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*“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you have learned, whether by word or by our epistle.” - 2 Thess. 2:14*

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), and especially in light of the many changes that have affected virtually every aspect of ecclesial life, there has been much confusion and debate in the Church regarding the nature of Tradition (the unwritten word of God) and its relationship to the Church’s “living Magisterium”, that is, to the living subjects (pope/bishops) appointed by God as the guardians and teachers of Divine Revelation (Scripture and Tradition).

For roughly 100 years prior to the Council, a mass of modern errors which came to be known as Modernism — the “synthesis of all heresies” (Pope St. Pius X, Encyclical [Pascendi Dominici Gregis](#), n. 39) — rocked the Church to her very foundations, since Modernists “lay the axe not to the branches and shoots, but to the very root, that is, to the faith and its deepest fires” in such a way that “there is no part of Catholic truth from which they hold their hand, none that they do not strive to corrupt” (*Pascendi*, n. 3). At the root of Modernism is “the heretical theory of an evolution of the dogmas [of Faith], namely, that they change from one meaning to another, different from the one that the Church previously held” (St. Pius X, [Oath Against Modernism](#)). Despite the valiant efforts of St. Pius X and his successors prior to the Council, the poison of Modernism eventually seeped into the ecclesiastical hierarchy and has since caused a rupture in many ways between the Church’s perennial Tradition (doctrine, morals, liturgical practice, etc.) and her “living Magisterium” (pope/bishops). The result continues to be a severe breakdown in the transmission of Tradition from the hierarchy (*Ecclesia docens*, “teaching Church”) to the faithful (*Ecclesia discens*, “learning Church”).

For individual Catholics who become aware of this grave crisis, various questions of conscience inevitably arise:

- *How can I know what truly belongs to Tradition?*
- *What takes precedence: the teachings of past popes or the current pope?*
- *Am I bound to obey my superiors in the Church even if they disregard what the Church has always believed, taught, and practiced?*
- *How do I keep the Faith and hand it on to others in the midst of all this confusion?*

As He has always done throughout Church history, Our Lord continues to raise up voices of clarity in our day to help anchor souls in His unchanging truth. One such voice is [Professor](#)

EXCLUSIVE: Interview with Professor Roberto de Mattei on  
Tradition and Authority in the Church

[Roberto de Mattei](#), an Italian Church historian and friend of *Catholic Family News* who has devoted himself to defending the Faith of all time through writing, speaking, and organizing various events in the public square. He is no doubt most well known for his book, [The Second Vatican Council: An Unwritten Story](#) (originally published in Italian in 2010; English translation published in 2012), a monumental historical work which bears the endorsement of Cardinal Walter Brandmüller, president emeritus of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Science and a signer of the famous [dubia](#) submitted to Pope Francis in 2016 concerning *Amoris Laetitia*.

Last year, Professor de Mattei published two additional works in English that contribute greatly to the ongoing discussion of Tradition and lawful resistance of superiors (including the pope) when fidelity to Tradition is at stake: [Love for the Papacy and Filial Resistance to the Pope in the History of the Church](#) (Angelico Press, 2019), a collection of essays and lectures (including his lecture at the 2018 CFN Conference), and [Apologia for Tradition](#) (Angelus Press, 2019), which originally appeared in Italian in 2011.

I recently asked Professor de Mattei if he would field some questions about his work and share his insights with readers. Here follows our interview exchange.

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**Catholic Family News (CFN): Thank you, Professor, for taking the time to conduct this interview. Many CFN readers are no doubt familiar with your work, but for those who might be new to our publication, would you tell us a little about your professional background?**

**Professor de Mattei (PDM):** My professional background is as a historian. I was a teaching assistant and then a full professor of Modern History and the History of Christianity at the University of Rome - La Sapienza, the University of Cassino, and the European University of Rome. Between 2003 and 2011, I held the position of Vice President of the National Research Council, the main Italian scientific institution. In those years I had a working relationship as well as a friendship with Bruce Cole, the chairman of the National Endowment of the Humanities. Bruce died in 2018 and I have wonderful memories of him because of the harmony that existed between our political and religious views.

**CFN: How did you become involved in the fight to defend and promote Tradition within the Church?**

**PDM:** Since I was very young, in addition to my academic activities in the universities, I have also been committed to the Catholic battle in defense of Tradition. From 1972 to 1981,

I took part in the Catholic Alliance movement, and then in 1982 I founded the Lepanto Cultural Center and the [Lepanto Foundation](#) of which I am president. A decisive moment in my spiritual formation was doing the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola in 1975 with Fr. Ludovic Barrielle. Another was personally meeting Professor Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira in 1976, whom I consider to be the greatest expert on the Catholic Counter-Revolution in the 20th century. I have dedicated two of my books to him, which are both translated into English: *The Crusader of the 20th Century* (1998) and [Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira: Prophet of the Reign of Mary](#) (2019).

**CFN: Your book *Apologia for Tradition* is divided into two main parts: (I) a historical survey of various crises throughout Church history and (II) a treatise on the nature and importance of Tradition, especially during times of ecclesial crises. The book opens with an Introduction in which you explain the relationship between history and theology. Could you elaborate on the interconnected nature of these two disciplines?**

**PDM:** I will respond with the words of Dom Prosper Guéranger (1805-1875) in his celebrated *Essai sur le naturalisme* (Essay on naturalism): “Just as for the Christian there does not exist a philosophy in and of itself, so also for the Christian there is no purely human history. Man has been called by God to a supernatural state; this is his final end; the history of humanity should bear witness to this.” This means that historical investigation cannot be separated from philosophy, and philosophy cannot be done without theology, because, as Dom Guéranger explains, “there does not exist, nor can there exist, a true knowledge of man without Revelation. Supernatural Revelation was not necessary in itself: man did not have any right to it, but God gave it and made it known; since then, nature alone is no longer sufficient to explain man. The presence or absence of grace, and grace itself, holds the first place in the anthropological study of man.”

**CFN: The second part of *Apologia for Tradition*, “The Church’s *Regula Fidei* in Times of Crises of Faith,” includes a section which asks and answers the question, “What is Tradition?” What is a basic definition of “Tradition” according to Catholic teaching?**

**PDM:** Tradition, in the theological sense of the term, is the revealed word of God concerning faith and morals that is not written but has been transmitted orally from Christ to the Apostles and from them to their successors down to us. The Protestants denied the existence of the Tradition and maintained that the Bible is the only rule of faith. The Council of Trent, instead, defined that there are two sources of Divine Revelation: Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Tradition (Denzinger-Hünemann 1501). Cardinal John Baptist Franzelin (1816-1886), S.J., citing St. Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca. A.D. 202), defines Tradition as the

“immutable rule of truth” in his classic theological treatise *On Divine Tradition* [available in English [here](#) - Ed.] because it is nothing other than the integral doctrine of the Church which comes to us from the successors of the Apostles with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. In a broader sense, Tradition, preserved by families and by social *élites*, is the foundation of society, because it is what is stable and immutable in the perennial existence of things.

**CFN: You cover in detail the “ten ‘proper sources of theology’” identified by the Dominican theologian Melchior Cano (1509-1560), explaining, “The doctrine of the theological sources...does not consider the Magisterium, because it is not a theological *locus*, ‘source,’ or ‘subject,’ but rather a function performed by the pope, by the Councils, and by the teaching Church within the power of jurisdiction.” [1] This point— that the Magisterium (pope/bishops) is not a *source* but a *function* — seems crucial. Can you elaborate on it?**

**PDM:** The Magisterium can be understood in two senses: the act of ecclesiastical authority that teaches a truth (the subjective Magisterium) or the object believed, the complex of truths that are taught (the objective Magisterium). In the former, the Magisterium is a function exercised by ecclesiastical authorities in order to teach revealed truths; in the latter, it is an objective deposit of truths that coincides with the Tradition. In moments of crisis, when an evident contradiction is created between the subjective and objective Magisterium, between the authorities who teach and the truth of faith that they ought to guard and transmit, the *sensus fidei* leads the believer to reject every ambiguity and forgery of the Faith, basing himself on the immutable Tradition of the Church, which is not opposed to the Magisterium but includes it. Ordinarily the Magisterium is the proximate rule of faith, but in the case of a contrast between the novelties proposed by the subjective or “living” Magisterium and the Tradition, primacy can only be attributed to the Tradition, which is always divinely assisted. The “living” Magisterium is divinely assisted only when it speaks in an extraordinary way or when, in the ordinary form, it teaches a truth of faith or morals in continuity with the Tradition.

**CFN: You characterize the *sensus fidei* (“sense of faith”) as “the adherence to the truths of Faith by supernatural instinct, even prior to theological reasoning,” [2] which can “prompt the faithful, in exceptional cases, to refuse their assent to some ecclesiastical documents and even to take up, with regard to the supreme authorities, a position of resistance or of apparent disobedience.” [3] Can you cite some examples of the *sensus fidei* in action throughout Church history?**

**PDM:** In Baptism and Confirmation, the Christian receives a supernatural light that theologians call the “common Catholic sense” or the “*sensus fidei*,” the capacity to adhere to the truths of the Faith by means of supernatural instinct, even prior to theological

reasoning. The first historical manifestation of the *sensus fidei* can be considered the Arian crisis. According to the attentive historical reconstruction which Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) made in his masterpiece, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, the models of the *sensus fidei* were St. Athanasius and St. Hilary of Poitiers, followed in later centuries by St. Bruno of Segni, St. Peter Damian, St. Bridget of Sweden, St. Catherine of Siena, and St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort. They were illuminated by the Holy Spirit during dramatic epochs of the history of the Church.

In more recent history, Benedict XVI defined the *sensus fidei* as “that capacity infused by the Holy Spirit that enables us to embrace the reality of faith with humility of heart and mind,” inviting theologians to listen to this source and to preserve the humility and simplicity of the “little ones” who have known this mystery such as St. Bernadette Soubirous and St. Thérèse of Lisieux.[\[4\]](#)

**CFN: In addition to the *sensus fidei* of individual Catholics, you also discuss the *sensus fidelium* (“sense of the faithful” as a whole) and assert that “the learning Church [*Ecclesia discens*] is a subject of passive infallibility”[\[5\]](#) – in other words, that the Holy Ghost protects the faithful as a body from erring in their belief (i.e., losing the true Faith). What is the source of this claim? Has it been taught by any particular theologians?**

**PDM:** Along with the infallibility of the *Ecclesia docens* in teaching there also exists an infallibility of the *Ecclesia discens* in believing, because neither the *corpus docendi* which is invested with the power of teaching the entire Church nor the universality of the faithful in believing can fall into error. If the flock of the faithful could in fact err, believing as Revelation that which is not, the promise of divine assistance to the Church would be frustrated. St. Thomas Aquinas refers to the infallibility of the Church in its totality when he says: “It is impossible that the judgment of the universal Church can be in error in what refers to faith” (*Quodlibet*, 9, q. 8 a 1). In 2014, the International Theological Commission, led at the time by Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller (former prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith), published a study entitled “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church” in which all of the theological references for this doctrine are presented.[\[6\]](#)

**CFN: I have a couple of questions in light of your 2018 CFN Conference lecture, “[Tu es Petrus: True Devotion to the Chair of Saint Peter](#)”, which is published in your book, *Love for the Papacy and Filial Resistance to the Pope in the History of the Church*.[\[7\]](#)**

**As you explain in your lecture, we must distinguish true from false devotion in relation to the papacy, just as St. Louis De Montfort does in relation to Our Lady.**

**The term you use in your lecture to denote false devotion to the pope is *papolatry*. Can you explain this term?**

**PDM:** Papolatry is the undue worship given to a man who is the Vicar of Christ on earth, and as such should be respected and venerated, but he is not the “successor of Christ.” Papolatry occurs when it is believed that everything the pope says and does is perfect and infallible, without distinguishing between the man and the institution he represents. I repudiate all forms of Conciliarism or Gallicanism, both of which wanted to limit the authority of the Roman Pontiff, but papolatry favors these errors because it leads people to unjustly attribute to the papacy or to the Church responsibility for all of the errors, scandals, and mistakes made by the men who govern the Church or have governed it. The Church is divine, but the pope is not a divinity; he is a man, capable of sinning and also of losing the Faith, if he does not correspond to the graces he has received and if he does not carry out his lofty mission.

**CFN: What are the origins of this false devotion of papolatry? Why do you think it has become such a virulent error in our times?**

**PDM:** I do not believe that the origins of this false devotion are to be found in the ultramontanism of the 19th century, as many think. The “ultramontanists,” beginning with Pius IX, knew well the limits of papal power. In 1875, in their opposition to Chancellor Bismarck, the German bishops declared that the Magisterium of the pope and bishops “is restricted to the contents of the infallible Magisterium of the Church in general, and it is restricted to the contents of the Holy Scripture and Tradition” (DH 3116). Pope Pius IX gave his full support to this declaration with his Apostolic Letter *Mirabilis illa constantia* to the bishops of Germany on March 4, 1875 (DH 3117). “Papolatry” was born after the Second Vatican Council: a hypertrophic cult for the person of the pope that developed parallel to the humiliation of the pope. A turning point occurred on November 13, 1964, when Paul VI deposed the papal tiara, renouncing the ceremony of coronation. This was not an act of humility by the pope but rather an act of humiliation of the papacy.

**CFN: I would now like to close on a Marian note. I know you are very devoted to Our Lady, in particular, to her Fatima Message. What role do you believe Our Lady will play in the restoration of Tradition within the Church? Do you think such a restoration is implied in her promise at Fatima, “In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph” (July 13, 1917)?**

**PDM:** The Most Blessed Virgin Mary is the Mother and guardian of the Tradition, because she preserves in her Immaculate Heart all of the words and teachings of Jesus, transmitting them to the Apostles. The faith of all the centuries rests on her as on its most noble

foundation after Jesus Christ, as St. Pius X states in his encyclical [Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum](#). According to St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort, with the consent of the Most High, Mary in glory has preserved the Faith in order to maintain it in the Church Militant in her most faithful servants. The triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, promised at Fatima, will be the triumph of faith and the Tradition of the Church that will shine forth once again in all of its integrity and purity, as it shone forth in the darkness of Holy Saturday, when, as theologians declare, Mary's faith summed up the faith of the Church: "*apostolis fugientibus, fides Ecclesiae in beatissima Virgine sola remansit* [the apostles having fled, the faith of the Church remained in the Blessed Virgin alone]".

*Professor de Mattei's responses were translated from Italian into English by Giuseppe Pellegrino (@pellegrino2020). Visit <https://www.patreon.com/lepantofoundation> for more articles and conferences by Professor de Mattei.*

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[1] Roberto de Mattei, [Apologia for Tradition: A Defense of Tradition Grounded in the Historical Context of the Faith](#) (Kansas City: Angelus Press, 2019), p. 70.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

[3] *Ibid.*, 95.

[4] Benedict XVI, General Audience of [July 7, 2010](#). — Ed.

[5] de Mattei, *Apologia for Tradition*, p. 87.

[6] International Theological Commission (ITC), "[Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church](#)" (2014). See nn. 22-42 of the study for a historical summary of the concept of the *sensus fidelium* and the infallibility of the *Ecclesia discens* ("learning Church") in believing from the Patristic era to the mid-20th century. — Ed.

[7] See Roberto de Mattei, [Love for the Papacy and Filial Resistance to the Pope in the History of the Church](#) (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2019), pp. 131-156.