The concept of tradition is inevitably problematic in modern discourse because it is overshadowed by the concept of progress as a leading modern idea and is often construed as standing in opposition to progress. In the contemporary world, the overwhelming evidence of ongoing technological progress makes it all the easier for many people to remain content with their assumption that scientific modes of conceptualization are sufficient for a full understanding of the world. A tacit acceptance of progress as the dominant idea of the modern age can even distort efforts to retrieve a rich understanding of tradition because tradition then comes to be viewed as the preservation of an earlier social order that has been altered by technological progress, but with no fresh understanding springing to life of what it is that essentially merits preservation and transmission for the spiritual nourishment of present and future generations. The problematic status of the concept of tradition is troubling because we can reach no vital understanding of the relationship between religion and culture without it. We know we need the term when we speak of religious traditions or of the Catholic intellectual
tradition, yet we may well sense that some readers or listeners grow hazy-eyed when they hear the word.

It is most welcome, then, that a translation of Josef Pieper’s *Tradition: Concept and Claim* was published last year.¹ Pieper is probably best known in the English-speaking world for his book *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, first translated into English in 1952. Pieper’s retrieval of the endangered concept of leisure in that book was conducted in the face of the transformed understanding of work and leisure emerging from two types of modern materialism: Marxism and consumerism. His analysis in that work broke through the blindness of materialism to bring back to appearance the religious foundation of culture. His retrieval of the concept of tradition moves in the same direction, striving to restore our access to the deepest source of culture. Pieper shows that the rise of science in the modern world has caused many people to misunderstand the concept of tradition just at the time when the development of the knowledge of cultures throughout the world offers the possibility of achieving an enhanced sense of global solidarity through the recognition of the common heritage of sacred tradition. Pieper pursues a renewed understanding of the concept of tradition with an appropriate sense of urgency.

Pieper acknowledges that tradition operates in many different areas of culture, including the territory of manners and etiquette, but his interest is in the content of tradition involved when we consider the handing down of teachings that illuminate the nature and position of the human person in the world as a whole. In his account of tradition he focuses on (as he says) “a teaching, a statement about reality, an interpretation of reality, a proverb,” as the content of tradition, calling this “the tradition of truth” (9–10). His analysis strives to identify the distinctive characteristics of tradition as a particular process of transmission. He acknowledges that it might seem, at first, that the process that constitutes tradition is identical with the more general process of teaching. What, then, distinguishes the process of tradition from that of teaching?
The nature of tradition in the strict sense involves one person handing down that which he or she has previously received from another. Here we must note a key distinction between tradition and teaching more broadly because the teacher transmits knowledge that he or she has either produced or has rationally confirmed and that is therefore a kind of possession of the teacher. The success of the transmission of knowledge performed by the teacher is conditional upon an act of rational confirmation performed by the student either at the time of transmission or at some later time when the student has developed the ability to confirm rationally the knowledge received. The content of tradition, however, is in a sense something held in trust by the teacher after having received it from another and that is again held in trust by the receiver. The one who hands down the content of tradition does not produce the content but is also not merely passive in relation to that content: that content must be taken to heart as something of vital importance and must be kept alive through transmittal in a form and language that will convey the living reality of the content to the receiver—the historical and cultural situation of the receiver must be acknowledged in the way the content is shaped for reception. The transmitter and receiver will be joined in the community of belief once the recipient recognizes the vitality of the content of tradition and understands how the truth received opens a fundamental understanding of the nature of the human person and of the world. At this point, the one who through the reception of tradition has come to participate in the tradition through belief will recognize that the one from whom tradition was received is merely an intermediate authority for the content of tradition while the chain of authority extends back in time to an origin. How is such an origin to be understood?

Here the importance of Pieper’s insight that the relationship between the transmitter and recipient of tradition is nonreciprocal comes to light: the tradition of truth must reach back to an origin of divine revelation. The tradition is, properly speaking, a sacred tradition. And here Pieper argues that Christian revelation culminating
in the Incarnation is not the sole source of sacred tradition. Plato presents Socrates as participating in the transmission of sacred tradition at a number of key points in the dialogues, and the Platonic attribution of the origin of tradition to the unnamed ancients who in turn received the truth from the word of the gods stands in a close relationship to the truths of Christian revelation. Pieper offers a bold account of the relationship between the Christian apostles and Plato’s ancients: “It is not just that both are understood as the first recipients of a message that reached them from the divine sphere. . . . There is also a more profound common element, which only the Christian can perceive in relation to the ultimate origin of the information attested by both groups. That origin is one and the same: the divine logos that became man in Christ” (30).

Pieper then extends this claim more broadly, arguing that within the complex and heterogeneous content of the mythical tradition throughout the world there is to be found an element of divine revelation. Sacred tradition broadly understood is thus “a common possession” of world cultures and constitutes “a unity in relation to the foundation of spiritual life” that “first makes communication among human beings possible and worth attempting” (55). Here we encounter a far-reaching claim for the possibility of intercultural dialogue and understanding.

It is common today that any claim such as the one Pieper makes about the existence of a divine origin for sacred tradition will be dismissed as nostalgic—that term is sometimes used as though it carried a sufficient argument in itself. The response of sacred tradition to that dismissal is that a nostos, a homecoming, is exactly what is offered when the truth of a sacred tradition is received. The challenge faced by those who hope to transmit sacred tradition is to convey the appeal, credibility, and worthiness of such a possibility.

I think it is illuminating to consider George Bernanos’s novel *Diary of a Country Priest* in exactly this light.² One aspect of the difficulty encountered by the priest who serves as the unnamed narrator in the novel is that within his milieu the living truth of the Cath-
olic tradition has not been successfully transmitted and received. The Church continues to function as an institution, however, within the novel many of the priest’s colleagues seem to regard matters of doctrine as necessary formalities but also as somehow quaint, while many of his parishioners, and especially the wealthy and powerful among them, regard the primary mission of the Church to be the conservation of the established social order. It is this latter view in particular that Bernanos seeks both to exhibit and then to disrupt.

In the world of this novel, the remnant of the French aristocratic order is represented by the Count, whose privilege and power continue to be secure even though his position is clearly conveyed by the novel to be part of a decaying social system in the long process of social and economic change that marks the transition to the modern industrial economy. The view that the primary duty of the Church is to uphold social conservation—a view upon which the Count insists, in pursuit of his own interests—can be recognized as a characteristic distortion of the content of sacred tradition. It is indeed the mission of the Church to transmit truths that have great social and communal importance. But when the truth of sacred tradition is fully received and fully taken to heart, the social consequences are more likely to be the kind of disruption exhibited by St. Francis in the rejection of inherited wealth and the embrace of poverty through which deep solidarity with the powerless can be achieved than through support for the privileges of the wealthy.

Bernanos makes this point most forcefully within the novel through an essay that the priest-narrator writes and then conveys to his mentor, the Curé de Torcy, without disclosing his authorship. The importance of this essay within the novel can be well articulated by an appeal to a renewed understanding of the concept of tradition because in this essay the priest-narrator succeeds in taking to heart the vitality of the content of the Christian tradition in a manner that overcomes the deadening deformation of that tradition that people like the Count impose upon it through self-interest. The short essay begins with an acknowledgement that tradition conserves the truth
for transmission to future generations, but it does so for a reason far greater than survival alone: “We preserve. No doubt. But we only preserve in order to save, and the world can never realize that, for the world asks only to survive. And mere survival suffices no longer” (46). The power of Christian tradition is then recognized in its ability to destroy the institution of slavery, a destruction that is at the heart of the tradition of Catholic social teaching concerning the dignity of work and the dignity of the human person. (We learn elsewhere in the novel that the Curé de Torcy was among the first generation of priests to receive the encyclical *Rerum novarum*, which addresses the situation of the worker within the new industrial order in the late nineteenth century.) When the truths of sacred tradition are received in a living form, they exert a transformational power upon the one who embraces those truths and potentially upon the society in which such truths take root. The novel as a whole can be understood as a profound exploration undertaken by Bernanos of the terrible loss that follows from the failure to transmit the truths of sacred tradition in the modern world and of the ongoing vitality of that tradition when it is embraced in the fullness of its vitality.

The first article in this issue of *Logos* explores the personal and social transformative power exerted when the truth of the Christian tradition is deeply received and then renewed in a manner that exemplifies the credibility of that truth for all to see. Christopher Ohan, in “A Christian Remedy in a Climate of Fear: Francesco Bernadone, the War with Perugia, and Conversion,” reexamines the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi and the setting of his life to show how Francis was able to address the social difficulties of his time through the healing power of Christian truth. The article depicts the damaging political conflict between Assisi and Perugia in Francis’s time, and then shows that the understanding of Christian conversion was undergoing a significant change in the midst of this political and social turbulence. Francis through his conversion provided a “new type of Christian presence,” and Ohan observes that through this presence he “was challenging Christians to live in
John F. Desmond proposes that the nihilism of the twentieth century was confronted by two important writers through their embrace of the truth of the Cross. In “Flannery O’Connor, Simone Weil, Writing, and the Crucifixion,” Desmond argues that the views of each writer on the Crucifixion shed light on their writing and thinking in spite of their differences, and that each “regarded the Cross as the defining event of all human experience.” O’Connor came to understand her writing as a kind of self-abandonment for which Jesus is the ultimate model. Weil sought to achieve such self-abandonment by “embracing and exploring the condition of suffering,” and explored the paradox and mystery through which God’s love is present to us in the midst of suffering. Desmond brings to light the differences between the views of the two writers on the Cross, since Weil did not accept the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and did not acknowledge the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. For Weil, “personal purity and the work of purification were to be sought outside the Church, without the sanctifying grace of the sacraments.” But the two writers converged in their efforts to restore a deeper understanding of suffering to the modern world. Desmond concludes that both writers were able to confront the deficiencies and challenges of the modern age through their embrace of the Crucifixion: “The Cross is the central axis in the writings of both the American fiction writer and the French philosopher. With their genius for writing paradox and mystery, O’Connor and Weil planted the Cross into modern consciousness as a goad, a sign, and a contradiction.”

Edward T. Oakes, SJ, in “Hamlet and the Reformation: The Prince of Denmark as ‘Young Man Luther,’” presents a vivid account of Shakespeare’s Hamlet by examining the play in the light of the Protestant Reformation and by viewing the character, the Prince
of Denmark, as a young Martin Luther. He furthermore argues that twentieth-century views of Luther are in some ways anticipated by Shakespeare, especially through an understanding of the close connection between Luther’s personality and his theological positions. Hamlet’s uncertainty concerning the afterlife and its nature is at the heart of his personal tragedy, and Oakes argues that Shakespeare also saw the Protestant Reformation as a tragedy derived from the disruption of traditional Christian eschatology involved in this uncertainty as manifested more broadly in Shakespeare’s time. “This uncertainty is not only the center of the play, the very motor that explains all of Hamlet’s tormented ambivalence, it was also the reason that religious strife in Elizabethan England remained so chronic and unresolved, even to our present times.”

In “Vatican II and Jacques Maritain: Resources for the Future? Approaching the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Council,” Richard Schenk, OP, argues that Maritain at the conclusion of the council expressed a profound understanding of the importance of combining “hope and critique” in the engagement of the Church with the contemporary world. Schenk argues that “where the council and its reception in the postconciliar Church were the weakest, it was caused by a failure to achieve this studied ambivalence, due to an exaggeration and isolation of the hopes for or the suspicions about our times.” The article brings together a careful account of a set of interpretations of the nature of the council’s engagement with the modern world and a view of Maritain’s approach to contemporary philosophy. Schenk examines two interpretations of the council that call in different ways for “departing from many of the concrete forms and formulations of earlier Catholicism,” and then two interpretations that seek to retain or retrieve particular forms of the Catholic tradition, and then looks to Maritain for guidance in discerning a fifth approach. In this approach, the Church is understood as engaging seriously in dialogue with the modern world but without losing its critical perspective on the challenges and deficiencies of modernity. Schenk observes that Maritain exemplifies
such an approach in his philosophical engagement with the modern world: “His critique of modernity and his search for the renewal of metaphysics, though surely at times overstated, was part of what Gaudium et spes would say is true of all genuine Christians, that they share not only ‘the joys and the hopes,’ but also ‘the griefs and the anxieties’ of this age, its luctus et angor, those forgotten words, the equally forgotten part of the intentionally mixed message of the Pastoral Constitution.”

James M. Jacobs, basing his analysis on the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, undertakes a philosophical examination of the nature of freedom in “The Inherent Limitations on Human Freedom.” The goal of the article is to affirm the concept of freedom without acquiescing to the notion that freedom entails the complete autonomy of the human person. Human beings realize their freedom through thinking, acting, and making, but these acts aim at achieving the true, the good, and the beautiful. These transcendental properties that human action seeks to attain would seem to impose a limitation on human freedom. Is such a limitation then a contradiction of freedom? Many modern thinkers seem to reach such a conclusion, but Jacobs endeavors to illuminate the relationship between freedom and human transcendence to develop a deeper understanding of freedom. “We achieve transcendence in knowing all being, in choosing the highest good, and in creating beauty as a testimony to the goodness of creation. To achieve the freedom of transcendence, then, means we first recognize that man is not free to determine his end. Rather, true freedom is found in accepting that our end is God, who is Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.”

We turn again to Shakespeare in “A Case Against Natural Magic: Shakespeare’s Friar Laurence as Romeo and Juliet’s Near-Tragic Hero.” In this article, Jill Kriegel argues that Friar Laurence plays a particularly important part in the play because he reflects with particular intensity many of the conflicts of his time that Shakespeare sought to address in his plays. The element of magic that persists in Friar Laurence’s approach to the world exemplifies a “destructive
drive to manipulate nature in opposition to divine law” that must be overcome if a path to salvation is to be achieved. Kriegel presents a summary of Shakespeare’s Christian orthodoxy and its place in Renaissance England and then shows how Shakespeare confronts some of the challenges to Christian orthodoxy in his time through the figure of Friar Laurence. Kriegel brings us to this illuminating conclusion concerning the friar: “While he is for Romeo and Juliet a poor mentor, for us he provides—through his negative example—a vital Catholic lesson, one which, I believe, Shakespeare intended.”

Kathleen Curran Sweeney, in “Forgetting the Begetting: Why the Abortion Question is Fundamental,” argues that the deepest implications of the question about the moral status of abortion reach to “the true ground of existence, nature, and the human person.” In approaching the full implications of the abortion question, we must delve into the nature of creation itself as the ground of existence. Sweeney turns to the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar to reach a deeper understanding of the goodness of creation, of the essential importance of self-giving in creation, of Christ’s mission, and finally of fruitfulness in the Holy Spirit. “The fact that the world is created within the relationship of the self-giving and receiving love of the Father and the Son, bearing fruit in the activity of the Holy Spirit who also pours himself out for the world in unity with the Father and the Son, makes all the difference in how we view the world, other people, our relationship with God, and the end of human life.”

Ross Labrie, in “Asceticism in the Writings of Thomas Merton,” argues that Merton “came to see the primary importance of asceticism as a liberating of the self from fragmentation and dividedness. For Merton, the self had to be united in order to effectively give itself in love to others and to God.” In his early writings, Merton emphasized the disciplinary value of asceticism and articulated the traditional view that the detachment actualized by ascetic practice prepared one for mystical contemplation. But he also came to reject the “puritanical” elements sometimes attributed to tradi-
tional Christian asceticism and strove to establish the ways in which asceticism must “relate to the concrete circumstances and needs of a person’s life.” Merton emphasized the importance of developing “an experimental discipline adapted to the individual’s own moral circumstances” as the heart of ascetic practice. Labrie points to the importance of the concept of work in every stage of Merton’s ascetic spirituality and he examines the role of sacrifice through dedication to God and to others as key components of asceticism in Merton’s view and practice. The goal of asceticism for Merton was “the union of all of creation within the circumference of divine love, a love that in many ways one could only see clearly through the exercise of ascetic virtue.”

Michael C. Jordan
Editor

Notes