



## Introduction

### Classic Texts and the *Consensus Fidelium*

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G.K. Chesterton once commented that ‘Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. Democracy’, he said, ‘tells us not to neglect a good man’s opinion even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man’s opinion even if he is our father’.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Chesterton’s world of early twentieth-century Britain, it is unlikely any of us have a groom, good or otherwise; but it is certain that we all have ancestors in the faith as Christians, female as well as male. Chesterton is urging us to include them in any contemporary dialogue as the meaning and purpose and praxis of Christian faith.

This is hardly new of course. While still an Anglican (if only just) John Henry Newman urged, in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), that understanding the Christian faith is a historic process of unfolding by the Church of the implications of the revelation of Jesus Christ. He would later develop this theological motif by locating the authenticity of such development in the faith of the masses of ordinary believers through time. In his later essay as a Roman Catholic, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (1859), Newman urged that the authentic development of Christian orthodoxy was not a matter for scholars and theologians but was decided by the mass of the faithful Christians. This *consensus fidelium*, Newman asserted, was ‘a sort of instinct or φρονημα [‘phronema’; a collective power of discernment], deep in the bosom of the mystical body of Christ’ and operated because of the Christian’s faithfulness to Christ in worship, prayer and devotion.<sup>2</sup>

1. Quoted in Arianna Stassinopoulos, *The Other Revolution* (London: Michael Joseph, 1978), p. 12.

2. John Henry Newman, ‘On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine’, in James Gaffney (ed.), *Conscience, Consensus, and the Development of Doctrine* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 392-428 (406).

Consequently, as Jaroslav Pelikan commented:

Tradition for Newman was, therefore, a profoundly democratic concept, which did not trickle down from theologians, popes, and councils to the people, but filtered up from the faithful (who are the Church) to become the subject matter for the speculations, controversies and systems of the dogmatic theologians.<sup>3</sup>

This democratizing and including of the faith of the faithful as the locus of orthodoxy was a very influential concept in the later half of the twentieth century. However, it raises a question about the place of classic texts in a debate about orthodoxy in the present. Newman explicitly repudiated the idea that official pronouncements or theological texts alone were to be depended upon for preserving orthodox Christian faith. But classic texts of any Christian tradition are by their very nature production of this sort. So do these texts, as of necessity the productions of the theologically educated elite, play any part in a contemporary ascertaining of the *consensus fidelium*?

I believe they do. Classic theological texts of any Christian tradition play a part in determining contemporary orthodoxy, first because the author/authors of such texts are themselves members of the faithful, clergy and laity. Writers of texts which have endured in a Christian community are without fail practitioners of the faith they write about. They too practise and share in the 'rule of prayer' Newman points to as the ultimate repository of Christian orthodoxy.

Secondly, classic texts are writings that have lasted. This is primarily what makes them classic texts as opposed to more ephemeral writings. They endured because they have been able both to communicate with the faith of their own original context, and subsequently. We are accustomed to this principle in Scripture. Paul's letters, for example, written originally to specific churches and addressing particular issues, were soon found to be meaningful to other churches in the same era, and are read as classic Christian texts in churches still today. This is not an accident but a consequence of the connection of these texts with the *consensus fidelium* of their original context and that of subsequent generations. This helps explain why it is that whereas the various Gnostic gospels have faded into disuse and dereliction by the church, the four canonical Gospels survived and were transmitted in Christian communities. Classic texts survive and are constantly used by a Christian community because they remain meaningful to the body of the faithful. They cohere as theological texts with the *consensus fidelium*, both of their

3. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 30.

own era and of Christians in subsequent generations. Consequently, as classic texts are enduring because they connect with the *consensus fidelium*, their context is necessary for interpretation. Text cannot be understood without context. The text and the faith it derived out of, and which it addressed, belong together in determining an understanding of it.

As transmitters, therefore, of the *consensus fidelium*, classic texts are fundamental to the transmission of identity. Just as much as Christian identity, Anglican identity is, in part, a consequence of faith handed on from previous ancestors. Dialogue with their faith, which is also ours, is necessary for the authentic maintenance of communal identity and integrity, and can be revolutionary. Newman himself is an indication of the revolutionary nature of engagement with classic texts. On the one hand, his engagement with the orthodox texts of the fourth century written against the Arian heresy led to his rejection of contemporary Anglicanism in favour of the Roman Catholic Church as a church which, he believed, had a more dynamic theology of development better equipped to face the liberalism of his day. On the other hand, a couple of decades later that same collection of classic texts caused Newman to critique his church of choice for its elitist theological exploration; and this thinking resulted in a theological understanding of the church which played a role in the revolution which was the Second Vatican Council.

In earlier Anglican history we can observe the same creative dialogic process as the classic texts influence the contemporary situation. Archbishop Cranmer's major moulding of the *Book of Common Prayer*, a classic Anglican text if ever there was one, derived in a large part from his engagement with the Sarum rite of the medieval mass; for him, a classic text. Freed from the polemics of the Catholic-Protestant divide scholarship can now point to substantial ways in which Cranmer both reformed and also continued the inheritance of that medieval rite into Anglicanism.<sup>4</sup> In another classic author of Anglicanism, Richard Hooker, his magnum opus, the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, was shaped in part by his meditation on another classic text of medieval Western Christianity, the *Summa Theologicae* of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>5</sup>

Anglicanism has always had this theological mind of engagement in the present with the theological inheritance of the past. Principally, this has to do with respect to the foundational Christian classic text of Scripture, so that the *Book of Common Prayer* collect prays that Anglicans will 'read,

4. Diarmid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 414-15.

5. Peter Munz, *The Place of Hooker in the History of Thought* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952).

mark, learn and inwardly digest them'. But the history of the church, and of the Anglican Church, demonstrates that this same process of engagement with other subsequent Christian classic texts has also been both necessary, illuminating, creative, and even revolutionary for expressing the faith in a later context.