Chapter 9

Communication in Handing on the Faith
TERRENCE W. TILLEY

Communication as Fundamental

Bernard Lonergan, S.J., devoted a mere fourteen pages to "communications," his eighth and last functional specialty, in his monumental Method in Theology. He gives each of the other seven specialties an average of over twenty-nine pages of text. Yet communications is devoted, Lonergan wrote, to "interdisciplinary relations with art, language, literature, and other religions, with the natural and the human sciences, with philosophy and history." But that is just the beginning. Communications also deals with "the transpositions that theological thought has to develop if religion is to retain its identity and yet at the same time find access into the minds and hearts of men [sic] of all cultures and classes." And communications also deals with "the adaptations needed to make full and proper use of the diverse media of communication that are available at any place and time."1 Quite a lot of work to be described in a mere fourteen pages (few of which, it must be admitted, were directly devoted to communications).

As theological work has increasingly become postmodern and post-liberal, the last has indeed become first. Theology in the university — now the primary academic home of theologians working in the United States — cannot but be interdisciplinary, inventive, and media-savvy. We can no longer do our research, interpretive, historical, dialectical, foundational, doctrinal, or systematic work except in interdisciplinary ways, especially in dialogue with history and the social sciences, and even with the so-called "hard sciences," that are becoming increasingly recognized as "soft." Since our primary teaching work is no longer to train future clerics, but to engage in general education courses for undergraduates and in specialized education for our majors and our predominantly lay graduate students in theology, religious education, and pastoral ministry, we must be inventive if we are to pass on the ancient creed in this new world. And in a culture dominated by information, we have not only to compete for visibility in a saturated universe by using new media from "Blackboard" to "PowerPoint" to "electronic reserves" to "web-based" or "web-augmented" pedagogy, but we also have to teach our students how to evaluate the information about the Christian tradition that they garner from a wide variety of electronic sources, most of which have an axe to grind and many of which are simply unreliable. Communications, as described by Lonergan, must be our first specialty, not our last.

However important it is for church folk in general and professional theologians to use media well, that is not my focus here. Communicating the faith is the most important task of the whole Christian community and each of its members. Theologians have role-specific responsibilities that affect communicating the faith, but as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a church to make a Christian. Or so I will attempt to show here.

Two Presuppositions

Human Nature as Socially Constituted

I make two distinctive presuppositions about context and content. With regard to context, in 1978, Walter Ong, S.J., wrote, "new technologies of print and electronics have affected not just the external world but the interior of man’s mind, the entire noetic economy in which he experiences himself and the world around him. In this sense, the technologies of writing, print and electronics are more operative within us than outside us."2 In short, media not only affect us, but also, in an ontological sense, effect us. If the emergence of an electronic culture shifts human consciousness as profoundly and pervasively as Marshall McLuhan, Ong, and others have said it does, then we are in some ways substantially different from our forebears who lived in oral or print cultures. This has profound importance for our understanding of how to hand on the faith.

Theologians seem to presume, unwarrantedly, that these differences are accidental, not substantial. But this underestimates the power of our
Diverse Communities Shape Our Identities Differently

However it may have been in other times, contemporary people do not derive their identity from one community or tradition. We are formed by and participate in distinct civic, national, social, familial, religious (and other) communities. We have access to an uncountable number of images, unimaginable amounts of information, and incredibly quick communication with far-distant people. Such participation and access contribute to our identities. We are compelled, as persons, to negotiate our identities because of such multiple belongings and such inundation with information and communication. We did not choose to have to negotiate our identities. This is not a role we take up, but part of the situation in which we live.

I also use the term “situation” advisedly. Theologians often work with a dualistic understanding of “the church and the world” or “religion and culture.” In doing so, it is easy to reify any of the terms in these dichotomies. This is a huge mistake. All participants in a religious tradition live not in a reified entity called “culture” or “the world,” but in the situation in which we are shaped by multiple practices and multiple traditions. Such divisions are not necessarily external to communities. Baptist theologian James W. McClendon Jr. once wrote that “the line between the church and the world passes right through each Christian heart.” This sort of insight has been part of the Christian tradition at least since St. Augustine. The division is as much internal to the participants and the community as it is external to either. Nor is the division simply “dual”; rather, it is multiple. Religious practitioners engage in a wide variety of practices and have a wide variety of allegiances. They are not only Jews (or Christians or Muslims), but may be socialists (or capitalists), politically liberal (or conservative), and so on. Because these divisions are multiple and both internal and external, rather than dualist and only external as the “church and world” or “religion and culture” rubrics suggest, the division is not necessarily between “us and them.” Of course, some religious rhetoric asserts otherwise, but this rhetoric is typically used in an effort to cement and ossify religious identity, often in a religious community that tends to understand itself as under siege from its enemies.

In Which Story Shall We Live?

What this means is that the Christian narrative that carries and is carried by the Christian community is not merely in external competition with other narratives, whether secular, consumerist, Americanist, or otherwise. Rather, these narratives are at battle in the hearts of those who practice Christianity as well as those who live out other traditions. Such battles, however, may be quite subtle. Sometimes people live in multiple worlds, or perhaps, take on multiple roles not fully compatible with each other. It is not that our lives are watertight compartments. Rather, it is because the traditions in which we live are partly compatible that we can live within each of them without noticing (or at least without being troubled by) the conflicts among them. McClendon’s invaluable discussion of the conflict of stories is followed by his own confession of his acceptance of the pattern of racism of the culture of his youth, a pattern his understanding of Christianity as given to him by his parents and community did not confront. Many of us accept both the Christian story and the story of white superiority. Many of us accept today the Prince of Peace as we go to fight wars to establish and preserve a new world order in which our country dominates. We have come to
see that we could not accept the principles of the racist tradition if we are Christian. Some of us see an incompatibility between being Christian and going to war on behalf of the state, but others would not find the principles of American patriotic and Christian religious traditions incompatible.

The point is that in our information-saturated era, we live in multiple traditions and live out multiple stories. The conflicts between them may not become evident until triggered by circumstances. And when that happens, the authority of multiple stories for us is at stake. We cannot simply appeal to one of them as authoritative. It is arbitrary to solve the problem of “multiple authorities” or “multiple traditions” by an appeal to one of them. While religious elites assume that our ultimate loyalty should be to God and the controlling story of our lives should be our religious story, in this culture, no story has automatic hegemony or presumed authority. We are forced to decide which story is our primary story, that is, in and by which story we shall live.

The Primacy of Practice

With regard to content, the fundamental issue is not dogma or doctrine. Among Christian theologians, the turn to “praxis” is crucial. But good practice (or praxis) requires wisdom, specifically practical wisdom. Theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., in my judgment, gets it exactly right when he put it this way: “Personally, I would call religious wisdom schools...Religions are not systems of truth constructs; they try to trace a way of life, albeit not without truth and insights.” British Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash drew out the implications of Schillebeeckx’s insight:

A “disciple” is a learner, apprenticed to a teacher, and, in educational contexts, we still speak of particular patterns of apprenticeship, areas of study, as “disciplines.” It is of paramount importance that Christians learn once again to understand Christianity to be a school whose pedagogy, as I have put it elsewhere, “has the twofold purpose...of weaning us from our idolatry and purifying our desire.”

This is, of course, an endless task, for nothing is more difficult than learning to worship, to have one’s heart set somewhere, while yet not worshiping any thing, any feature of the world, any idea, image, person, nation, theory, dream or fact, and nothing is more difficult than learning “not to stifle or suppress desire, but to release it from the chains which bind it in egotism’s nervous and oppressive grasp.”

If Christianity is such a school, then the paradigm in terms of which questions of authority and governance in the Church are best understood and tackled will be educational rather than political. To communicate a tradition is more to “train” someone “how” to believe than to “indoctrinate” someone in “what” to believe. Communicating doctrinal propositions is not communicating a faith tradition. One needs to communicate how to engage in the practices that give sense to those doctrines. To communicate a faith is to teach someone how to live in and live out a tradition. The doctrines can make sense only in the context of practicing the faith.

Learning How to Speak

Philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and their followers have taught us that language does not merely describe the world, but constitutes the kind of world in which we live. “When we learn a language we learn a world.” When we learn a language, we learn not merely how to describe things, but how to do things, how to live. Hence, the motto, “Don’t ask for meaning, ask for use!” suggests that we shouldn’t attempt to analyze what a word or sentence means, but rather we should begin by observing how people actually use language and what they use it for. The languages in which we learn to communicate, the ways in which we learn to use what our shared tongues give us, the patterns and images we discern and create in our communications all simultaneously give us a distinctive (but not isolated, private, or impenetrable) self in a common (but not determined, final, or unchangeable) world.

By “language” I mean to invoke the whole network of communication, verbal and nonverbal, words and gestures, images and sentences, in and through which we communicate (or fail to communicate) with each other. Poststructuralist thinkers have taught us the very complex ways in which language, institutions, communities, and communication are co-constituted. We are not constituted as social selves by words alone but by the use we make of words and images.
Thus, one way to understand how to be a participant in a tradition, in a “wisdom school,” is to understand how to learn a language. To become a Christian is to learn how to use Christian language. And that is not an abstract learning what to say, but a practical learning how to live and speak. To learn a language is to learn how to participate in a way of life that is constituted by a complex set of practices. And this learning shapes us. For example, when we learn how to say our prayers, we become pray-ers. Note that we cannot merely learn the words of a prayer; we must learn how to pray. The central issue is not communicating the words or propositions or doctrines, but showing someone how to practice the faith, including the practice of learning how to understand, articulate, and apply its “truth and insights.”

Faith, in this perspective, can be understood as a set of practices, even a complex virtue. Faith is not something we first believe, then practice. Rather, we practice the faith and in so doing come to understand it. God’s gracious initiative makes this possible. What this means for our work in communicating the faith is the subject of the main section of this paper.

**Communicating the Faith**

Communicating the faith is the complex practice of empowering people, disciples, to engage in the practices that constitute the faith tradition, including practices of participating in the sacraments and worship life of the church, and in distinctively Catholic social and moral practices that fit the local community in which we live, and of believing.

**“Learning How”**

One has to learn how to be a Christian. And this learning is crucial. Once upon a time, my university inaugurated a “learning-teaching” center to help students. I was befuddled by the nomenclature. “How can one have learning before teaching?” I asked. “Isn’t that like having a ‘catching-throwing’ center in baseball? Isn’t teaching prior to learning as throwing is prior to catching?” That this was part of the “new” “learning-centered paradigm” that had become an educational buzzword didn’t assuage my concerns. “What were we doing when we were teaching our students if not teaching them how to learn?” But, oddly enough, if one considers learning a practice, “learning” is prior. For I cannot teach you how to do something, be it perform a triple axel or ride a bike or sing bel canto arias or do calculus or write elegant prose. If and only if you are interested in learning how to ride a bicycle will you try to ride a bicycle. What I do is not to teach you how to ride. You learn that. What I do is to show you how it can be done. I can guide you, give you pointers, stop you from falling, and so on. But eventually I must let you go on your own. When you are more advanced, I may continue to give you pointers (and you may well return the favor), but in the end my role is not that of a teacher, but that of a coach. If we are to pass on the faith as a practice, then, we need to have people who are interested in pursuing the practice of living in and living out the tradition, and we need to coach, not teach, the faith.

Being a faithful Christian is not merely “knowing that” some doctrines are true and some commandments are right. Being a faithful Christian is not merely “knowing Jesus” or “knowing God.” Being a faithful Christian is a “know-how,” specifically, knowing how to be a disciple.

Communicating the faith is more like coaching someone than it is like dictating propositions to be memorized or handing over a book to be read. But if faith is a practice or set of practices, then portraying and communicating the faith is shown in performance more than said in dogma, doctrine, or rules. When it is said at all, it must be in a narrative form, not a propositional one, because one cannot lay out a practice or form of life except in a narrative form. The faith is communicated not in doctrine or rule, but in showing what it means to practice the faith. Narratives which show how to practice the faith can invite one to dwell in the faith or, in other words, to enter into the discourse practice of Catholic Christianity.

My colleague Brad Kallenberg has argued that members of a faith community must be “trainers rather than translators of the Gospel” into terms “anyone” can understand. He means by this that “communication of the Gospel is a function of the sort of community out of which we speak.” What gives sense to the words we use are our practices. It is not only that our practices give sense to our concepts, but also that the concepts we have and use grow out of our practices. If all we do is to translate our words for another, or simply tell them what we believe (especially using their linguistic presuppositions), then
we have evacuated them of sense as we have disconnected them from our practices. Kallenberg put it this way:

Our fluency in theological terms is...bound up with our activities. If a young child is asked who God is, the response is likely to include, “He’s the one we pray to before bed,” “we’re ’posed [sic] to confess our sins to God,” “We sing songs to him and visit him on Sunday,” “He’s the one we thank before we eat....” The richer this child’s engagement with these activities, the richer will be his or her understanding of God and of how to use the concept of “God” fluently. But catch the significance for evangelistic conversations: You or I may talk with someone who neither prays to God, confesses sin to God, thanks God, worships God, sings to God, nor testifies about God. How then can we possibly assume he or she has even the slightest inkling of who we’re talking about? For them, the word “god” is very nearly a null set.17

If we want to attract people to become interested in learning how to live as a Christian, we must practice the faith together well. Our liturgies must be joyous (not “good entertainment”). Our moral lives visibly satisfying (not fun, comfortable, easy, or scrupulous). Our communities must be places and gatherings of love, justice, and service (not obligatory meetings). Our gathering must be the gathering of a community whose discipleship is radiant. Our constant work must be that of reconciliation, not division. Our tradition can then be a school for recovering sinners.

Learning How to Live Out the Christian Tradition

The Christian tradition is carried and communicated in stories. The narratives show us what it means to live in and live out the faith. The Christian faith is constituted by stories of God with us and of us with God. When we learn how to live in them and live them out, we learn how to tell the stories rightly. The stories of the Christian tradition are stories of a God who creates, redeems, and sustains. Hence, they must take a trinitarian and christological form. But these are simultaneously narratives of discipleship, because from a practical perspective, discipleship (being a follower of Jesus) and Christology (understanding who it is that we follow) are intimately linked — one of the meanings of the Pauline saying that we are the body of Christ and members thereof.

The position developed here implies that “communications” is no mere functional specialization of theology. Rather, it is what the whole Christian community does and what the local Christian community does. Our communicative practice cannot be the sharing of doctrines and morals as if theologians were the primary communicators of the faith. Rather, our communicative praxis is and must be the attempt to shape ours and others’ lives and practices into the stories of being a disciple of Jesus. The praxis is not and cannot be the delivery of information but is always, wittingly or not, the shaping and reshaping of lives in communication, the involvement of people in wisdom communities, the initiation of folk into our discourse practices.

The Challenge of Consumerism

The challenge to our communicating the faith is made more difficult because we tend to resolve the fundamental strains in our identities as persons and communities by the tactics of consumerism.18 Our culture schools us to resolve our living in many communities, with many narratives, and disparate languages by the dominant tactic of consumerism: to choose among them and to acquire as many desirable goods as possible.

Because so many of us are rather materially wealthy, we have easy access to commodities of various sorts. We learn how to choose among commodities — which brand of car, soap, diaper, beans, or computer shall be ours? This learned skill is transferred into the realm of choosing our identities. In this context many narratives and traditions appeal to us as do many brands of commodities. We choose our identities as we pick soap brands: shall I choose to be an entrepreneur, a parent, a Christian, a spiritual person? Even our religious traditions have become commodified. Religions or spiritualities are now items for consumers’ choices. Marketers compete for market niche in the spirituality market. The church growth movement dominates evangelization. Megachurches provide an hour of Sunday entertainment and label it “worship” — while serving up Starbucks coffee. One pays one’s spiritual guru just as one pays the trainer at the local spa or health club. It does not take much of a jaundiced eye to note that the commodification of spiritual realities has reached epic proportions when spiritual corporate entities resort to litigation to preserve their intellectual property rights — so that no “unauthorized” (that is, “non-paying”) person can have the spirituality they sell.19
In the United States and much of Western Europe, many turn away from the demands of “institutional religion” to a “spirituality” available to them “on demand.” But as Catholic theologian Vincent Miller notes, “Spirituality as the emergent form of religious life is consonant with the workings of commodification.”20 We are consumers: our desires are shaped so as to be satisfied by goods we can buy in the spiritual marketplace, use, and discard when inconvenient. Our culture does not shape us to desire the Good that only can be “bought” by a life of commitment, that we give our lives to and for, and that we cannot discard without discarding our selves. How can modern folk live in fidelity to their religious traditions? Since our culture “trains” us to desire commodities, how can we learn how to desire the living and true God and life in God’s church? The key insight here is that our goods own us as much as we own them; and the only Good worth being owned by — being a slave to — is God, whose service is perfect freedom.

The faith lived in and lived out in the church of tomorrow will not look like and cannot look like the faith that was lived in and lived out in the church of yesteryear. We have far more live options for our self-actualization than our forebears had. What we can see on television, investigate on the Internet, and explore in our home towns has exploded over the last forty years. The variety that confronts us forces us to make choices. We cannot but try to cope with a cascade of possibilities. For a largely well-to-do, educated laity in a consumerist culture, everything is a choice. How can we live in and live out the Catholic faith tradition in this consumerist culture?

Two Ways of Living Out the Tradition

Some of us appear to “pick and choose” from the goods on offer from the Catholic Church. We are “discriminating” Catholics. Many of us choose not to buy into the magisterial teaching on the “pelvic issues” regarding specific sexual acts and reproductive choices while we may applaud the basic valuing of human sexuality as sacred and share the revulsion at promiscuity. Some of us do not follow the bishops on issues of social justice (especially the death penalty) or even sacramental practice. This is not because we want to be obstinate or reject the authority of the tradition or the hierarchy. Rather, we are invited into and live in so many narratives that we cannot but pick and choose among them. We choose the best we can find and then hope to fuse it into a coherent whole. The historian William Clebsch once pithily put it about modern humanity, “This new humanity makes history; the old was made by it. The same holds for religion.”21 We make up our religious lives. We are consumers choosing from all the attractive options. We try to make choices that bring us goods that will enable us to narrate a coherent life.

Our postmodern, consumerist era intensifies the religious style of modernity. Now we each and all make our own religion, but the ingredients from which we have to choose are far broader, the mixes available to us far wilder and spicier, and the results far more individualistic and private. We are constantly forced to choose. Because there are so many narratives and because they are so attractive, we cannot but choose elements from among them.

Others of us appear to choose to commit ourselves to one narrative wholeheartedly. This is the pattern of the “evangelical Catholics.” In effect, they try to give up the consumer mentality that permeates our culture. Rather than constantly remaking their choices, refashioning their religions, and renarrating their lives, they give their lives over to a tradition. Whether it is a movement like Opus Dei or the Legionaries of Christ, a religious order, or simply a commitment to a traditional devotional life and to the current authoritative hierarchical teaching in all (or most) of its aspects, evangelical Catholics give up choosing and accept the formation of their lives by a particular form of the tradition which has an authority and a community not of their own making — but of God’s.

The danger for evangelical Catholics is that they become rigidly fundamentalist or that they identify Catholicism with one strand of the tradition and wind up rejecting the whole tradition if they reject the pure evangelical strand. Such participants often seem to want to find certainty by clinging to a rock of tradition. But they are consumers who choose their own tradition as much as “discriminating” Catholics choose theirs.

However, in modernity and postmodernity, nothing is certain this side of the grave. The remedy for such fundamentalist tendencies is a commitment to seeking the truth; for if you seek the truth, you cannot know that you “have” the truth. It is not merely that there is always more to learn, but that the fundamental way of practicing the faith is not merely repetitive, but creative response to God who is revealed in and through everything (in various ways, of course). And others, even those wildly different from you, may have been given insights you do not have.
understanding popular and enduring institutions.

It is not institutions. (It

The danger for “discriminating” Catholics is that they become “cafeteria” Catholics, so flaccidly liberal that they wash out of the church without even realizing it. They are in danger of structuring their lives in ways that render the central and distinctive practices and beliefs of Catholicism minor constituents, perhaps “mere rituals,” in their lives. The remedy for “discriminating” Catholics is active participation in a flourishing community that acknowledges the ways consumer culture shapes us, but that also resists that culture by showing how a narrative of a life given to and for God through others can create a unified social self beyond the assembled shards that is the consumer culture’s substitute for a self. When they do pick and choose, they must not be, in the winsome image of my colleague Dennis Doyle, like people in a cafeteria loading up a tray, but like people who are given a tray that is so overloaded that they cannot keep it all and are unwilling to throw it away (acknowledging that some items — formally called dogma — cannot be offloaded), so they respond by selectively ignoring or eliminating certain “items” that overload them. Both “evangelical” and “discriminating” Catholics need support and coaching, not mere tolerance or, worse, the disdain captured in labels like “fundamentalist” or “cafeteria” Catholicism. Both patterns require practical support.

Three Kinds of Supporting Practice: Gathering, Sustaining, Evangelizing

Faith traditions are passed on through local communities embedded in enduring institutions. Participants are responsible as participants both for participating in the community, nurturing its life, and for supporting the institutions that enable the tradition to endure in multiple times and places. A faith tradition requires both a local community and an enduring institution. It is important to distinguish the institutional from the communal and traditional elements of religion. However, it is difficult to do so, for they are so complexly intertwined that they cannot be separated in practice, even if they can be distinguished in analysis.22 It is unfortunate that these distinctions are so often ignored in both popular and academic writing. Making such distinctions is crucial for understanding how to communicate the faith.

An institution is an enduring communal authority structure. These authority structures function to maintain a tradition over time. It is a commonplace that institutional patterns of authority and responsibility are enormously varied and complex. There are many institutional patterns creating social locations and particular roles in the community in which authority is exercised in multiple ways in passing on a tradition.

Those with institutional authority roles are not the primary agents in communicating the faith, but play supportive roles. Community members, especially those with specific roles in the local community, are the primary agents. Institutional authorities give the community members the tools to work with, to coach them in their practices, and to discern what constitutes good practice in the school of discipleship that is the local community. As the institution is the servant of the tradition and the gathered community, so institutional authorities, especially bishops and theologians, serve the bearers of the tradition, the participants in the community. In communicating the faith, they are servants (not “servant-leaders”) — both participants and coaches.

Enduring traditions have both institutional and communal elements. But the key point is this is not a merely nominal distinction. While institutions sustain the tradition through time so there is a tradition to be handed on, communities gather together in mutual support, prayer, worship, and reconciliation in a specific place and typically at a specific time and in so doing work to hand on the tradition. Institutions are fundamentally diachronic and translocal; communities are synchronic gatherings in particular locations.

Gathering

“Gathering” marks the communal aspect of enduring faith traditions. American Protestant theologian Edward Farley has helpfully used the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of the “community of the face” to define “community” in this sense as “a social group in which face-to-face relations are valued and pursued for their own sake. Face-to-face relations are part of the raison d’être of a village, therapy group, and some kinds of schools. Accordingly, in most instances, a small village is a community and a staff of researchers is not.”23 For Farley, Christian and Jewish communities have been prime examples of such gathered, face-to-face communities. “Face-to-face relations” are central and distinctive of communities, not institutions. (It is too soon to tell whether dispersed or virtual communities linked electronically fall more on the communal or institutional side of the distinction; can gatherings be “virtual”?)
Communities gather for a purpose. Christian communities gather for a number of purposes, such as worship, service, fellowship, and learning. The practices of this sort of “face-to-face” community shape people as members of that community. They become, to use Farley’s examples, villagers, patients and therapists, teachers and learners. Members of Christian communities become Christians in learning how to live in the Christian community. One learns how to be a Christian from other Christians who gather together for their distinctive shared practices.

Sustaining

Generally speaking, a person is raised or converted, and is initiated into a religious tradition in a local community. Communal leaders and familial authorities teach a person. A tradition is learned face-to-face, in community, because a tradition is not information or even beliefs, but a pattern of practice or set of practices. When learners are tested to see if they have understood the tradition, the testing may be done by designated authorities. But the coach primarily functions “face-to-face,” while the tester primarily functions as an officer empowered to decide if the learner has understood the tradition sufficiently to be a full member. Whether one is born into a religion or is converted into a religion, generally speaking, a gathered community shapes one’s religious life and one’s entry into the religion. As local, then, a religious community gathers face-to-face, and is constituted by interpersonal and social relationships.

Face-to-face religious communities form themselves when and where folk join in the practices of actualizing or realizing (making real) a religious tradition. The participants have the responsibility of creating and re-creating the gathered community. Many Christians identify a church as a place, typically one for worship. Yet a Christian can ask, “When is church?” A Jew might ask, “Do we have a minyan yet?” The gathering of a religious community is an event. The sense of church or worship or group meditation as an “event,” more common in evangelical than in Catholic traditions, means that the participants have a responsibility for making the event happen, for making it possible and desirable for the community to gather. With regard to Christianity, Avery Dulles described this responsibility:

The idea of discipleship, as we know it from the New Testament, makes ample room for both freedom and failure. Unlike the bare notion of community, discipleship brings out the demands of membership. The Church is not a club of like-minded individuals, but a venture in which all depend on the community and are obliged to make contributions to the community and its work. The possession of the Spirit is seen as the mark of a mature disciple and as a prerequisite of responsible, creative ministry.  

What Dulles writes of the Catholic Church applies to all forms of vibrant religious communities. The gathering of the community for worship and prayer, for instruction and guidance, and for restoration and healing of rifts does not happen automatically. Religious participants have the role-specific responsibility of gathering for the purposes of sustaining the community in the tradition. In the Western traditions, prayer and worship is a fundamental reason for gathering.

How we live as a community communicates the faith; it shows what sense our stories have and what our doctrines mean. If our moral lives are shoddy, our gatherings tepid or rote, our communities cantankerous and our work divisive, who would want such faith thus displayed? In short, the way we practice “communio” communicates the faith we actually have.

Evangelizing

But communities are not only sustained and gathered, they are also “sent out.” As with the patterns of sustaining and gathering in, the patterns for “going out” are as varied as are the traditions. For better and for worse, belonging to a religious tradition creates a division. In Christianity, this division has often been rendered in a dualistic way, as in the division between “church and world” noted above. The church, then, is to go out into the world. This can easily make “the world” as the realm of the enemy. This is not the sort of distinction contemporary Christianity can accept because, as noted above, divisions between church and world are not external to communities, but run through each Christian heart.

How can a religious community and its participants sort out these competing loyalties? Two patterns of practice respond to this situation. First, participants may witness to their tradition and to its primacy of place among their loyalties. Second, participants may engage the world
by service, social action, and other efforts at transforming the world in which they live into something close to the way their tradition says it should be.

**Witnessing**

Witness is diverse. It can be simply living out in disciplined fidelity the way of life that constitutes the tradition; our gatherings are a form of witness. Avery Dulles understands this as part of the sacramental life of the church: “Authentically sent by Christ, the disciples make him present anew as they live under the direction of his Spirit. Thanks to the sacramentality of the Church . . . the members of the Church experience his power as they are remade in his image.” Protestant theologian Stanley Hauerwas put it this way: “Witnesses must exist if Christians are to be intelligible to themselves and hopefully to those who are not Christians, just as the intelligibility of science depends in the end on the success of experiments.” What we do says who we are and attracts others to join us in our life and work. The lives of witnesses, then, exemplify what it means to live in and live out a tradition.

The root meaning of the Greek word we transliterate as “martyr” is “witness.” In the era of post-biblical expansion, the first distinctively Christian pattern of life was martyrdom. Inspired by the tales of the martyrdom of the Maccabees and of the stoning and vision of St. Stephen (Acts 7) and committed to their Lord and Savior as a martyr unjustly killed, some early Christians witnessed to the truth they found in the Christian tradition by their martyrdom (or willingness to accept martyrdom). Clebsch describes the period as one in which Christians sought “dual citizenship”: to be citizens of Rome and citizens of the true eternal city. In many instances, these dual commitments could be lived out with little or no conflict. However, when the commitments became irreconcilable, e.g., when the legal authorities demanded that the Christians turn over their Scriptures and/or worship Roman divinities, the martyrs witnessed unto death their commitment to the community and its God. Ultimately, their true home was heaven.

Witness, especially in the form of martyrdom, is not “sectarian” or “withdrawn from society.” Indeed, properly understood, the witness that leads to martyrdom must be a political act — for it is political authorities who kill the martyrs. To be a witness is always “transitive.” One witnesses to another about something. Sometimes one’s life is a witness to members of the community; other times one’s life testifies to others outside of the community. Sometimes one witnesses for the tradition to the community as well as to those outside by exemplifying how to live in and live out a tradition. To live a life of witness is not to withdraw from engagement with others outside the community, or from opponents within the community, but to engage them not with force nor with political action to change structures in the society, but with confronting them with someone who does actually place the tradition to which he or she witnesses at the determining center of his or her identity.

“What would you die for?” should have the same answer as “What do you live for?” If there is nothing that we would give our lives for, then is there anything we should give our lives to? Is our church a community worth dying for? If not, how can we communicate a faith worth living for?

One increasingly persuasive account of a crucial difference between Christian and American traditions illustrates this point of the importance of witness. The question is not whether to witness, but, as McClendon put it, given the situation, how to witness:

At least at one point, though, [the American master story] contrasts sharply with the biblical master story. . . . In the story Americans tell themselves, every great problem from independence to slavery to totalitarian threats is finally resolved by the *ultima ratio* of war. . . . Not even the best bearers of the American legend (Lincoln?) have escaped its inbuilt savagery. In surprising contrast, the biblical master story pivots upon a slave people who ran away “in urgent haste” (Deut. 16:3), upon a Savior who enters the capital city riding on a donkey and who is called the Prince of Peace; today it demands a living witness to that peace.27

To put it more harshly, the biblical tradition asks one to be willing to live and die as a witness to God’s love and justice; the American tradition asks one to be willing to kill to get our way in the world. Our lives, then, witness to and reveal which faith tradition we truly live in and live out.

Another form of witness, not only in the Christian tradition, has been the witness of asceticism, of people’s commitment to supplant the (evil) practices of the world in their own lives with the graced practices that
would allow them to focus on witness to God alone. Ascetics, however, are also not withdrawn. Many Christian ascetics lived in cities. But even when some early Christian monks withdrew from the city to the desert, people flocked to them. There they showed people how to overcome the passionate vices that threatened to distort their love of God: "piggishness, lechery, greed, depression, hatred, inability to care, bragging, and egotism."28 They served as exorcists, as arbitrators of disputes over tithes, water rights and property rights, and as physicians for ailments such as infertility.29

Martyrs and monks show that what is good enough to live for is good enough to die for; if one would not die for what one lives for, whatever that might be, one has failed to live one's life as one ought. Only what is great enough to die for is great enough to live for. This does not mean eschewing enjoyment or pleasure, but of unshackling one's desires from attachment to things so that one is freed to desire God. Ascetics do not snuff out desire, but channel their desire to the divine. The ascetics' witness is not a withdrawal, but precisely a witness to the rest of the members of their community and to others who sought to understand what they were doing, a witness about the practices of living in God's love, of living in the tradition. While all might not be as spiritually athletic as the ascetics, they can and should witness to one another concerning how to order one's desires to what one really desires.

Witness is not sectarian; it is one way for engaging the world. Sometimes a gathered community or sacramental church can be "inward-looking." Sometimes religious communities can withdraw, insofar as it is possible, from communication with those outside the camp. But these are not so much witness as failures to witness to others about one's ultimate commitments. The question is not whether to witness, but how to witness, given the circumstances. The question is how to witness today.

There are many who would refuse the stark opposition here portrayed. They might recognize the ultimate differences in the traditions and the lives they inspire and shape. But some would find that "witness" is not the right "tactic." They would argue that the point is not merely to witness to the world, but to engage it in order to change it and to bring it closer to the way God would want it. These folk would work to transform the world.

Transforming

Often, "witness" slides over into "transformation." The dichotomy between charity and justice popular in some intra-Christian polemics is too easy. Transformation on a small or individual level may be called charity, but it is work for justice nonetheless. Transformation on a social or structural level may be called justice, but it is intimately connected with charity nonetheless. Many religious groups operate shelters for the poor. This is typically identified as charity. This witness to hospitality comes closer to work for justice in some of the activities of the Catholic Worker movement. Dorothy Day, for example, did not merely extend hospitality, but also demonstrated against war and publicly supported striking unions in both New York and California. Such witness suggests that witness and charity are not separable from justice and transformation, but distinctive ways to seek to bring the vision and the reality of the community to those who will benefit from such work. Whether the practice is bishops' seeking to influence politicians on issues of social justice, protesters' demonstrating against human rights abuses, volunteers' giving a year of their lives to enable impoverished people to improve their plight, or parishes' founding development corporations to rehabilitate properties in degenerating inner-city neighborhoods, those engaging in these practices work to transform the world in which they live as an expression of their Christian commitments.

Social activism is distinct from, but not separable from, witness. Indeed, it is best understood as an activist form of witness. Witness of "communio" exposes others to what the good life can and should be and provides a model for the community to live in and live out. Activism seeks to transform the social structures that can deform the people of a society and make it practically impossible for them to be able to live in and live out the way of life the community valorizes. Nonetheless, some patterns of witness are "activist," and some active interventions clearly "witness" to what it means to live in and live out a tradition. Each of these, at their best, also shows that there is something quite worthwhile beyond consumer goods and a selfless whole self; beyond the postmodern jangle of the fractured self dominated by desires. Each of these provides patterns for those often elusive goals: of a religious life that integrates both mystical and political and of a theology that can be adequate to help sustain that form of life.
Conclusion

We communicate the faith by who we are and in what we do. This is a descriptive claim. Whatever our faith, whatever story or stories structure our lives we show what it is by our being and doing. Our practices give sense to our claims. Again, this is not a normative, but a descriptive claim. You will see what we mean by God when you see how we deal with God.

I have suggested that there are two emergent ways of being Catholic today, “evangelical” and “discriminating.” Again, this is a descriptive claim. Both ways of being Catholic are legitimate, not because they are both “good” or “better” than other ways of being Catholic. It is just that they are inevitable patterns made possible by our late-capitalist, pluralist, affluent, consumerist, and commodified culture; our very nature as humans has been redesigned in this culture, and so have our ways of being religious. The normative, theological point is not to disown either pattern, but to help shape the practices of both so that the patterns of practice do not become so distorted as to be real degenerations of the practice of faith.

What we need to do, then, is to be a community that attracts people who then want to reach the goals we strive for. That is the only way that “coaching in the faith” becomes possible. The members of a community coach each other in how to live out the faith. Faith is communicated in this (dialectical, not sequential) two-step process of desire (to live out the faith) and training (in living out the faith). Again, I take this to be a descriptive, not a normative claim.

Elites in the community then, such as bishops and theologians, are not fundamentally governors, but servants who are coaches’ coaches—scholars and teachers. We are to discover, understand, and creatively transform (when necessary) the tradition we live in and live out using those skills in which we have been specially trained. As teachers, we have an important role—but even in academia, we may function best if we understand our teaching roles as coaches, not transmitters or translators. And in so doing, we have to be interdisciplinary, inventive, and media-savvy as Lonergan suggests; these are the patterns of academic practice that must be ours. But the main task of handing on the faith is the whole community’s task, carried out as members of the community gather together to sustain each other, go out and witness to, and even work to transform (when appropriate) the world in the name of Jesus, the Christ. How we witness—perhaps not as martyrs or monks, but perhaps as “evangelical” or “discriminating” Catholics—shows what it means to be women and men whose fractured lives are made whole by the grace of being “owned” by the one “Possession” worthy to possess us in a consumerist society. Such witness attracts or repels those to whom we wish to communicate the good news.

In sum, I take it to be a descriptive claim that it takes a good church to make a Christian, that is, to communicate how to be a good Christian both by attracting folk to join the community and by mutually coaching those in the community in the ways of gracious response to Grace. And thus, communication is not the last, but the first and foremost functional specialization not merely for theologians, but for all Christians.