HANDING ON THE FAITH
The Church's Mission and Challenge

ROBERT P. IMBELLI, EDITOR
The Boston College Church in the 21st Century Series
Patricia De Leeuw and James F. Keenan, S.J.,
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The Church in the 21st Century Center at Boston College seeks to be a catalyst and resource for the renewal of the Catholic Church in the United States by engaging critical issues facing the Catholic community. Drawing from both the Boston College community and others, its activities currently are focused on four challenges: handing on and sharing the Catholic faith, especially with younger Catholics; fostering relationships built on mutual trust and support among lay men and women, vowed religious, deacons, priests, and bishops; developing an approach to sexuality mindful of human experience and reflective of Catholic tradition; and advancing contemporary reflection on the Catholic intellectual tradition.
In Memory of Pope John Paul II
Who, by Word and Witness,
Spent himself, Handing on the Faith
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Foreword

Beginning the Conversation

ROBERT P. IMBELL

When President William P. Leahy, S.J., launched “The Church in the 21st Century Initiative,” he identified, as one of its key concerns, “handing on the faith to future generations.” This challenge is, of course, central to the mission of a Catholic university and crucial to the very survival of the Church.

As an initial contribution to this ongoing endeavor, I had the privilege of organizing and hosting a conference that met at Boston College for two days of conversation and spirited exchange: September 17–18, 2004. Some of the features that characterized the conference bear mentioning. First, it was limited to nineteen participants who came having read papers prepared and distributed beforehand. The aim was to use the time together to promote a conversation that allowed positions to be engaged in a serious and sustained fashion. Two of the group, Paul Baumann and John Garvey, served as facilitators, focusing the conversation, suggesting connections, probing implications. This formal conversation then continued over meals and more informal discussions.

Second, though a majority of the participants came from colleges and universities, bringing academic competence in theology, sociology, history, and religious education, we were eager to have several bishops as full participants in the conversation to test insights and proposals from the vantage of their pastoral experience and concern. Thus, in a small but significant way, we sought to model fruitful and mutually beneficial collaboration between bishops and academicians. Indeed, the conviction underlying the conversation, as it does the entire enterprise of the Church in the 21st Century, is the inseparable connection between the pastoral and the theological.
Finally, the respectful conversations of the two days, the appreciative and discerning exchange of words, were placed in the context of a mutual listening to the Word. Each of the two days began with an adapted form of the Liturgy of the Hours; and the conference concluded with the celebration of the Eucharist. Dialogue began and culminated in doxology. As a powerful reminder of the importance of image and the aesthetic in handing on the faith, a replica of the great twelfth-century mosaic of the Cross of Christ as the tree of life, fecundating the new creation (from the Church of San Clemente in Rome), was displayed prominently in our conference room. It serves as the frontispiece of this volume.

Though the actual conference was limited to the invited participants, integral to it was a public presentation, a keynote address by the Most Reverend Sean P. O’Malley, O.F.M. Cap., Archbishop of Boston. Archbishop (now Cardinal) O’Malley’s talk, entitled “Passing on the Faith,” was delivered at St. John the Evangelist Church in Wellesley, Massachusetts, on Friday evening, September 17, 2004. His address manifested both in its substance and in its parish context the intimate union of the pastoral and the theological.

No conversation exists in a vacuum. Environment, both physical and human, plays a distinct role in its success. For their generosity in providing hospitality in a most congenial setting, sincere gratitude to William P. Leahy, S.J., President of Boston College; to Robert Newton, Special Assistant to the President; to Rose Mary Donahue, Assistant to the President; and to Dawn Overstreet, Assistant Director of the Church in the 21st Century Center. For their attention to the many details of support and logistics during the days of the conference, Michon Matthiesen, Randall Rosenberg, and Peter Fritz, graduate students in the Theology Department, deserve special thanks. Finally, Kevin Vander Schel, a graduate student in the Theology Department, provided invaluable assistance in the preparation of the manuscript.

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Feast of St. Gregory the Great

Authors and Participants

R. Scott Appleby, Professor of History, University of Notre Dame
Reverend Robert Barron, Professor of Theology, University of St. Mary of the Lake
Paul Baumann, Editor, Commonweal Magazine
John Cavadini, Chair, Department of Theology, University of Notre Dame
Most Reverend Blase Cupich, Bishop of Rapid City, South Dakota
William Dinges, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Catholic University of America
John Garvey, Esq., Dean, Boston College Law School
Paul J. Griffiths, Schmitt Chair of Catholic Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago
Thomas Groome, Director, Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry, Boston College
Reverend Michael Himes, Professor of Theology, Boston College
Reverend Robert Imbelli, Associate Professor of Theology, Boston College
Luke Timothy Johnson, Robert W. Woodruff Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins, Candler School of Theology, Emory University
Sister Mary Johnson, SNDdeN, Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies, Emmanuel College
Most Reverend Gerard Kicanas, Bishop of Tucson, Arizona
Introduction

Discernment, Newness, Transformation

Musings Inspired by a Conference

ROBERT P. IMPELNI

In approaching so vast and crucial a topic as “Handing on the Faith,” it seemed helpful to distinguish three inseparable aspects of the one gift and task we face. What is the concrete context in which this vital ecclesial ministry transpires? What is the substance of the faith, the promise of the hope that we seek to transmit? What are apt modes and models of communication for this all-embracing challenge? Hence “context,” “content,” and “communication” organized our labors and focused our reflection.

However, it quickly became clear that to each of the areas we brought explicit or, more often, implicit suppositions regarding the other two. The richness of the conversation stemmed from the different “readings” of each of the three areas on the part of the participants. Certainly, many of the readings bore a “family resemblance” among themselves. Others, though divergent, were clearly complementary. Finally, to the surprise of no one, a few were divergent. John Cavadini in the “Afterword” has sought to capture some of this harmony and disharmony in his personal post-conference reflections. The two days together were only intended to begin a conversation that we hope this book will continue to promote.

In this “Introduction” I ponder some of the issues engaged, considering them under the headings “discernment,” “newness,” and “transformation.” I hope, thereby, to offer some vantage upon ecclesial tradition and cultural formation as they interact in the hearts and minds of each of us.
Discernment

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourself to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect. (Rom 12:1, 2)

Although the contemporary cultural and societal context of the United States is indeed diverse and multiform, are there overarching influences, orientations, sensibilities that characterize the context in which the Gospel must be proclaimed and the ecclesial catechumenate unfold? In our conversations the term “cultural catechumenate” quickly became the preferred designation to indicate the power and pervasiveness of this cultural influence, fueled by market capitalism and propagated by advertising. The participants differed somewhat in their assessment of the complex economic and intellectual situation: some inclined to a more critical, others to a more appreciative reading of “the signs of the times.”

Whatever the final judgment on this score, Paul Griffiths’s acute analysis of culture’s role in the shaping of desire and thus of our very selves provides a very helpful heuristic, both for considering the culture and for guiding Christian formation. One crucial need, in my view, is to restore the ancient practice of discernment of spirits to the very forefront of preaching and catechesis today. In the post-Vatican II era of renewed appreciation for the role and responsibility of the laity, it is imperative for the entire people of God to mature in its task of becoming skilled diagnosticians in matters of the Spirit.

It is, certainly, true that the Catholic tradition has steadfastly affirmed that God’s image in the human is not eradicated by sin. Hence there is a native optimism to Catholicism — native, but not naive! For that same tradition also displays a critical realism regarding the effects of sin in us, both personal and institutional. Sin desensitizes and deforms conscience; darkening the mind by self-serving illusions, binding the will by self-gratifying addictions.

Brian Daley, S.J., drawing upon the rich heritage of the Ignatian tradition of spiritual discernment, puts it well, in words equally applicable to individuals and communities.

Introduction

Granted that the human heart does instinctively reach out for the God it glimpses behind the beauty and goodness of the world, still the heart is all too easily led to settle for substitutes: for causes, for the latest psychological or pseudo-religious fad, for religious experience in itself, rather than to seeking God in all his majestic, demanding otherness. Our spiritual instinct, our spiritual yearning, needs always to be subjected to careful discernment, to be tested by the norms of faith, if we are to be confident that what we are seeking, and what we are offering to each other, is not simply another image of ourselves, but is the God who is ultimately real.

Long before postmodern scholarship advocated the exercise of a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” the great masters of the Christian spiritual tradition spoke of the need to direct a hermeneutics of suspicion, in the first instance, towards oneself. They recognized the deep-seated propensity in each of us to self-deception and the ongoing call of the Gospel to metanoia, conversion.

In retrospect, the theme of “conversion,” so central to the proclamation and practice of the New Testament, should have played a more prominent role in our deliberations. Perhaps it was taken for granted. Yet the widespread appeal in contemporary North American culture to “experience,” often construed in that excessively individualistic sense that William Dinges documents, gives one pause. Presumably, if conversion is the narrow gate that opens upon the Christian Way, “my experience” too will need radical re-orientation, my “world of meaning and value” (to borrow a phrase of Bernard Lonergan, S.J.) will require the sort of “consciousness raising” that the very word metanoia enshrines. The transformed experience is that of the fruit of conversion finds summary expression in the letters of Paul as well as in the Gospel narratives by the exultant exclamation: “I once was blind, but now I see!”

If the practice of discernment is thus central to Christian life and to the handing on of Christian faith, the urgent issue that arises is: what are the criteria for discernment, what is the measure of authentic experience? The very wellspring of Christian discernment of spirits is Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul writes: “I tell you that nobody speaking by the spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be accursed.’ And no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). Two millennia later, the
inaugural statement of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, “Called to Be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril,” faithfully echoes the claim. “Jesus Christ, present in Scripture and sacrament, is central to all that we do; he must always be the measure and not what is measured.”

Newness

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Pt 1:3)

St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons at the end of the second century, has often been called “the first great Catholic theologian.” Born in Asia Minor, he witnesses to the Tradition of the undivided Church, both East and West. In opposition to the followers of Marcion who claimed that the Old Testament derived from a different God than the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, he defended the integral unity of both Old and New Testaments, whose source was the one God, Creator and Redeemer. When asked, what then was the “newness” that Christ brought, he responded in a way that recapitulates the conviction of the orthodox Tradition: “Christ brought all newness by bringing Himself.” The new covenant is the very person of Jesus Christ. And Christ’s newness renews all creation, bearing new life.

As Irenaeus intimates, Christianity is not ultimately a “religion of the book,” but a religion of the person, the living Lord Jesus Christ. In this regard it distinguishes itself decisively from both Judaism and Islam. Much of Pope John Paul II’s magisterium bears this Irenaeus imprint. In his splendid “Apostolic Letter” written on the occasion of the new millennium, John Paul wrote:

We shall not be saved by a formula, but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you! It is not therefore a matter of inventing a “new program.” The program already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its center in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved, and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity and with him transform history until its fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a program which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of

time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. This program for all times is our program for the Third Millennium.7

Handing on the faith, then, is not primarily a handing on of “doctrines” (though these are important), nor even a handing on of practices (though these are indispensable). It is, above all, evoking and fostering an encounter with the living person Jesus Christ. If “witnessing” is key to this, as those who participated in the conference are agreed, then it must be in the manner of John the Baptist who points away from self to the Bridegroom.

In a work that has become a contemporary classic Ronald Rolheiser has expressed this central point with verve and cogency.

What Jesus wants of us is that we undergo his presence so as to enter into a community of life and celebration with him.... Within Christian spirituality, long before we speak of anything else (church, dogmas, commandments, even admonitions to love and justice), we must speak about Jesus, the person and the energy that undergirds everything else. After all everything else is merely a branch. Jesus is the vine, the blood, the pulse, and the heart.8

Neither Rolheiser nor the Catholic Tradition would countenance reducing this realization to a privatized “Jesus and me” spirituality. This would contradict Catholicism’s profound corporate and communal essence. The living Jesus is always head of the body, the Church. And living Jesus is always living a profoundly ecclesial existence.9 But even as Catholicism never separates the risen Lord from his ecclesial and sacramental body, so it never reduces the Lord to the community. Jesus always stands over against the Church as its Source of new life in the Spirit and, because of this, as its Judge.10

It has become a truism to contrast pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II understandings of Tradition. The former, allegedly, focused upon tradition as the handing down of content, the so-called deposit of faith; whereas the latter, ostensibly, focuses on the process of handing down. The first can be designated by the Latin word tradita: those things handed down; the second by the Latin word traditio: the activity of handing down. A moment’s reflection shows that handing on the faith demands both: both content and process. The Gospel has determinate content:
it is not some amorphous good news. Its manner of communication is manifold: it can range from earthy parable to metaphysical exploration.

But the burden of this reflection on the “newness” of the Gospel is that there is a reality deeper than, though inseparable from, tradition either as *tradita* or as *traditio*. Let me offer a third Latin word to indicate this reality: *Traditus*. The Lord Jesus himself is the One handed over. He is the Gift that the Father “hands over” to the world. He continues to give himself for our salvation, to hand himself into our hands. The Church arises and is daily sustained by this Tradition: Christ’s Eucharistic gift of himself. The very title of Pope John Paul II’s last encyclical, the final testament of his spiritual conviction and theological vision, expresses this succinctly: *Ecclesia de Eucharistia.* The Church’s very being daily derives from the Eucharistic sacrifice of its crucified and risen Lord.

The Church has nothing to offer the world, nothing to give, but Jesus Christ. This is the Church’s awesome blessing and responsibility. It can only faithfully communicate Christ by the witness of its own new life received from him. Thus the truly credible communicators of the faith are the saints whose transformed lives most clearly manifest the newness Christ has realized and enabled. As St. Francis of Assisi reportedly instructed his friars: “Go and preach the Gospel. If necessary, use words!”

**Transformation**

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:17-18)

A subject mentioned but not given sustained attention at the conference is that of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the RCIA, which has become so important a part of Catholic life and pastoral practice since Vatican II. The RCIA is, arguably, one of the most important reforms or, better, recoveries, achieved by the Council. While the baptism of children remains, statistically, the “normal” practice of the Catholic Church in the United States, the initiation of adults is the “normative” practice. If we would see what becoming a Catholic Christian signifies and entails, then the RCIA is where to look. It provides precious guidelines for handing on the faith.

Integral to the RCIA is the period of preparation for the rites of initiation known as the “catechumenate.” This extended period, which may last for two years or more, offers some hope of countering the potent catechumenate of the culture, by liberating desire from its idolatrous distortions. In the provocative phrase of Aidan Kavanagh, it promotes “conversion therapy.” It does so by engaging the catechumens in a holistic process that engages affections and actions, heart, mind, and body.

Unlike the private “instructions in the faith” of the pre-Vatican II era, the catechumenate is rooted in the local Christian community and in its liturgical life. Participation in the community’s worship through the Liturgy of the Word is central to the catechumenate. And the various stages in the process toward full initiation are liturgically and ritually celebrated.

Accompanying the candidate through his or her catechumenal journey is a sponsor who serves as mentor, guide, and support. Thus a form of apprenticeship in the new Christian Way takes shape, a precursor to the continued importance in mature Christian living of a spiritual guide. In addition to formal catechesis the candidate is involved in the social outreach of the community, its concern for the poor and needy in its midst. Moreover, there is nothing automatic about the process; discernment is key: both the community’s discernment of the candidate’s aptness and readiness, and the candidate’s discernment as to whether she or he is prepared for total commitment to God, through Christ, in the Spirit.

The culmination of the catechumenate is the “awe-inspiring rites of initiation” themselves, most properly celebrated at the Easter Vigil, the keystone of the arch of the liturgical year. Here the candidate is plunged sacramentally into the life-giving death and resurrection of the Lord. To achieve its full symbolic significance this baptism should be by immersion. In this form, the spiritual reality of death to sin and new life to God finds physical resonance in the darkness and loss of breath of descent under the waters, and then being raised again into light and air.

The RCIA refers to “initiation” rather than simply “baptism,” because here baptism is completed by confirmation or anointing and is consummated in the Eucharistic celebration where the newly baptized
and the entire community are nourished by the very body and blood of the Redeemer and Lord and made one in him. Thus the celebration is the fullest sacramental expression of the reality signified: the death of the old self and the birth of a new self renewed in Christ.

As is well known, the last stage of the journey of the RCIA is called “mystagogia.” During the period between Easter and Pentecost those newly initiated come together to ponder further what has transpired in them, to enter further into the Mystery of new life in Christ, its meaning and implications.

But, in another and deeper sense, this last “stage” is never-ending and is not restricted to the new initiates. Christian life is an ongoing mystagogia: an ongoing immersion into the inexhaustible Mystery of Christ. For conversion and new birth are but the beginning of new life, of ongoing transformation in Christ “from glory to glory.” No writing in the New Testament is more aware of the challenge of continued growth in Christ than the Letter to the Ephesians. Indeed, Ephesians makes “spiritual growth” a defining mark of the Church and the Christian.

And Christ gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro, swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from cunning and deceitful scheming. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we will foster the growth of all into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body’s growth, as it builds itself up in love.

(Eph 4:11–16)\(^{13}\)

Handing on the faith necessarily includes handing on this hope of final transformation. And Ephesians reveals how catholic, how comprehensive, is Christian hope. For it embraces not only personal transformation, but communal and even cosmic transformation as well. In a culture where hope is often reduced to material expectation, the sheer scope of Christian hope can liberate imagination and energy on behalf of human dignity, social justice, and environmental stewardship—even as

we await the blessed fulfillment of hope: the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

“Discernment,” “newness,” “transformation”: these are but verbal markings, pointing haltingly to the Mystery: Christ in us, “the hope of glory” (Col 1:27). In the perennial task of handing on the faith nothing is more needed than that parents and pastors, catechists and communities rekindle in themselves the flame of the Christic imagination.\(^{14}\) In undertaking this joyful labor we can take as teachers and guides the anonymous artists who created the great San Clemente mosaic of the Cross as Tree of Life. It sustained them in an age of crisis and upheaval. It will surely sustain us.