

Louis DeThomasis FSC

# Flying in the Face of Tradition



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## DEDICATION

*To Saint John Baptist De LaSalle and his Brothers,  
as Jesus lives in their hearts forever!  
And to my brother "Luddy,"  
as he is now in the loving embrace of the Lord forever!*



## INTRODUCTION

### *Unraveling the Quandary before It Unravels Us*

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*This is our joy:  
that through the living river of tradition  
Christ is not 2,000 years away from us  
but is truly with us always.*

POPE BENEDICT XVI

• • • • •

The word *tradition* is a critical element in the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of itself. This book is an attempt to go beyond an intuitive understanding of that word and seek to rediscover in it a blueprint for unraveling the quandary taking place in the church today, before the institutional church itself unravels.

I do not intend to make this a theological treatise on tradition. I am not a theologian. Rather, my aim is to appeal to common sense and the core values and beliefs within Catholicism to offer some carefully derived conclusions regarding two important factors: first, an understanding of the present reality of what is going on in the world today; and second, an analysis of how that present reality affects what is going on within the church today.

Throughout the book I refer to "the church" or "the Catholic Church" and use the two terms interchangeably. Specifically I am referring to the Roman Catholic Church, of which I am a lifelong member and a professed religious. Yet the audience I am attempting to reach with these conclusions is not only those situated on the inside of the institutional Roman Catholic Church or its

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academic community *per se*. I definitely hope this work will have something to say to them; but at least as importantly I hope to reach the wider audience of faithful Catholics who are deeply troubled at this moment in the history of the church. Finally, it seems important that I try to reach a wider spectrum of Christians in general.

As I wrote this book I kept in my mind a unique lesson in academic scholarship and integrity from my undergraduate days in the late 1950s. I was working on my bachelor's degree at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. On the first day of his class, one of the most scholarly and beloved Jesuit professors of the time provided us with a unique insight.

.....  
*I love the Catholic Church  
and have always been  
thoroughly committed to it  
to this day.*  
.....

He said that the heart and soul of scholarship is to listen carefully to many people with diverse views and to read as many books and articles as possible with differing approaches and conclusions about the same topic. Then, he said, you must carefully and thoroughly think through the material for yourself. Only then may you write it down and take responsibility for what you yourself think and say.

That priest's advice seemed quite reasonable, and the class was clearly processing the possibilities inherent in his statement. Before we young scholars got too far in our thinking, however, the wise man paused and, with a mischievous and knowing smile, he bellowed, "Remember, dear students, if you copy from one source, that's plagiarism; if you copy from many sources, that's scholarship!"

I have taken my old professor's advice to heart whenever I research a particular topic. I have learned the importance of utilizing only accurate information. Any researcher soon discovers that just because something appears in one place does not mean that it is valid or true or necessarily reliable. As you read this book, you can be confident that I have carefully verified as much as possible the facts and information that I use from multiple sources.

I was especially concerned that I rely on accurate information because the topic of this book is of great importance to me personally. I love the Catholic



Church and have always been thoroughly committed to it to this day. Intimately associated to that commitment is my life in Catholic education. I have been honored to serve as a De LaSalle Brother for more than four decades of my life and have been involved in Catholic education the entire time.

So I have read, listened, discussed, argued, and thought about the topics discussed here. I have felt it especially important to assure the validity of my conclusions and have sought views and opinions that challenged my preliminary conclusions to assure that they were not simply my personal biases. I have “copied” ideas and thoughts from many, many sources. However, for their integration into my own conclusions, I take full responsibility.

In order to make this book more approachable and readable to a wider audience, I do not treat the subject matter in the style of a formalized, academic research structure. Be assured, though, that while it is my intention that this work be accessible to all I do not want the rigor of the thoughts, ideas, and observations expressed herein to be compromised. If you want to criticize my conclusions, that is your prerogative; but please do not conclude that I don’t know what I’m talking about just because I have chosen not to cite every source of every fact or idea in the book. I’ll leave that task to another book, by me or by someone else. It is the conclusions that are the important thing here, because it is the conclusions that must lead to action sooner rather than later.

Despite my intention for clarity and readability, however, this book is not conducive to a quick speed-reading. Because of the nature of this subject matter that involves the church situated in a new global society of the third millennium, careful consideration must be given to distinctions, complexities, and nuanced statements.

At the Vatican’s Apostolic Palace in Rome are many magnificent works of art for all to see and appreciate. One in particular holds a special place in my heart and psyche. There are, of course, many works of art that the world may judge as superior to this particular one, but we all know that art becomes meaningful to individuals for reasons that others may not grasp. In this case, because of the particular meaning this work has for me, it has taken on an exceptional significance in terms of this book.

On the wall of the *Stanza della Signatura* is Raphael’s High Renaissance

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fresco masterpiece titled, “The School of Athens.” In this fresco, standing and sitting in a magnificently appointed classical Greek study area are many of the philosophers of that time. Central in this fresco are Plato and Aristotle in conversation. Plato is clearly depicted as an old, wise, grey-bearded, barefooted man, while Aristotle is envisioned as a young, striking, well-dressed man. Plato’s arm is raised, with a finger pointing up as if he were bringing “the heavens” to the attention of his young student. Aristotle, alongside but just slightly ahead of Plato, has his arm and hand extended and outstretched on a horizontal plane as if to remind Plato that they are presently on this earth and not in the heavens—“And, Plato, don’t you forget it,” he seems to be telling his master.

Experts may not see exactly what I see in this painting; but most agree that Plato is pointing toward the heavens because he is the more theoretical and esoteric philosopher. Aristotle, on the other hand, is the empirical and forward-looking philosopher who emphasizes real, daily, concrete, worldly particulars.

For me, it is most fitting that this fresco is in a place of prominence in the Vatican. Actually, I believe it should be placed in a main entrance to the Vatican City State for all to see as they enter. We are told that a picture is worth a thousand words. But for me this fresco reveals so much more than a thousand words: It is a multi-volume “book” that can stand on its own as an insightful and poignant treatise on the situation in which the institutional church finds itself today. The faithful—and the not so faithful—are continuously and forcefully reminding those leading the institutional church that their actions and manner of administration leave much to be desired. (To be clear, I know the church is both a human and divine entity, with human actors and divine grace interacting. When I use the term institutional church I am referring to those human organizational structures and personnel within the church, the persons and structures that serve the rest of the church as leaders and middle-managers. It includes the organization of the Vatican and all the dioceses throughout the world.)

I make no supposition that a solution to the issues I raise here will necessarily be found. In fact, I believe that there is a case to be made that no simple solution is possible. The institutional church is presently being confronted with multifaceted, complex, and diverse situations and scandals. There is a wide-

ly perceived, seemingly intractable institutional culture that says “authority means never having to say we’re wrong.” The institutional church seems to be accepting change only in the sense that it believes it can deal with reality by means of some new public relations tactics and superficial organizational (or even liturgical language) changes. This, however, is not going to work. Complete transformation is what is required.

Transformation as a dynamic force, both organizationally and spiritually, requires that the institutional church begin to see for itself—and do for itself—what it does not now see or do. The institutional church must become more open, more transparent, more accepting of diversity, and—this is the toughest one—more democratic.

I set out my case for arriving at this conclusion, knowing full well that in the church, just as in Raphael’s “The School of Athens,” there necessarily is

need to point a finger toward the heavens while concurrently serving the needs of the world. Difficult to do? Yes. But, that is what the Incarnation is all about.

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*The institutional church must become more open, more transparent, more accepting of diversity, and more democratic.*

Transformation is always difficult, and there will always be those who resist efforts to do things differently. However, it is important for all of us to understand the basic qualities essential to being responsive to the here and now. In this regard, it is good to heed the advice of Benjamin Franklin. In his *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, he observed that “Experience holds a dear school, but

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only a fool will learn no other way.” It is my hope that the church will embrace the “here and now” and live in a new emerging world. We need not to recreate the past but rather to invent a future that makes the Gospel alive once again in the world.

Because this book is an attempt to make clear what is so complex and necessarily filled with ambiguity, I have kept each chapter brief and offer an elaboration of a single focused point in each segment. I also incorporate many ideas from presentations that I have given and from my other written works over

the years, because they have given rise to my present conclusions. Actually, I am well aware that each chapter could very well be expanded into a book unto itself, especially if the aim of the book were to present the matter as a structured academic research study. It is my hope that if anyone finds merit in the topics that I address in each chapter they will take these ideas and study them further. That is the true nature of intellectual inquiry.

The Holy Spirit is alive and well and speaking through many good people in the church. It is time for us to have the courage to be open and listen to one another, even those whose understandings may be different than our own. The constantly shrinking globe is bringing different people, different cultures, and different religions together. That sounds wonderfully positive to me. However, instead of this global phenomenon bringing peace and love to the world, we see much intolerance, marginalization, and, yes, even terrorism. We in the church, too, can quickly close off discussion and sharing of different ideas. But that would be a disaster, for we truly do have a quandary in the institutional church today; it is a quandary that desperately needs unraveling. This book is my contribution to that task.

Brother Louis DeThomasis, FSC  
Rome, Italy  
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