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# BLONDEL AND A LIVING TRADITION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION

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*This paper suggests that an appreciation and application of the notion of Maurice Blondel's "living tradition" would help in addressing some concerns about Catholic education. Blondel's key insights and his contributions to Catholic thinking and a living tradition are discussed along with the educational implications for Catholic schools.*

Neil Postman (1996) has recently advocated a return to and a re-expression of the "metaphysical" rather than the "engineering" aspects of education, that is, answers to the question "why?" as having priority over "how?" (p. 3). He argues that education flourishes best when it is sustained by an overarching narrative, a story that "tells of origins and envisions a future, a story that constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority, and, above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose" (Postman, 1996, pp. 5-6). This kind of narrative must have "sufficient credibility, complexity, and symbolic power" to enable those who rely on it to organize their lives around it (Postman, 1996, p. 6). Such a story will "give point to our labours, exalt our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to our future" (Postman, 1996, p. 7). The kind of story that Postman says is necessary will be "foundational," that is, it will provide key concepts, goals, metaphors, and values for the conduct of education, but it is not to be held uncritically, nor is it unrevisable; indeed, the best of stories will have the capacity to cope with criticism, revision, and constant adaptation to changing circumstances.

It can justifiably be claimed that Catholic education has just such a "story." It operates out of a substantive, comprehensive, and integrated

worldview. In communicating that worldview to surrounding cultures, the Catholic Church has demonstrated the capacity, without denying the past or its central principles, to adapt and to develop its own self-understanding. Both the Catholic worldview and its story about education are highly contestable in our society. Even within its own terms, however, Catholic education runs the risk of deifying the past, exalting authority, neglecting the critical faculties of pupils, and rendering them passive recipients rather than active collaborators in their own learning. One way of preventing this risk from being realized is for Catholic educators to draw out more fully the implications of the notion of "living tradition." A thoroughgoing appreciation of this notion and an engagement with its implications for education would simultaneously meet at least some of the educational objections to the existence of separate Catholic schools (for example, those relating to the passivity of learners and the danger of indoctrination) and minimize the possibility that what is communicated is a tradition that is frozen or ossified, one which, to use the language of faith, thereby fails to advert to the continuing and creative operation of the Holy Spirit in believers. At the same time a deeper appreciation and appropriation of living tradition would give scope for the operation of that "metaphysical" narrative asked for by Postman as a necessary foundation for any healthy form of education.

### **BLONDEL ON "LIVING TRADITION"**

Probably no one has contributed more importantly and effectively to the notion of living tradition in the Catholic Church than the French philosopher Maurice Blondel (1861-1949). He pointed the way to a notion of tradition which serves not only to conserve but also to discover. It is possible to detect his influence on the thinking of key 20th-century Catholic theologians and thereby to trace his imprint on the Second Vatican Council, an imprint which was indirect since it passed through the intermediary work of others. Drawing upon a range of Blondel's work, I shall first summarize his key insights and illustrate his contributions to Catholic thinking on the notion of living tradition and then briefly indicate some of the educational implications which follow.

The essay which provides several of Blondel's seminal ideas on living tradition is "History and Dogma." This originated in a number of articles which appeared in 1904 as a contribution to the controversy about the role of historical criticism in the Church's life. Blondel claimed to point a way forward which both avoided the pitfalls of those who fixed the Church in a restricting and narrow immobilism, and also escaped the dangers stemming from those who yielded too much to contemporary scholarship. Blondel's view might be summarized in the following way. God's last word has not been spoken. Christ is still communicating as he promised he would: "I still

have many things to say to you but they would be too much for you now. But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will lead you to the complete truth" (John 16:12). But truth cannot be contained in a purely intellectual manner, for such an approach would bypass those who find this difficult. Furthermore, the truth that comes from God lies always beyond mere human formulations and cannot be captured in them. "There can be no given moment of history when the mind of man has exhausted the mind of God" (Blondel, 1956, p. 213).

The only way we can enjoy the truth is by drawing upon the collective experience derived from faithful action by the Church's members. Tradition makes it possible for something to pass from the implicitly lived to the explicitly known (Blondel, 1956). In the overall lifestyle of the Church, more riches are carried than can be unpacked and passed into currency at any one particular epoch of its existence. Tradition is a "living synthesis of all the speculative and ascetic, historic and theological forces...It embraces the data of history, the efforts of reason, and the experiences of faithful action" (Blondel, 1964, p. 215). In this synthesis we all have a contribution to make, for tradition has to do with the whole body of the Church, not just any particular privileged section of it. "Without the Church, the faithful could not detect the true hand of God in the Bible and souls; but, unless each believer brought his little contribution to the common life, the organism would not be fully alive and spiritual" (Blondel, 1964, p. 277).

Blondel feared that some scholars had exaggerated the power of historical investigation, while other scholars had overrated the efficacy of philosophical reasoning. In accessing the truth about God's ways and purposes, these two forms of human inquiry are inadequate. Despite the need for both, something more is required: "the mediation of collective life and the slow progressive labour of the Christian tradition" (Blondel, 1964, p. 269). There is a certain light shed by the orderly and repeated performances of Christian practices: "faithful action is the Ark of the Covenant where the confidences of God are found, the Tabernacle where he perpetuates his presence and his teaching" (Blondel, 1964, pp. 277, 279).

There is, for Blondel, a kind of meaning and verification carried in our action which goes beyond the competence of our powers of reasoning. As he says, "A man can carry out completely what he cannot entirely understand, and in doing it he keeps alive within him the consciousness of a reality which is still half hidden from him. To 'keep' the word of God means in the first place to do it, to put it into practice" (Blondel, 1964, pp. 273-274). A dialectic between devotions and truth operates in such a way that the humble faithful can benefit from a profound intuition more penetrating than that enjoyed by the most erudite of intellectuals (Blondel, 1961, pp. 339-340).

Together, dogmas and the practices enjoined on us by the Church make one body and it would be "murderous vivisection" to try to separate them (Blondel, 1966, p. 279). The constant theme echoing throughout Blondel's

writings comes from St. John: He who does the truth comes to the light. In "History and Dogma" he puts it thus: "The miracle of the Christian life is that from acts at first difficult, obscure, and enforced, one rises to the light through a practical verification of speculative truths" (Blondel, 1961, p. 274).

Following this presentation of faithful action as the focus of tradition, we are reminded by Blondel that there can be no doctrinal unity without a prior common discipline and a conformity of lifestyle (Blondel, 1973, p. 413). Joint action (and even more, shared suffering) would open the way for greater unity than could ever be achieved by a theological vanguard or pioneer elite group. To pay attention to tradition as a whole, rather than giving emphasis only to part of it, would enable us not only to preserve what is valuable from the past (this much at least about tradition is commonly appreciated), but to move forward, for "its powers of conservation are equaled by its powers of conquest. (Tradition) discovers and formulates truths on which the past lived, though unable as yet to evaluate or define them explicitly" (Blondel, 1964, p. 267). We should, therefore, be wary of shedding too quickly or casually those aspects of the Christian tradition which do not easily "make sense" to us, those features which jar on our understanding or sensibilities. It may be that through an uncomfortable confrontation between the expectations of a living tradition and the individuality of our own experience there is an opportunity to avoid illusion and to widen our horizons.

## THE LEARNING CHURCH

Blondel did not advocate an uncritical acceptance of all features of the Church. He was well aware of many defects in the Church he loved and he realized that purification was necessary as part of the process of building a new synthesis for his time. He could be scathing about some aspects of church life and especially a distorted view of authority then operative in the higher echelons of the clergy. Coming from such a man, from the center, these criticisms have all the more force.

The predominant party in the Church was wrong to exercise a power that was political, rather than spiritual in style, for this was incompatible with the Gospel. The Church was supposed to serve, not tyrannize over souls (Blondel, 1966). It seemed to Blondel that the face of the Church too often presented to the world was a serious aberration from the ideal: "a Catholicism without Christ, religion without a soul, authority without a heart" (Blondel, 1966, p. 158). It was wrong to think that God could be served by making him reign in society without preparing souls to receive him (Blondel, 1966). The emphasis on imperialism and prestige was a far cry from the strength that comes from weakness; the former smacked of paganism, whereas the latter came closer to Christianity. Blondel insisted that authority was assisted but not inspired, and such authority needed to consult

and to be clarified and joined by the prayer and study of the faithful; it should not flow just one way, from above to below. Authority was an organ of tradition, not a replacement for it (Blondel, 1950). Though he did not minimize the principle of authority, Blondel certainly rejected authoritarianism in the Church, because it exalted a part of tradition above the whole in a most unhealthy manner for the body which shared Christ's life.

Nothing illustrated the misuse of authority more than the dangerous distortion of clericalism. This was endemic in the Church at the beginning of the 20th century, inherent in the one-way thinking which saw everything in terms of from above to below, an over-hierarchical conception of the Church. Rule by clergy was a kind of guardianship over minors who were never allowed to grow up, take risks, or show any initiative. "Clericalism," said Blondel, "was founded on an objectivism which identified the human container with the divine content"; it was behind the immobile mentality prevalent within the Church and also responsible for much of its fanaticism and lack of humanity (Lubac, p. 288). He considered it "the most dangerous of traitors, the most false-hearted and deadly of the enemies of Catholicism, since it contradicted the essence of the Church and made of it a sect, something unilateral, formal, intellectual, neither good, loving, nor lovable" (Lubac, p. 288). The stress given by Blondel to the contribution of the whole body of the faithful in his treatment of living tradition differed greatly from the distinction which was too sharply made earlier this century between the teaching and the learning Church, the clergy and laity. Indeed, if the laity were always treated like children, how could the candidates for the teaching Church ever be recruited; from such juvenile and inexperienced sheep, how could wise pastors be found? (Blondel, 1961).

Toward the end of his life, at the age of 85, Blondel returned again to the topic of tradition and the need to balance the risks of growth with the need to safeguard the Church against specious novelties (Blondel, 1946). He continued to emphasize that the transmission of truths, functions, and powers involved in tradition required more than a simple acceptance from the faithful. He remained supremely confident about the "unquenchable power of enriching invention" which resided within tradition (Blondel, 1946, p. 81). It was not a chain which had to be dragged along, weighing us down; rather, it should be thought of as an umbilical cord, providing lifeblood and nourishment (Blondel, 1946). In these last comments on tradition he reiterated his earlier themes: Tradition and innovation are not opposed to one another; responding to the promptings of the Spirit and submission to authority are not incompatible; revelation is inexhaustible; the Church lives through growth; each generation has its trials, its mission, and its effective fruitfulness in adapting what is permanent and what is moving in the Church to one another (Blondel, 1946).

## EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

At the beginning of this paper I suggested that an appreciation and application of the notion of living tradition would help in addressing some concerns about Catholic education. I have taken Blondel as an influential thinker within Catholicism, one who contributed greatly to that Church's understanding of living tradition. Let me now draw out eight implications of his comments for schools.

First, undue weight is not to be given to the past. Rather than being backward-looking, seeking always to preserve, to hand on, to transmit, Church schools should, in the light of a rich appreciation that tradition is living, respond to the changing circumstances and new questions facing pupils and staff. What kind of balance is struck, in the course of each year's work, to ensure that students are invited, not only to enter into the educational and ecclesial heritage from the past, but also to respond to the concerns and questions thrown up by new circumstances through their own contributions and projects?

Second, Blondel reminds us that, if tradition is to flourish and to be welcomed, there must be due emphasis given to the experience, insights, problems, and questions of the particular members of the school community, both pupils and staff. Furthermore, each person should be able to feel that his or her contribution is both needed and valued by the school community. How hard do our schools try to communicate to each and every student that his or her questions are taken seriously and that he or she has particular talents and abilities which both the school and the wider society (including the parish) is in need of?

This leads into the third implication of Blondel's analysis of living tradition, which is that the Church's representatives cannot be credible or effective teachers if they are not simultaneously still learners. They must not give the impression of having "arrived" or of being "complete" and therefore of having stopped developing. They should be models, not only of life-long learning in academic terms, but also of life-long growth in faith and an ever-deepening appreciation of the mysteries of God's world and ways. If one side of this coin is that Blondel believed that the Church could not claim to teach if she was not prepared to go on learning, the other aspect of this is that the Church cannot expect her members to receive what she has to offer if at the same time she does not allow the learners themselves to give, to make a contribution, so that there is a certain reciprocity or mutuality about the teaching and learning process. It follows from this that teachers will elicit and respond positively to feedback from their students about the helpfulness of their endeavors; that they will model commitment to devotional practices; and that they will demonstrate to these students a familiarity with the discipline, lifestyle, and feelings associated with being a student (for example, excite-

ment in finding new ideas and a desire for feedback on their own progress).

Fourth, Blondel's comments warn against the Church school adopting an overbearing attitude in its efforts to convey the truth, even salvific truth. Its tutelary role should never slip into tyranny. There must be room for questioning, for growth, for disagreement, for learning by mistakes, for exploration, even when this appears to stray from orthodoxy. The Church school should seek to serve its pupils, not keep them in a state of servility. This will require an atmosphere which facilitates discussion and debate, which encourages the expression of tentative and provisional views, which invites students to exercise responsibility and initiative in a variety of forms and contexts, and which also allows them to withdraw (without reprimand) from these if they choose.

If in this point Blondel warns against prematurely closing the argument, this is related to a fifth implication of his thought, namely that Church schools should take care to avoid an excessive reliance on rationality as the only means to arrive at truth. His comments about moving slowly from the implicitly lived to the explicitly known, about attending to the multiple dimensions or many-sidedness of life, and about the integral development of the human person should guard us against any over-intellectual emphasis or any compartmentalization of knowledge or separation of the curriculum from the devotions, problems, and practices experienced by members of the school community. An excessive over-reliance on rationality will be avoided if the curriculum is broad and balanced; if pedagogy allows for student input, as well as reception; if it responds sensitively to student feedback; if many forms of achievement are praised; if all students are encouraged to experiment, to cooperate, to offer, and to receive help; and if the school community shares its sorrows, highlights its concerns, values, and priorities, and celebrates its achievements through sacred and secular rituals.

This brings us to a sixth implication. If there is to be no sharp separation of academic from more "existential" concerns within a school, the school should expect to display, offer, and train its members in faithful action, both in its devotional expression and in social action. There would be formation in spirituality and in community service and these would be seen as mutually supportive strands. Associated with these practices the school should be prepared to retain those aspects of the tradition which might appear at first to be uncomfortable or to be demanding for its members, for example, the call to self-denial, to on-going and ever-deepening conversion, to loyalty to and engagement with the whole liturgical cycle and its constitutive elements, not just to those which readily appeal or those which are easily understandable.

Seventh, not only did Blondel display in his own teaching all the qualities of inclusiveness (Coutagne, in press), in his writing he urged a sensitivity to the differing spiritual, intellectual, and personal needs of learners. His comments about the need for adaptability on the part of the teacher, whether



religious or other teachers, echo contemporary calls for attention to differentiation in approaches to (and readiness for) learning. Part of this sensitivity which Blondel asks for expresses itself in the patience he advocated in the face of misunderstanding, confusion, error, or shortcomings. In avoiding an overbearing atmosphere the school will not seek too quickly to uproot the weed growing alongside the wheat (Matthew 13: 24-30). Blondel always displayed a high degree of both patience and precision in pointing out mistakes and distortions, but he also advocated that searchers needed a friendly space in which to develop and to try out their ideas. Teachers in Catholic schools should be noted for this form of "hospitality."

Such patience did not imply an indiscriminating tolerance. The eighth implication of Blondel's understanding of living tradition is that a degree of vigilance is required in order to safeguard the Church, and, by extension, the school, against the corrosive effects of ideas or practices which either directly or more subtly contradict and undermine the mission and purpose of the Church school. Some emphases and priorities offered in the educational world will appear in the light of such vigilance to damage the carefully nurtured "wine" of Catholic education, either by "watering it down" or by mixing it with "acid." Threatening elements might be forms of competitiveness, within and between schools; unbalanced kinds of curriculum, pedagogy, or policies for assessment and behavior; distorted expressions of egalitarianism; or concessions to pluralism or to a liberal view of education. If our openness to the continuing unfolding of truth made accessible to us by the Holy Spirit entails remaining in communion with the wider Church (and therefore not acting as if the school were an island, operating in isolation from the rest of the Church), so too our vigilance or safeguarding role must be carried out in harmony with that wider ecclesial communion. Our nurturing of living tradition is not for the sake of ourselves alone, but is to be exercised both together with and on behalf of the whole Church. In this light, a Catholic school will welcome and engage positively with, rather than resent or reject, the oversight and inspection which is carried out on behalf of the Church, whether the trustees are from a diocese or from a religious order.

## CONCLUSION

I have shown how Blondel demonstrates in his treatment of living tradition the possibility of combining fidelity and creativity in the context of a Catholic school. If real contact with active minds is to be made, then new intellectual creations are necessary, Blondel would say, not because former ways of expressing the faith are easily dispensable but because further explorations of the riches of the faith are essential for effective communication with outsiders, indeed often extremely helpful for promoting deeper understanding of the legacy of faith for insiders too (Blondel, 1966).

If we adopt a Blondelian perspective, there are limits to the extent to which we are able to clarify or mark the boundaries of the distinctiveness of the Church or of the Church school, because no definition of pure Christianity is possible since it is a living reality, not a concept or theory, and introducing someone to the faith is bringing them into a way of life, not to a mere acceptance of a formula (Blondel, 1966). Ossification and immobility are incompatible with living tradition, a notion which implies a Church on the move. Blondel considered that the capacity for movement is both essential for and integral to the Church's nature and mission. His view was that if we wish to win souls and to spread the good news of Christ (as opposed to defending institutions), this is best done from a moving vehicle, not from a fortress (Blondel, 1966).

In order to pass on a faith in the context of living tradition, according to Blondel, a blend of docility and initiative is required: docility to tradition and also to the needs of others, initiative to adapt the life of tradition to the needs of individuals. Blondel employed the imagery of music and text to bring out this blend. Faith as docility on its own is like music that is written but remains on the page unplayed; faith as confidence and trust and initiative is like music that is played, but without the text is in danger of rambling away pointlessly and getting lost (Saint-Jean, 1966). An appreciation of living tradition provides several pointers as to how a Catholic school might attempt to promote in its pupils an active receptivity, a critical solidarity, and a discerning openness. An appropriation of living tradition, along the lines suggested by Blondel, makes it possible for Catholic schools to maintain their distinctiveness while displaying an openness to the insights and questions of pupils and to the changing needs of the times.

Blondel was, of course, not the only major exponent of living tradition to have influenced modern Catholic thought. Both Mohler and Newman in the 19th century highlighted key aspects which contributed to later thinking on living tradition; Mohler stressed the role of the Holy Spirit in the experience of the faithful, while Newman significantly advanced our understanding of the development of doctrine (Mohler, 1996; Newman, 1960). But by bringing together reason, experience, and faith, by giving emphasis to the collective experience of the faithful, by showing the relationship between devotion and arriving at the truth, by describing a more healthy role for authority than prevailed in the Church of his time, and by showing how tradition can facilitate a meeting place for what is permanent and what is changing in the life of the Church, Blondel powerfully enhanced the Catholic Church's ability to appreciate and to apply the notion of living tradition to its own self-understanding (Blondel, 1966). In doing so he has bequeathed a legacy which can assist Catholic educators in guarding against at least some of the risks to which any substantive worldview and any associated "strong" school ethos are prone.

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