

The Case for Tradition

Tradition has a bad name. Catholic traditionalists are seen as rigid, bitter and judgmental. In political circles, individuals who hold traditional values are cast as fanatics and bigots, and in modern culture, traditionalists are depicted as reactionary and backwards.

Modern society values newness and change. The media celebrates revolutionaries and trendsetters, not people who defend the time-tested truths of previous generations.

Even in a world of constant flux, people are still drawn to tradition, and this inherent desire is displayed in growing countercultural movements that favor time-honored practices. The food industry has a niche for products made using traditional methods, artisanal cheeses and breads come to mind. Individuals are also rediscovering the joy in producing their own food and drinks with hobby farms and home brewing. People are also drawn to historical sites for vacations to experience traditional lifestyles, and antiques and historical items are popular features in home decor. Modern Americans desire tradition, but they are content with only small vestiges in their otherwise thoroughly modern life.

Tradition is an inescapable aspect of a Catholic mindset. It is not a trinket on the side, but a central element. We often label Catholics as liberal or conservative or progressive or traditional. However, tradition is synonymous with Catholic. To call someone a traditional Catholic is to be redundant.

The theological principle of Tradition (capital T), which upholds the authority of teachings outside of scripture, is a key tenant of the Catholic faith, but I would argue that the non-theological use of tradition (small t) is also a central aspect of Catholicism. In a more general sense, the word “tradition” comes from the Latin *traditionem*, which means “delivery, surrender, a handing down, a giving up,” and it means to pass down customs and beliefs from generation to generation.

A Catholic mindset rooted in tradition emphasizes the timelessness of truth. Catholics accept that truth is not contingent on a time period, and therefore, what was true in the past, is true today, and will be true in the future. Subsequently, the teachings of the church do not change. The church develops its teachings to confront challenges of the day or to address a heresy, but any development cannot contradict what has been taught by the church in the past. Therefore, one function of the church is to pass on timeless truths from one generation to the next.

The church also resists fads. The secular world is in constant flux, with values and

beliefs incessantly changing. Amid the instability of the world, the church is an anchor, meant to hold one steady in the stormy sea of the world. The church is a destination to come to find calm and peace and escape the chaos of the time. It is not a place to fight for more change and chaos. Any church that seeks innovations to keep up with the times is subject to the world and not to God; such a church is a contradiction to its very nature.

A traditional mindset values the vast corpus of Catholic wisdom generated through the ages. Every generation of Catholics is tasked with preserving what is good and beautiful in the faith, and then passing it on to the next generation. The Catholic Church has 2,000 years of accumulated experience, and with each period, the level of knowledge grows deeper and richer. Catholic tradition begins with Jesus and the Apostles, and it was further developed by the Church Fathers, Doctors of the Church, and countless others. When encountering this abundant body of work, we have to wonder “who am I” to question this wisdom. Our first response to any theological question should be a spirit of deference to the brilliant and inspired minds of the past, not to discard them to the dustbin of history.

Reverence for tradition has always been part of God’s plan. In the Old Testament, stories were passed down orally and the Law was memorized by every generation. Jesus revealed the fullness of the faith to the Apostles, and they were charged to spread the Gospels throughout the world. From the Apostles, the faith spread to others, and as St. Paul writes, “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.” (2 Thess 2:15) Without tradition, we would have no faith. Tradition is the very means of how it grows, and I would reason that churches that neglect their traditions died off and those that honor them prosper.

Tradition is a force of unity. One of the amazing aspects of the Catholic faith is that a Catholic can attend any parish across the world and find a similar experience, but this occurrence is contingent of the faithful passing down of traditions. In addition to Catholicism being unified across space, it is also unified through time. When we say a prayer or attend Mass, we are reciting the same prayers as previous Catholics have done over the last 2000 years. Tradition unifies Catholics with Jesus, but it also unites Catholics with all the saints over the history of the church.

One of the most common attacks on tradition is to point out the atrocities of the church in the past, and demand that the church modernize and get with the times. Yet, if you examine major outrages such as religious wars, slavery, racism, fascism, you will quickly note that these are not part of the Catholic tradition, but happened across religious lines. They occurred because Catholics forgot their traditional beliefs and succumb to popular and evil ideologies of the day. Traditional Catholicism is a safeguard against radical ideologies, not a cause of them.

Yes, tradition has a bad name, but has our faith improved in modern times, since tradition has been neglected? Or, do you feel like something is missing? Perhaps, it is time to give tradition another try.

Tradition is not blind acceptance of the past. Tradition is preserving what is the best and most beautiful, and handing it on to the next generation as a gift, and they would be wise to accept it.