer to this with the Latin term *sensus fidelium*. Tradition is the common sense of faithful Catholics. They express it in the family, when they build up their parish community, and when they contribute to society. We transmit the Catholic faith by living our lives and by raising our children. That too is Christian tradition, although in a less precise and juridical sense.

Another way to speak of Christian tradition in this general sense is to recognize God's Word and Spirit in history. Here tradition is the gradual unfolding of the gospel in culture and institutions. It is the slow but sure establishment of God's kingdom. It is the transformation of creation by means of God's presence in the world. To speak of God's Word and Spirit in history may be imprecise as a definition of Christian tradition. It does not state who can define tradition in an authoritative way. Although it is unsatisfactory as a legal definition, nevertheless it is more common and widely held. Tradition takes place as Catholics hand on the faith.

In short, we understand Christian tradition in two ways and we need to distinguish them. In the first way, the bishops and the pope are the authoritative proponents and interpreters of tradition. If a question arises, "What does Christian tradition say?" we Catholics have a ready answer. Tradition, we say, is what the bishops and the pope teach. But we have to admit that

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[3] For the Greek Orthodox position, see John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Foreword by John Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), p. 129. Zizioulas frames the question in terms of the unity of Christ and Spirit. He writes that the question about whether the Son or the Spirit has priority is a "theologoumenon," that is, open to debate.

[4] General Council of Trent, Fourth Session, "Decree on Sacred Books and on Traditions to Be Received" (1546), in Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, Editors, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, second edition (New York: Alba House, 1982), p. 73.

[5] In 1274, the Second General Council of Lyons affirmed the *Filioque* (Neuner and Dupuis, no. 321, p. 109). The council also heard "The Profession of Faith of Michael Paleologus," the Emperor in the East, who acknowledged the preeminence of the Roman Church (Neuner and Dupuis, no. 803, p. 217). In 1439 the Council of Florence did not deny the *Filioque* but affirmed the formula that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father through the Son" (Neuner and Dupuis, no. 323, p 110).

Christian tradition is more than what any one person or group – more even than what the ecclesial Magisterium – explicitly teaches. Broadly speaking, Christian tradition is the Spirit of Christ unfolding in history. Hence we can speak of tradition in two senses, one precise and juridical, the other broad and general. The second, I believe, is the proper context for understanding the first. Let me explain that precise and legal sense. While I'm doing so, I invite you to think of concrete examples, that is, ways in which we Catholics have defined Christian tradition with authority and exactness. Then I'll ask you to give me some examples,

Tradition in the Precise and Legal Sense

Before we can explore tradition broadly and in general, we need to grasp it in its more precise and legal sense. To illustrate, let me tell a story about a chapel located at St. John's Seminary where I teach. It stands in the Archbishop's House, a modest bungalow built in 1939. The house has two bedrooms and a good-sized living room. Archbishop José Gomez will occasionally spend a night there. Off the living room is a tiny chapel with a marble altar. There are no pews. Above the altar, painted on the ceiling, is a motto in Latin. It reads, "Roma locuta est, causa finita est." In English, "Rome has spoken, the matter is closed."

This Latin motto goes back to St. Augustine. In the fifth century, he was fighting against an English monk named Pelagius. Pelagius denied the existence of original sin. He argued that Christians did not need sacramental baptism. In the view of Pelagius, all human beings have been created upright and capable of following God's Word. Saint Augustine disagreed with Pelagius. In the year 417 Augustine gave a sermon[6] in which he said that two Roman councils had condemned the Pelagian heresy. The two councils, he said, were decisive. Rome had spoken against Pelagius, and his cause was "finished."

1500 years after the time of St. Augustine, towards the close of the 19th century, Roman Catholicism found itself under severe threat. It was threatened by the forces of Protestantism, of revolution, rationalism, and populism – in short, the forces of modernity. The Protestant Reformation had lit a fire of skepticism. The French Revolution had deposed the Catholic Church from its position of privilege. Philosophers of the Enlightenment argued that the revelation given by God to the Church was nothing more than what the human mind itself could discern. Democratic movements in Italy were encroaching upon the papal lands. Many Europeans wanted popular elections rather than a divinely appointed king. The pope was increasingly a prisoner of the Vatican.

Facing these threats, Catholics believed that the best way to defend the Church was to unify it. The point of unity would be the person of the pope. In him the Church could present a united front against the threat of modernity. Part of its defensive strategy was to give a precise and legal definition of Christian tradition. The old definition provided by St. Vincent of Lérins in the year 434 – tradition defined as what had been taught "everywhere, always, and by all" – was somewhat vague.[7] It lacked precision.

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[6] Saint Augustine, *Sermon 131* (Sept. 23, AD 417), in *Sermons*, translation and notes by Edmund Hill, OP, Volume III/4 (94A – 147A) of John E. Rotelle, OSA, editor, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1992), section 10, p. 322.

[7] Vincent of Lérins, *The Commonitory*, in *Early Medieval Theology*, newly translated and edited by George E. McCracken in collaboration with Allen Cabaniss, vol. IX in the series *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957). The translation of *The Commonitory* (pp. 36-89) is based on that of Reginald Stewart Moxon in *Cambridge Patristic Texts* (1915). See section II, "The Standard Test for Orthodoxy," no. 3 (p. 38).

In 1870, at the time of the First Vatican Council, Roman theologians made the definition of tradition more precise. They said that tradition was an objective truth with an active mode of transmission.[8] The "objective truth" was the content of tradition, i.e., the doctrine of faith. The "active mode" was the authority, such as the bishops or pope, who taught the objective truth. These two elements became the core of the so-called modern theology of tradition.[9] To define tradition, they said, requires both the truth itself and the teacher of the truth. Without them there could be no tradition in the precise and legal sense.

The supreme teacher of Christian tradition is of course the pope. In 1870 the First Vatican Council declared the pope infallible when he teaches authoritatively about faith and morals. The definition of papal infallibility, by the way, is a perfect example of Christian tradition defined with exactitude and authority. When you come up with your own example, please do not use that one. Think of other ways in which the Church has defined tradition.

Pope Pius IX presided over the First Vatican Council. During one of the council debates, an Italian cardinal and Dominican, Filippo Maria Guidi (1815-1879), made an argument that displeased Pope Pius. Cardinal Guidi said that it was *not* the person of the pontiff in isolation that is infallible, but rather it was the teaching itself, that is, the teaching as propounded by the pope and the other bishops. After Guidi's speech, Pius IX summoned him to a private conference. There the pope declared to him in some heat that, "La tradizione, son'io."[10] By saying, "Tradition, it is I," Pius IX meant that the pontiff comprises two aspects of tradition, the truth itself and the authority to teach it. He incorporates them in his very being.

Tradition, defined as what the popes and bishops teach, is Christian tradition in the narrow and legal sense. It is a body of explicit doctrine pronounced by an authoritative teacher. This definition helps us to understand the Latin motto on the ceiling of the archbishop's chapel at St. John's Seminary. "Rome has spoken, the matter is closed." When the pope speaks authoritatively, his words become part of Christian tradition. The pope teaches infallibly when he speaks with authority about faith and morals. In a legal sense, he is tradition.

Christian tradition is broader, however, than specific doctrines that the pope and bishops teach at any one time. In the more general and common sense of the term, Christian tradition is the transmission of the faith. It is God's Word and Spirit in history. It is the unfolding of the gospel in society. It is God's kingdom come. Tradition in this broader and more general sense is the context, I believe, within which we must interpret tradition in the narrower sense.

But before we ask how to understand this more common understanding of tradition, let's see if we understand tradition in its precise and legal sense. I'd like to pose a question. Can you give a concrete example of tradition as it was defined by the pope and theologians of the 19th century? We have already spoken of papal infallibility, so you cannot use that example. Can you come up with another? Why was it so important to define?

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[8] The pre-eminent Roman theologian of tradition was Johannes Baptist Franzelin, a German-born cardinal who wrote a *Tractatus de divina traditione et scriptura* (1870).

[9] J. P. Mackey, *The Modern Theology of Tradition* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963).

[10] Cuthbert Butler, *The Vatican Council: The Story Told from Inside in Bishop Ullathorne's Letters*, two volumes (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930), vol. II, p. 98.

Tradition as Expressed at Vatican II

To understand Christian tradition in a general and more common sense, let us turn to the Second Vatican Council. In the fall of 1962, Pope John XXIII summoned 2,000 bishops from around the world to Rome. By all accounts, they did not have a clear idea of what Vatican II was meant to accomplish. They had grown up in a Church that was wary of the forces of modernity – wary of the separated churches, of the French Revolution and the rise of democracies, and of philosophic rationalism. The Church had preserved itself by uniting with the pope. The bishops who arrived in Rome must have thought that their primary duty, as members of the Ecumenical Council, was simply to affirm what the pope proposed for their approval.

That was not, however, the case. In his *Brief History of Vatican II*, Giuseppe Alberigo described the attitude of the bishops in this way:

> The Catholic bishops were shocked by the invitation to assume an active role at the level of the Universal Church, and it would take some effort to create an atmosphere of inquiry after the long period of passivity experienced during the preceding pontificates.[11]

The bishops may have asked themselves, what did they have to offer an infallible pope? Wasn't their primary duty to be loyal and to transmit faithfully what the Church taught? They can be excused for making that assumption. But that was not what the pope was seeking. John XXIII summoned them to Rome because he wanted the bishops to share their wisdom, the wisdom of the Church throughout the world. He wanted to hear from the bishops of Addis Ababa, of Bogota, of Manila, and of a thousand other dioceses.

Consider the difference between Vatican I and Vatican II. The First Vatican Council took place when the forces of Italian democracy were seizing the papal lands. It was the close of the 19th century, and many Catholics distrusted modern science as a threat to Christian faith. The Greek Orthodox were viewed as schismatics and the Protestants as heretics. Roman Catholicism had dominated Europe for centuries, and modernity had undermined that dominance. In the face of these threats, Vatican I united behind the pope. He sat in the chair of Peter, he held the keys to the kingdom, and he had the charism of infallibility. Tradition was a source of the Gospel, and the pope was the voice of tradition.

Centralizing power in the Vatican was a defensive strategy that seemed effective. Too often, however, Roman centralization expressed itself as rigidity and immobility. In the decades after Vatican I, for example, the Church was so opposed to secular society that it looked upon many of its greatest modern achievements with suspicion. The Church even coined a special term to describe false efforts to reconcile Catholicism with the world. The term was "Modernism,"[12] defined as the abandonment of basic Christian values and a redefinition of faith

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[11] Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, Foreword by John W. O'Malley, SJ, translated by Matthew Sherry (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 12.

[12] "Modernism has become the generic name for the most varied attempts to reconcile the Christian religion with the findings of agnostic philosophy, rationalistic science of history, and in general with all those cultural movements which in their development have progressively become estranged from religion or have set themselves in hostile opposition to it." J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, Editors, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, revised edition (New York: Alba House, 1982), p. 48.

in the world's terms. Catholics proclaimed, "Jesus Christ yesterday, today, and tomorrow," but the proclamation frequently was a rationale for maintaining an outmoded status quo.

At Vatican II, Pope John XXIII struck a different attitude. In his mind, the Church needed to read the signs of the times. Instead of reading them by himself and then pronouncing an infallible judgment, the pope summoned the bishops of the world to Rome for Vatican II. He wanted their intellect and pastoral experience. He invited the assembled bishops to shape the Church's agenda. In the next three years, the bishops produced sixteen documents that updated the Church's relationship to the world. They affirmed the responsibility of bishops for the liturgy (including Mass in the vernacular), renounced any desire for a particular kind of civic government (such as the restoration of Europe's monarchies), acknowledged that God is working in the religions of the world, and championed religious liberty. Vatican II brought Roman Catholicism out of the medieval world. Pope John XXIII died in 1963. He was succeeded by Pope Paul VI, who promulgated the work of Vatican II. By doing so, the new pope exercised his role as the voice of Christian tradition.

The difference between Vatican I and Vatican II revealed the dynamism of tradition. Understood as the transmission of faith and the unfolding of the Gospel, it had transformed the Church between the time of Vatican I and Vatican II. By contrast with the First Vatican Council, Vatican II welcomed scientific breakthroughs, economic growth, and political developments that advanced the world's cultures. It welcomed them because such developments revealed the providential hand of God. A shift in the Catholic consciousness had taken place between 1870 and 1965. Christian tradition (in the broad sense) had created a context in which Christian tradition (in the juridical sense) could speak with a renewed voice.

Vatican II and Revelation in History

The clearest evidence for this shift in Catholic consciousness is the recognition of the goodness of human activity. We see this in Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes.* The document begins by expressing the solidarity of the Church with all humanity. Its joys and its hopes, its grief and its anxieties, especially those of the poor, are shared by the followers of Christ. The document then acknowledges the achievements of culture: of science, economics, politics, and the arts.

This was not always the case. In the early 20th century, for example, the Church insisted that the world of scholarship should conform to Christian teaching. For centuries Vatican officials published an index of prohibited books, which once included works by scientists (such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler) as well as philosophers (such as Locke, Hume, and Kant). They were suspect because their thinking did not always accord with the Church's received wisdom. *Gaudium et spes*, however, acknowledged "the rightful autonomy of earthly affairs" (GS 36). It said that science and philosophy must follow their own laws. "Methodical research in all branches of knowledge, provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner and does not override moral laws," continued *Gaudium et spes*, "can never conflict with the faith." The Christian welcomes the wisdom expressed in cultural and scientific development (GS 44), confident that such wisdom brings humanity "to a higher understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty" (GS 57). In short, Vatican II marked a development in the Church's official attitude toward the scientific and cultural developments that had been unfolding since the Enlightenment. The Index of Prohibited Books ceased publication in 1966.

The term *aggiornamento*[13] and the phrase "reading the signs of the times"[14] characterize Vatican II. These terms disturbed opponents of the council who had grown up in an era marked by the condemnation of Modernism. To them, Roman Catholicism represented perennial truths. The Church possessed the eternal guarantee of Jesus, "I will be with you always, even to the end of the world" (Mt 28:20). In what way, some might have asked, could the Church possibly need updating or the signs of the times? To the opponents of Vatican II, the signs of the times meant revolution – the Protestant revolution, the French Revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution. What could these signs mean other than immorality and faithlessness?

Fortunately, those opponents of Vatican II were a small minority. Most bishops recognized in Christian tradition the gradual unfolding of God's plan for the world. In history, in the development of the human race over time, the bishops saw the intention of God. *Gaudium et spes* expressed this in terms of the incarnation itself. "By the incarnation," said the bishops, "he, the son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man" (GS 22). God's decision to unite the incarnate Word with humanity has consequences for everyone, even those who are not Christian. In every person who acts with good will, said the bishops, "grace is active invisibly" (GS 22). We encounter the presence of God not just in specifically holy things, such as the liturgy and sacraments, but in every person who follows his or her conscience.

Ultimately, history itself has become a sign of God's grace and intention. *Gaudium et spes* affirmed this in an explicit way. It said:

> Individual and collective activity, that monumental effort of man through the centuries to improve the circumstances of the world, presents no problem to believers: considered in itself, it corresponds to the plan of God" (GS 33).

The collective effort of humanity to improve the world corresponds to God's own plan. God intended every person to strive for a better life. That does not mean, of course, that history is not marked by sin and evil. Christians have a duty to correlate the light of revelation with human experience. Evil must be acknowledged and condemned. God, however, has a providential intention. God wants us to grow and realize the potential with which we were created. God asks us to utilize our gifts, to build on what nature has given us, and to contribute our best to the world. To do so is to be fully alive, and to manifest the divine Word in the world.

Closely linked to this positive affirmation of history is Christian tradition. God sent the Son into the world to unite humanity and divinity. Christian tradition, broadly understood as the transmission of the gospel and the gradual revelation of its meaning, is the basis for hope. God desires the salvation of all people (1 Tim 2:4). The incarnation of the Son has shown that human nature is capable of oneness with God. History is gradually disclosing what this means.

Conclusion

Usually when we consider what it means to pass on the Christian tradition, we think of our own lives and those of our children. As parents we show them how to make the sign of the

[13] "Aggiornamento" was used by John XXIII in his 1959 "Announcement of the Roman Synod, the Ecumenical Council, and the Update of the Code of Canon Law" and used by Paul VI in *Ecclesiam suam* (1964).

[14] The phrase about reading the signs of the times (Mt 16:3 and Lk 12:56) was used by John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* (1963).

cross, we teach them how to pray, we read them Bible stories, and we prepare them for the sacraments. We transmit the Gospel with actions like those.

That that was not the nineteenth century's primary way, however, to understand tradition. The Catholic theologians of that era wanted to include in the meaning of tradition both Christian truth and the authority who passes it on. They identified Christian tradition with the teaching of the pope and the bishops. Catholics believe that the pope is infallible when he authoritatively teaches about faith and morals. He is, we can say, the voice of tradition. But today, 150 years after the declaration in 1870 of papal infallibility, we can certainly admit that the nineteenth century's definition – namely, the identification of tradition with the teaching of the pope and bishops – is only a partial definition. Its great value is its precision. It enables us to identify Christian tradition with what the magisterium teaches.

Christian tradition, however, is not just an authoritative body of teaching. It is also the transmission of the Gospel in general terms and the spirit of Christ unfolding in human history. The pope and the bishops are not the only ones involved in passing on tradition. Every one of us plays a role. Whenever we participate in our parish, catechize newcomers, and live out our lives as Christians, we transmit faith from the past to the present. To be sure, the Catholic theologians of the 19th century knew about that. They called it the "sensus fidelium," or "passive tradition," or the laity's "supernatural instinct" for the faith. They acknowledged these aspects of tradition but subordinated them to tradition in the legal sense. In their minds, the broader expressions of tradition were vague and imprecise, less important than a definition of tradition as a body of doctrine with an authoritative teacher. The importance of these general, less precise, and vaguer aspects of Christian tradition lies in a special recognition. Tradition in the wider sense is the context for tradition in its narrower and more precise sense.

My next-door neighbor Angelo, worshiping at St. Demetrios, belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church from which our Church has been divided for almost a millennium. At Vatican II, relations between the two Churches began to thaw. On December 7, 1965, Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras I, issued a joint declaration. It was read simultaneously in Rome and in Constantinople. In the joint declaration, the two leaders expressed regret at the "offensive words" and "reprehensible gestures" which had marked the Great Schism of 1054. They removed the declarations of mutual excommunication from that time. And they lamented the "reproaches without foundation" that were leveled by each side. These were the positive steps of 1965.

The Pope and the Patriarch also admitted, however, that "this gesture of justice and mutual pardon is not sufficient to end both old and more recent differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church.[15] The two did not try to achieve a final reconciliation. The differences about whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, or from the Father and the Son, remain. We are not holding our breath for an official declaration that the Great Schism has been repaired and that both parties now stand within the one Christian tradition stemming from Christ and the Apostles. But we recognize that this broader and more general understanding of tradition provides a context. Within that context, we hope, the authoritative teachers of Christian tradition one day will affirm the unity of those now divided.

[15] Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople, "Joint Catholic-Orthodox Declaration," Dec. 7, 1965 (Vatican City: Vatican.va website, accessed on Feb. 17, 2020).