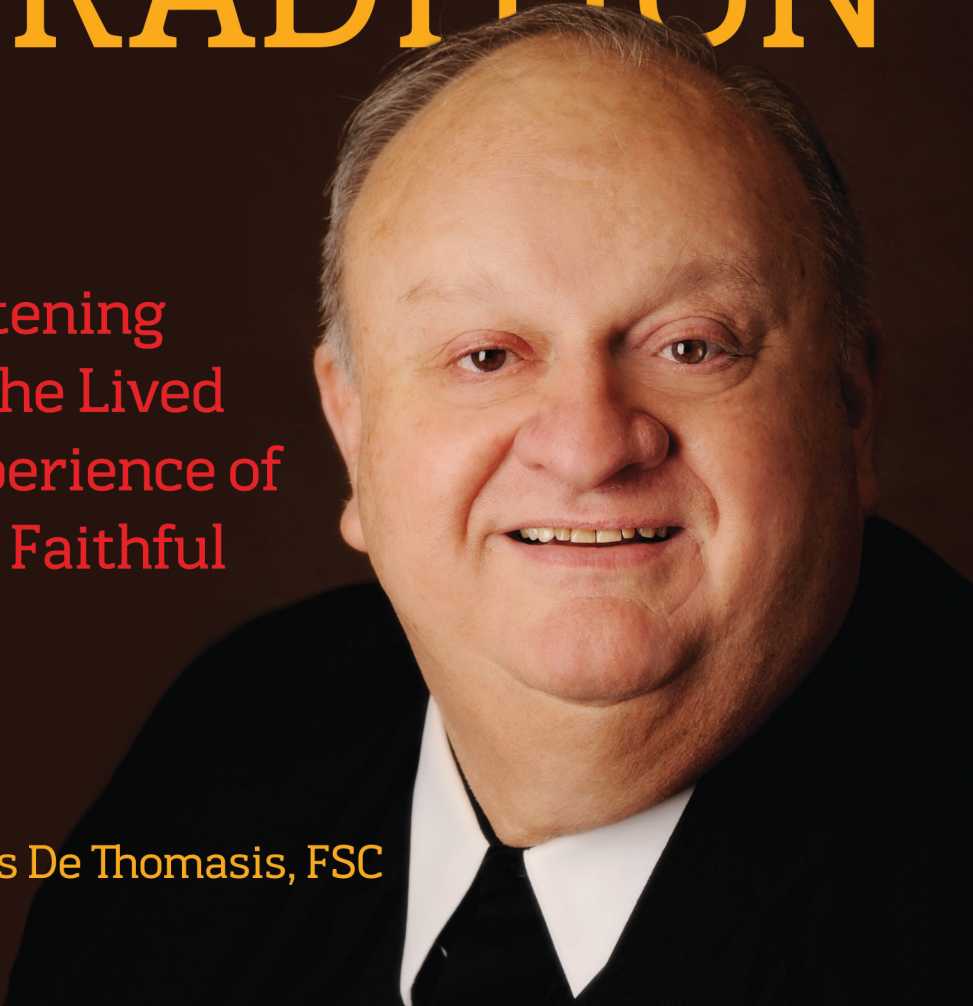


# FLYING IN THE FACE OF TRADITION

Listening  
to the Lived  
Experience of  
the Faithful

Louis De Thomasis, FSC



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PUBLICATIONS

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## A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

The job of the publisher is simply to give good authors an outlet for their ideas. That is what we have done here with Brother Louis DeThomasis' provocative book, *Flying in the Face of Tradition*. I urge you to read it in the spirit with which it is written, one of passion, concern, and hope for the Catholic Church that he loves.

Brother Louis is not some alienated Catholic out to do the church harm. Just the opposite. He has been a moderate, well-respected De LaSalle Brother and Christian educator and investment manager for more than forty years. He was president and professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota from 1984 to 2005 and the co-founder and former president of the Christian Brothers Investment Services (CBIS), which helps many Catholic organizations benefit from a managed portfolio based on Catholic principles and values. He is currently the president of CBIS-GLOBAL: Europe. He has received many awards and recognition of his service to the church and society, including the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice Award* conferred by Pope John Paul II in 1998, knighthood in the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem in 1989, and five honorary degrees from five U.S. colleges and universities.

So you see that Brother Louis is, in a way, a member of the "institutional church" that he calls to account and transformation. He does so not with any malice or mean-spiritedness but rather with a sense of clarity, urgency, and love. He knows, as do we, that several members of the institutional church have demanded that some of the issues he raises, specifically the ordination of women, are "closed" and never to be discussed again. However, using the church's own teaching of the role of the lived experience of the faithful as a continuing source of revelation and renewal in the church, he respectfully offers his own thoughts as "an exercise in tradition."

ACTA Publications, which has its own fifty-plus years of contributions to the church, has always been a publishing house where dialogue is encouraged and innovation is developed. We feel that Brother Louis is offering a fresh and

insightful contribution to what is happening in the church and in the world right now and how we may “unravel the quandary” that the institutional church is facing, whether it admits it or not.

Don’t take my word for it. Read and decide for yourself whether or not Brother Louis makes sense. The Holy Spirit will be with you as you do so, because Jesus promised to send forth the Spirit “to fill the hearts of the faithful.”

Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
President and Co-Publisher  
ACTA Publications

## INTRODUCTION

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

• • • • •

*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

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

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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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 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  
Lent 2012

## CHAPTER 1

### *Is the Institutional Church Dying?*

• • • • •

*Death is not the greatest loss in life.  
The greatest loss is what dies inside us  
while we live.*

NORMAN COUSINS

• • • • •

**T**o even raise the question of whether or not the institutional church as we know it is “dying” is to be considered by some to be heresy.

It is not through disloyalty or with mean-spiritedness that I have come to feel compelled to ask this question. It is precisely because of my faithfulness to the church and my conviction that the Good News of Jesus Christ is for all humankind that I am driven, at this late point in my own life, not only to attempt to answer this frightful question but, more importantly, to begin to seek a solution to the consequences of whatever answer may arise.

I am a 70-year-old De LaSalle Brother, entering my eighth decade of life with anticipation, appropriate energy, and some well-developed understandings about the church that I feel I have not only a right but a duty to present to whomever might want to listen.

What sort of positive or negative bias about the church has made you want to read a book that asks this volatile question? The “institution” spoken of here may be the church of which you have felt part of all your life and love as much as I do. Or, perhaps, you once were a member of this church and, for any number of reasons, have chosen to reject or simply ignore it. You might well be a

member of the clergy, a professed religious, a bishop, a cardinal, or the current or future pope. You could work for the church in some capacity, or you may have a job and a family and are involved in civic and community affairs as “just” a layperson. You might even be one of our non-Roman-Catholic Christian brethren, or the follower of another faith, or someone with no faith at all that wants to see what the big hubbub is all about inside the Catholic Church today.

It doesn’t matter to me, because these thoughts are for everyone, regardless of where one stands or sits *vis-a-vis* Catholicism. It is important to me, however, that every reader come to the realization that for me to constructively criti-

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*I believe that the death of the institutional church as we all know it can be the last opportunity for it to transform itself into something that once again is able to carry out its original purpose.*

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cize something I love with accuracy and fairness I must also clearly acknowledge that I am a sinner myself. Indeed, it is only with age, reflection, and prayer that I have been able to muster the courage to discuss the problems, transgressions, mistakes, and sins of the church, because I know that I am as guilty as anyone of many of the sins decried in this book. I too have been insensitive, closed-minded, arrogant, self-centered, too-quick-to-defend-the-indefensible, overly protective of myself and my fellow church-members. For this I am sorry. And for this reason I offer this book as a small token of atonement.

On the other hand, because of my lifetime commitment to the church, I can claim a certain amount of expertise on this subject. If you know me, you will agree; if you do not, I hope this book will demonstrate to you that I have developed some appropriate knowledge and insight on the subject of Catholicism.

Is the institutional church dying? Yes. And even though it may be politic to add “unfortunately,” I offer no such qualification. I believe that the death of the institutional church as we all know it can be the last opportunity for it to transform itself into something that once again is able to carry out its original purpose.

An explanation of what I mean is certainly in order.

First, the “institutional church” needs to be defined as it is used here. Specifically, my thoughts are about only one part of the Roman Catholic Church: the structural part. The “institutional church” is not the Catholic people throughout the world who attend Mass, who do good works, who relate almost exclusively in terms of their faith to their local parish. Nor is the institutional church the divinely inspired mystery of the “communion” of the People of God in unity with one another today and with the long line of followers of Jesus Christ that went before us and will follow us. The institutional church, as it is commonly understood and appears to the public, is the formal structural hierarchy within the Vatican and, by extension, the local churches throughout the world within the office of each duly appointed Roman Catholic bishop.

Second, the entire church, much less the narrower institutional church, is not the kingdom of God. In Vatican II’s “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (*Lumen Gentium*) there is a significant passage that says:

From this source the Church, equipped with the gifts of its Founder and faithfully guarding His precepts of charity, humility, and self-sacrifice, receives the mission to proclaim and to spread among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God and to be, on earth, the initial budding forth of the Kingdom. (LG 5)

In other words, according to Vatican II, which is the “institutional church” speaking at its most united and powerful, the church may be a “means” to the Kingdom, but it is not the Kingdom. At its best, it is “the initial budding forth of the Kingdom.”

Third, the church, as it is lived by Catholics each day, is the “People of God.” It is faithful, dynamic, and true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The church as the People of God lives on and thrives in this world because Jesus never stops bestowing his grace and spirit: “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Throughout the world can be seen lay women and men, consecrated religious women and men, priests, bishops, cardinals, and popes who make real the love of Christ through the abundance of work and

sacrifice they offer to the poor, the needy, and the marginalized. These are the people who make real what the church must be, who make real the words attributed to St. Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,  
no hands but yours,  
no feet but yours,  
yours are the eyes  
through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the earth,  
yours are the feet  
by which he is to go about doing good,  
and yours are the hands  
by which he is to bless us now.

Finally, an important distinction to keep in mind in approaching an understanding of the institutional church is the keen insight of the late Cardinal Avery Dulles, SJ. In his talks and writings he talked of the church not only in terms of the People of God and its institutional structures, but also as a mystical communion, a sacrament, a herald, and a servant. All these images and models are involved in our ongoing and evolving understanding of the church. Each traits mentioned by Dulles is necessary for a healthy and vibrant church.

Thus, the church is many things. Therefore, in a sense, to talk of the institutional nature of the church necessarily involves a certain amount of fragmentation of what in totality is the Catholic Church. But it must be done here so that specific aspects of the church today can be isolated and we can be appropriately critical where criticism is due. Therefore, it is proposed that throughout this book:

The *institutional church* referred to is that part of the Roman Catholic Church that involves the structures, infrastructures, administrative offices, rules, regulations, rituals, and the personnel—whether clerical or lay—that have evolved in the church over time. These outward organizational structures were developed not from the infallible processes

that the Holy Spirit nourishes to protect the church from error but rather by the very human and fallible people who make up the church.

It is very important that this definition is clear. I have encountered very serious and faith-filled people who believe that my ideas amount to finding fault with the people in the pews or their priests. That is not the case at all. Nor is mine a criticism of particular local bishops and cardinals, except as they offer examples of what is wrong. They, too, are trying to respond to the Spirit, just as the wider group of the faithful are.

My critique of the institutional church is aimed at the public persona of the church itself, as observed in its structures and the people representing it (*de facto*, mostly clerics and therefore mostly men). It is the super-structure of the church, the one that makes the institutional rules and has made the in-

stitutional mistakes that have gotten us into our present situation. In no way am I even remotely questioning the entire church's faith-filled inner life of holiness and grace. The reader must keep this important distinction in mind so that the context of my critical observations is not seen as any kind of destructive attack on the church in general. It is the institutional church that is dying, not the church we Catholics belong to.

.....  
*Can the People of God  
continue to function  
with the present day  
institutional model of  
the church?*

.....  
And, given this situation, a significant question arises: Can the People of God continue to function with the present day institutional model of the church? The answer to that question is no.

"Is the institutional church dying?"

My answer is: "Yes, fortunately!"

It is fortunate because this death can be the occasion for a *metanoia* in the church. *Metanoia* is theologically understood to mean a change of mind and heart; within the church it would mean repentance that leads to and is an occasion for transformation.

Does the institutional church need repentance and transformation? It

seems to me that the answer to this is incontrovertible. Here are some recent incidents and happenings around the world that directly involve the institutional church. They all occurred in the two years immediately before this book was written. These examples make clear the specific nature of how the institutional church has been conducting itself and why this gives rise to a call for its transformation. This list is not exhaustive, and many of the incidents are well known to the faithful. I offer them here as examples only, and while any one of them might have a “explanation” or a “legal response,” the cumulative effect of them is to say that something is terribly wrong in the institutional church and needs to be radically changed.

*November 2009*—A 27-year-old woman pregnant with her fifth child went to the Catholic hospital in Phoenix, Arizona, with pulmonary hypertension and experiencing heart failure that would most likely be fatal to her if the pregnancy continued. Sister Margaret McBride, RSM, a well-respected Catholic hospital administrator, consulted thoroughly with the medical professionals and medical ethicists at the hospital regarding the likely result of allowing the pregnancy to continue and determined that it would mean the mother’s death. The hospital group finally and under time constraints approved a procedure to save the patient, which resulted in the death of the fetus. Bishop Thomas Olmsted, the Catholic bishop of Phoenix, then announced to the public that Sister Margaret was excommunicated for officially permitting an “abortion.” Local newspapers began to ask, “Why is it that priests who commit sexual abuse crimes against living children are not excommunicated, but Sister Margaret is?”

*Easter Sunday Mass 2010*—The former Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, with the Pope present and thousands of the faithful in attendance, characterized the media’s coverage of clerical sex abuse as “petty gossip.” As one would expect, the international media was fully present. After this talk, Benedict XVI embraced Cardinal Sodano in front of all at Saint Peter’s Square.