Opinion

NCR Voices



Pope Francis speaks to members of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Jan. 30, 2020, at the Vatican. The pope told the members, who were holding their annual plenary meeting, that Catholic doctrine is faithful to tradition, but develops and deepens over time. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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One of the greatest experiences a human being engaged in the life of the mind can have is when reading an article — or in this case, two articles — a light bulb goes off and something is clarified, a distinction is highlighted, or a connection is made, or an insight that had been latent becomes manifest.

A recent episode of NPR's "All Things Considered" featured an interview with Sarah Hurwitz, who served as a speechwriter in the Obama administration, becoming first lady Michelle Obama's principal speechwriter. [Full disclosure: I worked with Hurwitz on Gen. Wesley Clark's presidential campaign in 2004.] The interview, conducted by Rachel Martin, focused on Hurwitz's new book, *Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life — in Judaism (After Finally Choosing to Look There)*.

I was delighted by much of what Hurwitz said. The warmth with which she spoke about connecting with her childhood faith again, and finding in that faith some of the things she had been looking for in adulthood, really touched a chord.

One observation jumped out especially. Hurwitz was asked about her criticism of the "spiritual buffet" approach to religious life. Here is the exchange:

> But I think what makes me nervous about the spiritual buffet is that what you're saying is, "I'm going to take this thing from Buddhism that's so me and this thing from Judaism that's so me and this from Catholicism."
>
> *Martin*: One-hundred percent. That's what I'm doing.
>
> *Hurwitz*: This is what so many of us do, and at the end of the day you're reinforcing yourself. You're kind of deifying yourself.
>
> *Martin*: Wow.

> *Hurwitz*: You're saying, "What reinforces my preexisting beliefs?" This is how we consume social media, right? But it's not the purpose of these great spiritual traditions. The purpose is to learn that you are infinitely worthy and also you sometimes do things that are unkind or that are cruel or insensitive or impatient and you need to be lovingly and gently invited to do better.
>
> *Martin*: So you think you don't get that accountability mechanism if you self-select into parts of the faith?
>
> *Hurwitz*: Exactly. You're picking and choosing the parts that move you and make you feel good. The purpose is to challenge yourself and push yourself to see where you're falling short, lovingly and kindly.

This is a profoundly important critique of a kind of contemporary subjectivism in religion — "let me tell you about *my* truth" — colliding with the attitudes bred in us by the ambient consumer culture. We see it when people talk about "my conscience" and put the emphasis on the "my," forgetting that conscience is God's voice speaking to us about what to do, or to avoid, in a particular situation. It is mine because I am in that situation, but it is not mine insofar as it has its origin in the supreme lawgiver.

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The second article, which had nothing to do with the NPR story, was Fr. Lou Cameli's splendid essay about bringing the voices of the saints into the synodal dialogue published here at NCR on Monday. "In the process of synodality, we can and should be sharing our experiences and aspirations," Cameli writes. "At the same time, we must also be in dialogue with our historical tradition. That tradition is no mere abstraction. It is embodied in the saints and all the women and men of faith who have gone before us and still walk with us. If these partners are missing, we will have flattened out our experience of church and reduced it to our current state of soul on the planet Earth."

Cameli is making a point very similar to that made by Hurwitz: The focus on our own experiences and desires has a flattening effect on our spiritual life and our ecclesial self-understanding if it is not constantly receiving the tradition that went before.

Vatican II did not embrace liberal Protestant theology. As University of Edinburgh theologian David Grumett explained in *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, which I reviewed here and here, the *ressourcement* theologians who shaped the council "wanted to contest liberal theological methodologies that bypassed historical sources altogether" as well as to debunk the ahistorical Neo-Scholasticism that had been dominant in Catholic theology in the pre-conciliar era.

Put differently, as Laval University theologian Gilles Routhier argues in that same *Oxford Handbook*, Vatican II was itself an act of reception of the Catholic tradition: "reception of Scripture, reception of the creed, reception of the teachings of previous councils, reception of magisterial teachings, reception of the customs and traditions that make up the heritage of the different churches within their cultural context, and so on."

The post-conciliar yearning for some sense of constancy, the desire to be informed by "the church of the ages," for a faith and moral teachings that are above history, cannot ignore the fact that the church lives in history, acts in history, as did her founder, Jesus Christ. This fact does not mean, however, that the church is merely an historical reality, a social organization like any other, albeit with a strange ritual at its center and some fancy outfits and songs.

Transcendence is not complete otherness. It is otherness breaking into history. We should think of transcendence as a verb not as a noun: God and his church transcend history by entering into it. Dialogue with the tradition is what allows the church to remain true to its founding and to itself while responding to the changing experiences and circumstances of each generation and culture.

The entire time I was reading *The Oxford Handbook*, I understood this tension between a faith lived in history and a faith that is outside of history to be present in virtually every chapter. It was reading an interview with a Jewish speechwriter and a column by a Chicago priest, however, that made it click in a way it hadn't before. Dialogue with our tradition does not hold us back. It is what propels us forward as Catholics.