

CONTINUITY AND CREATIVITY

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When I was invited to deliver this commencement address, I did not have much difficulty deciding that I should say something about continuity, what the Greek Fathers call [...]for the relation between this [...] and the development of doctrine or (to alliterate in English alone rather than in English and Greek) between continuity and creativity is the central theme of my own scholarly work, and it is also the persistent issue in Orthodox theology. Having decided on the topic, I then was obliged, after the fashion of at least some preachers, to find a text -- or perhaps pretext. Since I was coming to an Orthodox seminary, I thought first of a favorite passage from St. John of Damascus, in which he says: "Like a bee, I shall gather all that conforms to the truth... I am not offering you my own conclusions, but those which were laboriously arrived at by the most eminent theologians, while I have merely collected them and summarized them, as far as was possible, into one treatise." I once copied this passage in Greek as the inscription of a book of mine that I sent to Father John Meyendorff, to which he responded: "Better for a theologian to be a bee than a butterfly!"

But with a name like Jaroslav, I then thought that it might be more appropriate to select my text from some aspect of Slav culture. May 26 is the birthday of Pushkin, and, after all, Dostoevsky's famous lecture of June 8, 1880, on Pushkin represents the secular (and yet not really very secular!) counterpart of this very issue of continuity and creativity. Further reflection on proper names, however, led me to recall that in this haven of *Pravoslavie* there are faculty members with such surnames as Schmemmann, Meyendorff, and Erickson, and I realized that I would have to turn to the Teutonic literary tradition for the epigraph of my address. And, of course, I found it where I always look first in German literature for a winged word, in Goethe's *Faust*, in the familiar lines:

Was du ererbt von deinen Vatern hast,
Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen.

Although the play on the words "erben" and "erwerben" cannot be satisfactorily reproduced, the sense can be paraphrased something like this: "What you have received as a heritage from your fathers, you must earn if you are really to possess it." This is set into contrast with the earlier words of the pedantic *famulus*, Wagner, who is apparently, as they say nowadays, "into history," and expresses his pleasure at seeing

...wie vor uns ein weiser Mann gedacht
Und wie wirs dann zuletzt so herrlich weit
gebracht.

("How even before our times a wise man had some ideas, and how now at last we have gloriously brought these ideas so far along.") These two passages represent two contrasting views of continuity and creativity, and of these views I want to speak this afternoon.

I

The words of the *famulus* Wagner are a brief statement of the creed of historicism, which was beginning to dominate the thought, and especially the academic scholarship, of the West when Goethe was writing his *Faust*. Indeed, he ridiculed it as one who in many ways shared it. But for our purposes the *credo* provides a convenient foil, for it shows how a false conception of continuity leads to a distorted notion of creativity, how our ability to see the present clearly depends on our sharpening our perspective on the past.

And that is precisely Wagner's problem. He begins his disquisition of "the uses of history" with what is to him, I am sure, the generous concession that "even before our times a wise man had some ideas." The condescension that speaks through these words is at worst in its very effort to acknowledge that someone in the past could conceivably have said something sensible. But the determination of what in the past may have something to tell us is based on what we ourselves have said and done. It is the search for the ancestry of our own ideas and systems. Now even this search leads to some surprises. Just when someone has invented a new system or created a new theology or (if you like) launched a new heresy, historical research will show that, at least in nuce, the idea has been tried before and has failed. For example, the ghosts of Gnostics seem to have returned in the past few decades to haunt the children of our modern age. But more serious is the distortion of the past that comes when we put to it only our present-day questions, instead of attempting to discover its questions - questions that the past addresses to us and to our time. To

find it remarkable that a Plato or a Gregory Nazianzenus had a first-class intellect is to have misread history as no more than a prelude to this existential moment. As one can travel to other lands and be irritated that these foreigners do not speak English or, alternately, be amazed that these little children can chatter in a foreign tongue, so one can travel through time as well as through space without ever letting the relation between subject and object be reversed. Then the search for continuity becomes an intellectual hobby or is seen almost as an embarrassment.

With the acceptance of an out-of-focus picture of the past there inevitably comes an exaggerated interpretation of the present: "And how now at last we have gloriously brought these ideas so far along." As Faust says sarcastically in reply, "Yes, indeed, all the way to the very stars - ja, bis an die Sterne weit!" Ironically, this tendency to make the present an absolute by which the past is judged has often been the occupational disease of historians, whose task it is (or ought to be) to try to make the past live. For example, one of the foremost historians of Christian doctrine in the nineteenth century, Ferdinand Christian Baur, published in 1838 a book on the history of the doctrine of reconciliation; the three periods of that history were said to be: the fifteen centuries from the very beginnings of the Church until the Reformation, the three centuries from the Reformation to the death of Immanuel Kant (in 1804), and the three decades from the death of Kant to the publication of the book. So solemn a claim about one's own point in history is, if anything, even more silly than the view of the rest of history on which it relies. Just think of the fads and fancies in the name of which the Christian tradition has been asked to surrender its central convictions! During the Enlightenment and through the nineteenth century, the gospel was attacked as gloomy and pessimistic, with all its talk about sin and corruption, which had now been transcended by modern progress. In the twentieth century, on the other hand, the Christian message seems to be too good to be true, promising as it does hope and eternal life and the transformation of human nature into divinity. The objections to Christianity have come a full one-hundred-eighty degrees, and those who have, in the name of a particular contemporary theology, called the past to judgment have found themselves superseded and indeed relegated to that very past which they had treated so haughtily. And meanwhile they have been deprived of the ability to look at their own "syllable of recorded time" with the detachment and understanding that comes from a cultivation of the tradition.

When past and present are related to each other as they are in Wagner's formula, both continuity and creativity suffer. The Church does not define itself on the basis of its continuity through history, but on the basis of its capacity to respond to current events. This preoccupation with the contemporary - and therefore with the temporary - is identified by some modern theologians as the very soul of creativity. But when history is seen as a series of existential moments strung together only by their chronological sequence, the response to current events is obliged to improvise as though no one had ever had to respond to events before. Now whatever such improvisation may do to the life of man and of nations, in the life of the Christian Church it would mean that "creativity" and "relevance" can be achieved only by the surrender of Christian identity. We are told in the Gospel (Mark 9:41) that whoever shall give a cup of water to drink in the name of Christ will be blessed. The social gospel of the twentieth century has mounted massive programs to give the cup of cold water; but because of its loss of continuity it has been unable to specify how this is "in the name of Christ," until there is little if any discernible difference between the social and political action of churchmen and that of their secular (usually liberal) colleagues. Eventually someone is bound to conclude that there is no point in reciting the name of Christ in the first place, since it does not make the water any colder or more refreshing, and the net result is secularization - which some "creative" theologians are now prepared to hail as the wave of the future. The flower has been cut off from its roots, and now it is beginning to fade.

II

Dr. Faustus, you may recall, had studied, "Philosophie, Juristerei und Medizin, und leider auch Theologie," and though he had lost his faith in the process (you may remember his words on Easter morning, "Die Botschaft hor ich wohl, allein mir fehlt der Glaube"), he had not completely lost his mind. The interpretation of "continuity and creativity" expressed in his formula, "What you have received as a heritage from your fathers, you must earn if you are really to possess it," is by no means confined to faith and to theology, but pertains to the arts, to language, and to American constitutional government. Therefore Faust, the prototype of the modern pagan, may serve us the way Aratus served St. Paul on the Areopagus with the words: "for we are also his offspring" (Acts 17:28).

The fundamental presupposition of this formula is that there truly is an inheritance that we have received from our fathers, that it is "given" both in the sense of being objectively there whether we accept it or not and in the sense of being a gift that has come not *from* us but *to* us. Applied to the life and faith of the Church, this means that no generation ever begins *de novo* in a real sense, not even the apostolic generation did, for it affirmed, throughout the New Testament and the early preaching of the message, its continuity with the people of Israel. When the Church is asked to "give an answer" (1 Pet. 3:15), that answer takes its beginning from the faith of the 318 Fathers of the Council of Nicea. When the Church gathers for worship and prayer, one of the central convictions to which it gives voice is its gratitude for the inheritance which it shares with all those, past and present,

who adore the Blessed and Undivided Trinity. There have been times when people turned to the Church for political and social guidance, but now they can get that elsewhere; they found the highest expression of music and art in the Church, but no one needs the Church for that any more; they used the Church as a place to meet friends and to gather with their families, but now there are more such places than most people and most families want. What is left for the Church? Why, what was really the "one thing needful" all along, the tradition of faith and doctrine, of worship and discipline. In the Church and only in the Church the twentieth century can find this tradition, but it can find it in the Church only- if the Church preserves and cultivates what it has inherited from the Fathers.

But the Church is not a museum or a mausoleum, and its inherited tradition must not be permitted to become only the artifact of some glorious past. In an epigram with which I have come to be identified, tradition is the living faith of the dead and traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. We who cherish the inheritance of the Fathers are constantly tempted to clutch it to our bosoms, to polish it with lapidary skill, or to embalm it for preservation against the ravages of time--as though a Christian basilica were some sort of pyramid with an onion dome on top!

For what we have received as a heritage from our Fathers, we must earn if we are really to possess it. Each generation of the Church has had to learn this lesson anew. Continuity is not the same as archaism, and over and over the Church has reacted to the challenges of heresy and unbelief by stating its historic faith and restating it, and, as Maximus Confessor says, "giving it an exegesis and working out its implications" (PG 91:260). It, in response to Christological heresy or to attacks upon the holy icons, it was appropriate for the Fathers to recite the Nicene Creed with an extended paraphrase that spoke to these false teachings, then it remains appropriate for us also to locate ourselves within the continuity of the faith of our Fathers and, in the name of that continuity, to speak the Word of God to the world of today. For what a world intoxicated with each fleeting moment needs to sober it up is the message of the apostolic faith, but we are not simply pipes and conduits through which that message passes, but living, responsive, and, yes, creative participants in its ongoing life and history.

It is into that ongoing life and history that we were baptized, and into its preservation, transmission, and communication that you, as priests of the Church, are to be sent. Your priestly ministry will be the daily reenactment of the story of salvation, the daily repossession of the heritage. It will become a truly creative reenactment and repossession not by cutting itself off from dogma and liturgy and discipline, but by having the courage to assert what the faith

means as well as what it *has meant*. Those of us who have had the privilege of growing up in immigrant communities know the problems, but also the gratifications, of being bilingual: sometimes it is language A that best expresses what we want to say, and at other times it is language B, but one of our tasks was always to foster communication between those who, unlike ourselves, were so unfortunate as to be able to speak only one language. The priesthood

of the Church is, in a sense, called to be bilingual, speaking the language of the tradition and maintaining continuity with it, but then creatively bridging the gap of communication with those who speak only "modernese." This is a risky enterprise. It is much easier to live in the past or, on the other hand to capitulate to modernity and, as the saying goes, to "let bygones be bygones."

It is to neither of these that we have been called, but to discipleship and to faithfulness and to continuity with the faithful disciples of the Church in all ages. Grounded in that continuity and making that tradition our own, we are set free to speak and to work as those who, through the Incarnation, have been privileged to share in the very nature of God the Creator and in His freedom.

The charter of this continuity and of this creativity is the summons and the promise of Our Lord Himself: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31.32).