ESSAY

Where Is Peter

A reflection on Tradition, obedience, and wounded unity

ELIAS ANDRADE · JULY 2, 2026 · 11 MIN READ

Yesterday, July 1st, I received with sorrow the news of the consecration of four new bishops by the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Pius X, carried out without a pontifical mandate and despite the public appeal of Pope Leo XIV, who days earlier had pleaded, with the meekness proper to Peter: Do not do this. Let us try to live the communion of the Church. I do not write these lines moved by the satisfaction of pointing out errors — God spare me such wretchedness —, but by the grief of seeing wounded once more that unity for which Christ himself prayed on the eve of his Passion: that they may all be one (Jn 17:21).

I must begin with a confession. I have always held a deep admiration for the richness of the Church's Tradition. For a time I walked in traditionalist circles, and I understand from within — not as a stranger — the sincere desire to guard the treasure received from our fathers in the faith. There I met people of rare piety, in love with Christ, for whom the beauty of the liturgy and the rigor of doctrine were not poses, but love. I also understand the unease before the confusions and ambiguities that, at certain moments of the post-conciliar period, wounded many souls. None of this is contemptible; much of it is holy. It is not the unease that is in question. It is the remedy.

For experience, and later study, taught me a truth that today seems evident to me: there is no true Tradition without communion with the Successor of Peter. And this is not my opinion. When, in 1988, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre consecrated four bishops against the express will of the Pope, Saint John Paul II diagnosed the root of that act with a precision that crosses the decades: in it, he wrote in Ecclesia Dei, an incomplete and contradictory notion of Tradition was manifested — incomplete, above all, because it did not sufficiently take into account the living character of Tradition. Thirty-eight years later, the same two bishops of that act — the only ones still living — laid their hands upon new candidates, in the same field, on the same date. History did not repeat itself by chance. It repeated itself because the error about the nature of Tradition remained the same.

What, then, is Tradition? Here a distinction is needed that dissolves almost all the confusion. The Catechism teaches (§ 83) the difference between apostolic Tradition — the deposit of

faith entrusted by Christ to the Apostles, which remains immutable — and the theological, disciplinary, liturgical, and devotional traditions that were born in time and which the Church, in the light of the greater Tradition, may conserve, deepen, or modify. To confuse a tradition with Tradition — to take a historical form, however venerable, for the very substance of the faith — is the error that disguises itself as fidelity. Tradition is not what each generation decides to conserve according to its taste. It is what Christ entrusted to the Apostles, what the Apostles entrusted to their successors, and what remains guarded, across the centuries, in communion with the Successor of Peter.

The Second Vatican Council, in Dei Verbum (§ 8), says that this Tradition progresses in the Church, and cites a luminous phrase of Saint Gregory the Great: the divine words grow with the one who reads them. The Church, therefore, does not live by ruptures, but — in the happy expression of Benedict XVI — by a hermeneutic of reform, of renewal in continuity. Tradition is not a museum; it is a living organism. And that which is alive remains the same, said Cardinal Newman, precisely because it keeps growing: to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.

I recall, to make this palpable, a simple image.

There are three kinds of gardener before a tree.

The tree changes with the seasons. The leaves grow old, fall, give way to others. Its identity, however, remains intact: the root is the same, the trunk is the same, the sap is the same. So it is with the Church. For two thousand years, languages, cultures, legitimate forms of evangelization and of liturgical expression, pastoral methods and historical challenges have changed — and the deposit entrusted by the Apostles has remained unaltered. In philosophical language: the accidents change; the substance remains. This is how Saint Thomas explained the very development of the articles of faith: the revealed truth is always the same, but was known with growing explicitness over time.

The first gardener believes he preserves the tree by gluing the dry leaves back onto the branches. He loves one season so much that he prevents the tree from living. It is the temptation to confuse Tradition with immobility, as if the Holy Spirit had ceased to guide the Church after a certain moment in history. It is to take the accident for the substance.

The second gardener represents the opposite extreme. Seeing the leaves fall, he concludes that the whole tree has failed and must be remade according to the spirit of the age. It is the temptation that appears when certain currents cease to announce salvation in Christ in order to reduce the mission of the Church to merely political categories — something that Ratzinger

himself, as guardian of doctrine, distinguished with care, condemning the use of ideological keys of reading without ever denying the duty to love the poor concretely. It is the temptation, deeper still, that Benedict XVI called the dictatorship of relativism: when an objective truth is no longer recognized, and Revelation, instead of judging the world, comes to be judged by it. It is to lose the substance in the flux of the accidents.

That same spirit of rupture marked dramatic moments of history. I think of Luther. Benedict XVI, in an Augustinian convent in Erfurt, had the courage and the charity to recognize the authentic religious question that tormented that monk — how to find a merciful God? I do not whitewash, however, the outcome: before real problems, the rupture of communion was chosen instead of perseverance in unity, and the remedy proved, with time, more harrowing than the disease. A true question does not justify an answer that tears the tunic of Christ.

But there is a third gardener. He loves the tree, and not merely one of its seasons. He loves the root, the trunk, the fruits — and accepts even the winter, because he knows that God continues to lead the life of the tree even when everything seems different. He is not a moderate who splits the difference between two errors; virtue is never mediocrity. He loves the living whole, and therefore knows how to distinguish the means from the end. Liturgical and disciplinary forms are precious means, ordered to an end: union with Christ and the salvation of souls. To absolutize the means, to the point of sacrificing communion for it, is to invert the order of things — it is to use the gift against the Giver.

I think of Mary Magdalene before the tomb (Jn 20). She wept because she believed she had lost Jesus. And yet Christ was there, before her, more alive than ever; he only revealed himself in a way she did not yet know how to recognize. How often do we too run the risk of seeking the Lord only in the forms to which we have grown accustomed, forgetting that He remains alive and leads his Church?

I think, above all, of Francis of Assisi. His desire was to reform the Church. When he met resistance, he did not found a parallel community nor place himself above the authority constituted by Christ. He obeyed. He returned. He waited. He sought and obtained the confirmation of his mission from the Pope — and from that obedience was born one of the greatest spiritual renewals in history. Here one must be exact, for the decisive argument is settled at this point. Saint Thomas teaches that obedience is a great virtue, but that it has a clear limit: one must not obey a superior in what is against God. Someone will say, then: this is our case. But it is not. The Pope commands no sin. He did not declare the ancient liturgy illegitimate; the dispute, as a cardinal whom no one would accuse of leniency observed with clarity, is not about the Mass, but about authority. One is not faced with a sinful command to be resisted. What is refused

is not an imposed error — it is communion itself. And for this there is no state of necessity that avails: the Apostolic See itself has affirmed, after 1988, that no allegation of necessity authorizes consecrating bishops against the express will of the Roman Pontiff. The episcopate is the fullness of Orders within the apostolic college, and this college, by divine right, exists always with Peter and under Peter (Lumen Gentium, 22). To touch it against the will of Peter is to wound the very constitution that Christ gave to his Church — however noble the intention.

This is why I cannot see in that act a victory of Tradition. I see a wound in communion. And here I turn to the most instructive of analogies, the one a cardinal expressly evoked in these days: the ancient Donatist schism. The Donatists possessed valid sacraments. Saint Augustine did not deny it. But he taught, against them, that validity separated from unity and charity becomes sterile — that one can have the true form of the sacrament and yet remain outside the love that makes the Church be the Church. Saint Thomas states the distinction precisely: schism is a sin against charity, that is, against unity, distinct from heresy, which is against faith. In this lies the most silent tragedy: one can profess the faith rightly and, at the same time, gravely wound communion. The orthodoxy of words does not heal the rupture of the bond.

I must, however, be just, and justice asks for a distinction that charity imposes. The grave canonical consequences fall, above all, upon those who consecrated and upon those who were consecrated. Not upon the many faithful who, drawn by the beauty of the rite and at times wounded by real experiences, attend those chapels without any intention of breaking with the Pope. Let it be recalled that, in 2009, Benedict XVI lifted the excommunications of 1988, and that Pope Francis recognized the validity of the confessions and marriages celebrated by those priests. The situation of so many simple souls is ambiguous and painful, and I do not dare to judge them. I pray for them, and with them.

And I pray also for myself, because the temptation of which I speak here is not only that of others. Our Lord warned about the blind who lead the blind, and called whitewashed tombs those whose religious appearance concealed a heart distant from God. It would be easy, and unjust, to hurl those words against a group. I prefer to turn them against the mirror. The beauty of the liturgy, exterior modesty, theological knowledge are precious gifts — but they become sterile, in any of us, when they cease to be sustained by humility and degenerate into constant suspicion, spiritual pride, and systematic distrust of the Church. When the defense of tradition no longer produces peace, meekness, and communion, something essential of the Gospel has been lost — and this holds for the traditionalist and for the progressive, for you and for me.

Perhaps the greatest temptation of our time is to imagine that it falls to us to save the Church. It does not. And here I touch the point that, curiously, is today the most contested by those of whom I speak. The Church is not a work of ours, which we ought to rescue with our own strength, even if it were against Peter. We did not build her: we received her. She precedes us, as the body precedes the member, as the mother precedes the child. It is not we who sustain the Church; it is Christ who sustains her, and it is the Church who begets us to the faith, and not the contrary. To save her against Peter would be, in the end, to lose exactly what one wished to save — for communion with Peter is not an accessory of the Church, but part of her very form. To us it falls only to remain in her with fidelity, humility, and hope. It is the hope of which Benedict XVI speaks: the one that rests not on our capacity to fix everything, but on the Lord who does not abandon his bride.

I pray, therefore, that God may grant conversion to those who have withdrawn from full communion, prudence and fatherhood to the Shepherds, and humility to all of us — that we may never confuse our preferences, whether traditional or progressive, with the will of God.

At the end of life, we will not be judged by the liturgical form we preferred, nor by the ecclesial current to which we belonged. We will be judged by the fidelity with which we remained united to Christ, to his Church, and to the chair of Peter.

> Ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia.

Elias Sales de Freitas — July 2, 2026