



The Limits of Rational Knowledge of God According to Joseph Ratzinger

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Abstract: Joseph Ratzinger’s theological thought is distinguished by the conviction that the Christian knowledge of God is closely associated with the concept of the *Logos*. Therefore, in his reflection, Joseph Ratzinger is a theologian who seeks to render the mystery of God in positive terms. Yet, it would be a mistake to leave this statement without adding that in the rational knowledge of God, theology should at the same time confront what constitutes the limit of rational knowledge. The aim of this article is therefore to provide an overview of how Joseph Ratzinger pointed to the limits of the rational knowledge of God. A two-step method was adopted to achieve this goal. With reference to the synthetic approach, it first accounts for the place that the question of the rational knowledge of God takes in J. Ratzinger’s theological reflection; then it points out how, according to the German theologian, we should understand the apophatic dimension of all theological knowledge; namely, that God, being the infinite Love, can only be known in aspects, and only in the attitude of surrender. In the next step, the most significant aspects of Joseph Ratzinger’s theological reflection on theological knowledge were selected. The analysis of representative texts demonstrates how the German theologian understands limits in the rational knowledge of God. Thus, the understanding of rationality closed to the knowledge of God was presented first, along with the requirements that reason has to meet in order to open itself to the knowledge of God. Then it was demonstrated which of the most important areas of J. Ratzinger’s theological reflection refer to the limits of rational knowledge, and how they do it. The article concerns the limits of knowledge determined by the Revelation, the mystery of God, and the personal centre of Revelation – Christ, as well as the ecclesiastical nature of the creed.

Keywords: Joseph Ratzinger, positive theology, apophatic theology, rationality, knowledge of God

The conviction that the mystery of God is rational lies at the core of Joseph Ratzinger’s entire theological work. This is reflected not only in the breadth of his work, in which he expressed the belief that *ratio* can and should be involved in the reflection on issues related to God. It is also reflected in the fact that he *explicitly* explored the theme of the rational knowledge of God from the beginning of his theological reflection until its end.

This topic was one of the main themes of his lecture delivered on 24 June 1959 on the occasion of his appointment to the Chair of Fundamental Theology at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Bonn. Joseph Ratzinger titled the lecture “The God of Faith and the God of Philosophers.”¹ The conviction that *ratio* has

¹ The text was subsequently published under the title: “Der Gott des Glaubens und der Gott der Philosophen. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der theologia naturalis” (Ratzinger, “Der Gott des Glaubens,” 40–59) and was later reissued. Polish trans.: Ratzinger, “Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów,” 149–168.

access to the mystery of God was also expressed in later publications and addresses, such as the *Introduction to Christianity*, where Ratzinger stated: “It is nonsense to plead the ‘mystery,’ as people certainly do only too often, by way of an excuse for the failure of reason. If theology arrives at all kinds of absurdities and tries, not only to excuse them, but even where possible to canonize them by pointing to the mystery, then we are confronted with a misuse of the true idea of ‘mystery,’ the purpose of which is not to destroy reason but rather to render belief possible *as* understanding.”²

This thought was expressed in a very meaningful way in a speech delivered at the University of Regensburg on 12 September 2006, which was addressed to representatives of the academic world. The address was titled “Glaube, Vernunft und Universität. Erinnerungen und Reflexionen [Faith, Reason and the University. Memories and Reflections]”. Benedict XVI said then, recalling a conversation between the Christian Emperor Paleologus and a Muslim who claimed that God’s actions are not subject to human logic:

Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God’s nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true? I believe that here we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God. Modifying the first verse of the Book of Genesis, the first verse of the whole Bible, John began the prologue of his Gospel with the words: “In the beginning was the λόγος.” This is the very word used by the emperor: God acts, σὺν λόγῳ, with *logos*. *Logos* means both reason and word – a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason. John thus spoke the final word on the biblical concept of God.³

According to J. Ratzinger, the close connection between rationality and the mystery of God also means that reason plays a critical role in relation to the assertions of faith. It protects faith from being relegated to the space of subjectivity and privacy, and from ceasing to be communicable.⁴

To appreciate the significance of this reflection, it needs to be reminded that, at the time when the *Introduction to Christianity* was written, J. Ratzinger was one of the few authors who addressed the issue with such attention, and that his reflection on the relationship between the knowledge of God by faith and rational cognition is not only a meta-scientific reflection, but is also distinguished by an exceptionally broad consideration of cultural change and the historical context.⁵ Furthermore, this research topic has not only been relevant to Ratzinger since his first publications but has also been a constant point of reference in the writings he published as pope.⁶

² Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 76–77.

³ Benedict XVI, “Meeting with the Representatives of Science.”

⁴ Cf. Ratzinger, “Die wichtigste kulturelle Herausforderung,” 254.

⁵ Cf. Fisichella, “Verità fede e ragione,” 28.

⁶ Blanco Sarto, “Myśl teologiczna,” 38.

1. Reason in the Face of Mystery That Surpasses It

Joseph Ratzinger's reflection on the mystery of God is therefore essentially oriented toward knowing it in positive terms and emphasises the ability of the *ratio* to grasp the truth about God. However, this does not mean that his thought fails to consider the fact that the truth about God is always greater than human knowledge and that God remains an unfathomable mystery. Admittedly, it is difficult to find texts extensively treating the issue of apophatic theology in the German theologian's work. However, it is possible to find statements that allow us to grasp his understanding of God's incomprehensibility and the limitations of reason in discovering the Divine mystery.

One of the texts, in which this can be grasped best, is a part of the commentary on the confession of faith in the Triune God in the *Introduction to Christianity*. It is there that J. Ratzinger writes that Christian theology has to realise its limits in the face of the mystery of the Trinity and that "a realm, in which only the humble admission of ignorance can be true knowledge and only wondering attendance before the incomprehensible mystery can be the right confession."⁷

How should this dimension of incomprehensibility be understood? The analysis of this part of the commentary on the *creed* allows us to identify two reasons why, according to J. Ratzinger, all knowledge of God is at the same time accompanied by a certain dimension of His incomprehensibility. Firstly, the decisive reason is the fact that "Love is always '*mysterium*' – more that one can reckon or grasp by subsequent reckoning. Love itself – the uncreated, eternal God – *must* therefore be in the highest degree a mystery – 'the' *mysterium* itself."⁸ Therefore, in knowing God, man does not come to "possess" something of His mystery, but discovers it in the relationship of love with God. The truth about God is therefore apophatic in the sense that it is discovered in the act of surrender rather than grasping.

The second reason is indicated by Ratzinger's commentary on the development of the Trinitarian dogma. Commenting on the process, he remarks that the dogma itself has its roots not in speculation about God or in a philosophical attempt to explain the origin of being. The dogma originated from a reflection on how God has been known in history. Summing up this observation, J. Ratzinger states:

Every one of the big basic concepts of the doctrine of the Trinity was condemned at one time or another; they were all adopted only inasmuch as they are at the same time branded as unusable and admitted simply as poor stammering utterances – and no more. The concept '*persona*' (or *prosopon*) was once condemned, as we have seen; the crucial word that in the fourth century became the standard of orthodoxy, *homousios* (=of one substance with

⁷ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 162.

⁸ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 162.

the Father), had been condemned in the third century; the concept of ‘proceeding’ has a condemnation behind it – and so one could go on. One must say, I think, that this condemnation of the later formulas of faith form an intimate part of them: it is only through the negation, and the infinite indirectness implicit in it, that they are usable. The doctrine of the Trinity is only possible as a piece of baffled theology, so to speak.⁹

Pointing out that all human knowledge and discourse about God is “poor stammering utterances” and involves practicing a “crucified theology” does not mean that Ratzinger is giving up on the claim that truth is not accessible in this knowledge and discourse. It is accessible, albeit only with the reservation that one remembers about the insufficiency of this knowledge and about the fact that this is only the knowledge of aspects. Explaining this fact, the German theologian refers to the example of modern physics, which points out that it is impossible to study the corpuscular and wave structure of matter at the same time. Similarly, therefore, in knowing God, it is not possible to know Him completely and comprehensively but “only by circling round, by looking and describing from different, apparently contrary angles can we succeed in alluding to the truth, which is never visible to us in its totality.”¹⁰

Thus, it should be said that, to Ratzinger, the awareness of the incomprehensibility of God does not mean that man should give up on speaking about God in his cognition.¹¹ The possibility of talking about God follows from the fact that He is not entirely incomprehensible – He can be known but only in aspects and in an act of loving engagement.

Thus, the inability to know God completely does not rule out the activity of *ratio*. The mystery of God remains rational. Nevertheless, emphasising the rational character of faith, which does not imply giving up on reason, even in the face of the limits to our knowledge, the German theologian makes it clear at the same time that this applies to a reason that has not been narrowed.¹² First, we need to briefly outline how J. Ratzinger defines that narrowed model of rationality, so that we can subsequently show how he understands the possibility of rational knowledge to be attained by a reason that is open to this knowledge and where reason may potentially encounter limits in the knowledge of God.

⁹ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 172.

¹⁰ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 174.

¹¹ Ratzinger, “Preaching God Today,” 88.

¹² Cf. Ratzinger, “Wege des Glaubens,” 550–551, 640–643.

2. Rationality vs. Openness to the Knowledge of God

In his publications, J. Ratzinger identifies two main reasons why the knowledge of God in modern times is perceived as unrelated to rational knowledge. The German theologian sees the first of these reasons in the evolution that took place in philosophy in response to the claims made by Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Referring to Kant's thought, the Bavarian theologian does not comment extensively on his philosophical system but instead, he mainly stresses that Kant's critique of metaphysics marked the end of unity in philosophical thinking and of the belief in the truthfulness of the knowledge of God through reason.¹³ Behind this claim, of course, is Kant's thesis that arguments for the existence of God and the knowledge of Him are accomplished not on the metaphysical but on the moral level.¹⁴

Ratzinger believes that Schleiermacher contributed further to the departure from the metaphysical horizon of cognition. Referring to the three different dimensions of human existence, namely, reason, will, and emotion, he linked religion to feeling, science to reason, and ethos to will. As a consequence of this, religion was reduced to something that is quite indescribable and undefinable; it is something that focuses on the subject experiencing emotions rather than an encounter with an objective interlocutor. It is, in a word, beyond rational cognition.¹⁵

Moving away from a philosophy that has the courage to ask about the truth of reality is therefore, according to Ratzinger, the first reason why rationality closes itself to the knowledge of God. According to Agnieszka Lekka-Kowalik, we can propose a thesis that, in his philosophical views, J. Ratzinger is a classical philosopher, in the same sense as the term is understood by the Lublin school of philosophy, which means: convinced about the existence of truth and its cognisability by reason, taking into account the deepest and existential human questions, as well as the significant role of love in cognition. Although the aforementioned author admits that substantiating this hypothesis requires deeper analysis, she points to a number of arguments in favour of it.¹⁶ Krzysztof Kaucha, meanwhile, states that J. Ratzinger develops a philosophy that considers metaphysics and ontology, incorporating the scientific view of the world into his reflection.¹⁷

Thus, the first reason why, according to the German theologian, rational knowledge of God presents itself as impossible is, above all, related to the metaphysical assumptions and the abandonment of the courage to ask questions about the essence of things.

¹³ Cf. Ratzinger, "Faith and Philosophy," 11.1–11.3.

¹⁴ Cf. Judycki, "Kant," 621.

¹⁵ Cf. Ratzinger, "Faith and Philosophy," 11.4.

¹⁶ Lekka-Kowalik, "Przymierze na rzecz rozumu i prawdy," 37–42.

¹⁷ Kaucha, *Cóż to jest prawda?*, 88.

The second reason is closely correlated with the first, although, in Ratzinger's view, it is not limited to the area of philosophical reflection. It is more a way of thinking that came to prevail in modernity, and that is marked by a kind of positivism. That positivism has, admittedly, marked its influence in philosophy too (here, Ratzinger mentions Kant, but, above all, cites the thought of Wittgenstein), however, its influence on the way of thinking is much broader.¹⁸ This is how J. Ratzinger describes it in one of his texts:

The successes in the progressive discovery of the material world and of its laws are achieved through an ever stricter and more refined application of that method which is characterized by the combination of observation, experiment, and the development of mathematical theories. Within this method, which limits itself to what is verifiable and falsifiable and from that acquires its generally binding certainty, there is no room for the question about the essential causes of things. Since God is not observable along the lines of a repeatable experiment and not calculable in terms of a mathematical theory, he cannot appear within this method—that is by its very nature impossible.¹⁹

The second reason why reason remains closed to the knowledge of God is related to the prevalence of a mentality founded on the cognition characteristic of natural sciences that does not open itself to a broader cognitive horizon.²⁰ In this context, the scientific reason does not have to be hostile to matters of faith; rather, it is no longer interested in it, as it has ceased to seek the ultimate and definitive truth of existence.²¹

We have no space here to elaborate on the reasons why J. Ratzinger rejects this understanding of reason. A detailed analysis of Ratzinger's texts from this point of view has been conducted by Krystian Kałuża.²² What is important for the present analysis is the German theologian's belief that there is a need for a different understanding of rational cognition. Where reason is locked within the limits of objective cognition, knowledge of God remains inaccessible. It is therefore necessary to recognise that *ratio* should perform its activity in accordance with the nature of man and, more specifically, with the dialogical conception of the person. Ratzinger wrote about it in the *Introduction to Christianity*:

¹⁸ Cf. Ratzinger, "Faith and Knowledge," 9.12; Ratzinger, "Faith and Philosophy," 11.13.

¹⁹ Ratzinger, "Contemporary Man," 79.

²⁰ In another place, J. Ratzinger ("Theology and Church Politics," 21.8) states: "For the farther the Enlightenment advanced historically, the more it fell into the habit of narrowing the concept of reason: Reason is what is reproducible. This means that reason becomes positivistic. Thus it restricts itself to what can be demonstrated over and over experimentally; but the consequence of this is that it abandons its own initial question, 'What is it?' and replaces it with the pragmatic question, 'How does it function?' This in turn means that, under the pressure of its standards for certainty, reason abandons the question about the truth and investigates nothing more than feasibility. In doing so, it has fundamentally abdicated as reason."

²¹ Ratzinger, "Die wichtigste kulturelle Herausforderung," 254.

²² Cf. Kałuża, "Josepha Ratzingera koncepcja teologii fundamentalnej," 63–77.

For man is the more himself the more he is with ‘the other.’ He only comes *to* himself by moving away *from* himself. [...] Accordingly, he is completely himself when he has ceased to stand in himself, to shut himself off in himself, and to assert himself, when in fact he is pure openness to God. To put it again in different terms: man comes to himself by moving out beyond himself. Jesus Christ is he who has moved right out beyond himself and *thus* the man who has truly come to himself.²³

The consequence of this assumption is the German theologian’s belief that only reason that is open to receive what is given to it by God can properly know the things of God. According to Andrzej Czaja, this rule comes from the legacy of St. Augustine and has been consistently applied throughout J. Ratzinger’s theological reflection.²⁴ Meanwhile, J. Ratzinger himself will emphasise that reason has to be open to this deeper meaning, as logic itself has “a nose of wax,” which means that it is prone to be turned in different directions.²⁵

3. Beginning of Theological Knowledge – A Gift That Comes from “Outside” of the Knowing Subject

The above conclusion leads directly to the first area of Ratzinger’s theological reflection, in which the limits of rationality are clearly drawn. It is the question of Revelation. He devoted a lot of space to this topic in his theological reflection, at various stages of his academic career. The purpose of this study is not to provide an exhaustive discussion of J. Ratzinger’s understanding of the Revelation but to point out how Revelation places certain limits on rational knowledge and how it delineates the “space” for rational reflection.²⁶

Above all then, as it flows from the nature of Revelation, new knowledge of God is opened to human reason only through the act of faith. Significantly, in one of his texts, Ratzinger describes faith as a new beginning of thought that man himself cannot establish and cannot replace. It is a new beginning that comes from the Word.²⁷ He expresses it in yet another way by referring to St. Augustine’s famous saying *credo ut intelligam*. He confessed that this phrase reflects accurately the essence of his understanding of the mystery of God and that he himself, following St. Augustine and

²³ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 234–235.

²⁴ Czaja, “Naczelna zasada,” 5. To learn more about the role of St. Augustine’s thought in J. Ratzinger’s theology see Cipriani, “Sanct’Agostino,” 9–26.

²⁵ Ratzinger, “Vorwort,” 786. Cf. Ratzinger, “Die Einheit des Glaubens,” 178–181.

²⁶ A broader account of the understanding of God’s Revelation in J. Ratzinger’s work is discussed by Rafał Pokrywiński („Pojęcie Objawienia Bożego,” 81–102).

²⁷ Cf. Ratzinger, “The Church as an Essential Dimension of Theology,” 397.

St. Thomas Aquinas, understands his theology this way, calling the above-mentioned motto the fundamental thesis of faith.²⁸

Of course, this does not imply that J. Ratzinger denies the possibility of knowing God by natural means, using only reason that has not been enlightened by faith. As was indicated above, the possibility of rational knowledge of God derives from the fact that creation bears in itself a trace of Him who is the Logos. Nonetheless, referring to the dogma on the natural knowledge of God, J. Ratzinger stressed that, though it cannot be denied, one should also not overestimate this claim. It expresses the unity of creation and redemption; it states that faith in Christ is not a separate area, unrelated to the rest of being, but that it reaches the basis of all things.²⁹ Behind these claims is the German theologian's conviction that rational knowledge of God solely through reason, within historical reality, frequently encounters obstacles from man himself.³⁰

Thus, the first limitation that reason has to confront when it wants to know God is the fact that God is most clearly accessible in Revelation. The second limitation is the fact that the attitude of faith, not understanding, has priority in meeting God who reaches out to man. Understanding comes second, as a consequence of faith. Ratzinger emphasises this, pointing out that the primacy of faith is related to the fact that the act of faith is a reliance on You and opens one to realities that are accessible only to a trusting and loving person.³¹

The German theologian expressed this thought in other works too. In the *Introduction to Christianity* he will repeat that the knowledge of God eludes objectivity and that someone who is trying to be a mere spectator will not learn anything.³² Meanwhile, in his *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy, he will recall biblical testimonies reminding us that the knowledge of God is linked to the attitude of humility, as expressed by St. Paul in his famous statement on the foolishness of the cross and Divine wisdom that is not accessible to the wise of this world (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–19, 26–29; 3:18) and on the fact that giving up on human wisdom consists in the readiness to enter into the knowledge of God that is characteristic of the Son. Ratzinger states: “We might also say that our will has to become a filial will. When it does, then we can see. But to be a son is to be in relation: it is a relational concept. It involves giving up the autonomy that is closed in upon itself; it includes what Jesus means by saying that we have to become like children.”³³

An observation that Ratzinger makes in his study of the concept of Revelation in St. Bonaventure is interesting in this context. He notices a certain difference in the

28 Cf. Ratzinger – Seewald, *Salt of the Earth*, 7.114–7.116.

29 Ratzinger, “Gottesbegriff und Gottesbild,” 52.

30 Cf. Ratzinger, “Gottesbegriff und Gottesbild,” 52.

31 Ratzinger, “Faith and Knowledge,” 9.14.

32 Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 175.

33 Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 283.

understanding of theological reflection by St. Thomas and by St. Bonaventure. While to the former, theology means the building of new conclusions that follow from the articles of faith (cf. S. Th. q. 1, Art. 2 and 7), in Bonaventure's view, theology does not supply new content but merely re-states it in a language that can be understood. Therefore, in the latter case, it is not so much a matter of extensive movement that broadens the conclusions, but of going deeper, as the task of theology is not to create new ideas but to find the right words for ideas that do not come from it, but from God Himself. Its task would therefore be to receive the Kerygma, understand it, and express it in a scientific conceptual language.³⁴

To sum up, it can thus be said that in the knowledge of God, the human *ratio* encounters its limits not only in the moment in which it has to open itself to Revelation. Reason is called to be humble, and therefore to defend itself against pride in which it wants to achieve independence and self-reliance in the knowledge of God. The limit here is defined not so much by sources inaccessible outside of the Revelation but by how one functions in obedience to the Word. Traditional theology would articulate it by emphasising that theology cannot be practiced without a living relationship with God.

4. The Centre and Order of Theological Thinking

The aforementioned claim of the German theologian that reason has to not only recognise its cognitive limits and open itself to Revelation but also act in an attitude of humility and obedience, demands to be elaborated. It gives rise to the question of how this attitude of humility and obedience is reflected in theological thinking and how one can speak of the limits of theological knowledge in this context. It seems that, in the case of Ratzinger's theology, it is the most appropriate to speak not so much about strict boundaries but about the fact that theological knowledge has to be properly oriented and have a proper central point of reference.

According to Ratzinger, a living experience of God stands at the centre of theological reflection. The German theologian strongly emphasises that authentic knowledge of God is based not so much on reflection as on experience, and that reflection is secondary to it – it is secondary, as God allows Himself to be known in the encounter, that is, in the experience of Jesus Christ.³⁵

An important addition is required here. To Ratzinger, the claim that God can be known fully through Jesus Christ means also that knowledge has the nature of

³⁴ Ratzinger, "Offenbarungsverständnis und Geschichtstheologie," 204–205.

³⁵ Ratzinger, "Gottesbegriff und Gottesbild," 49.

a way and should be described as imitation.³⁶ This is why Jerzy Szymik states, citing what Benedict XVI wrote in his book about Jesus of Nazareth, that the essence of the theological method is *sequela Christi* – conversion, transformation, and imitation of Christ.³⁷ It is a strictly Augustinian-Bonaventurian belief, which means that all faculties of the soul; memory, intellect, and will, need to interact in attaining the knowledge of God.³⁸

Thus, to J. Ratzinger, theology is a deep harmony of two subjects: God who speaks, and man who allows Him to express Himself in the human word.³⁹ Therefore, with all his acceptance of the scientific character of theological reflection, Ratzinger emphasises that theology can be studied only in the context of appropriate spiritual practice, and with readiness to accept its claims on life. “But just as we cannot learn to swim without water, so we cannot learn theology without the spiritual praxis in which it lives.”⁴⁰ It is also from this perspective that we need to understand the words in which Ratzinger stressed that his interest in issues related to the liturgy was closely linked to the question of faith and theology. He wrote:

I chose fundamental theology as my field because I wanted first and foremost to examine thoroughly the question: Why do we believe? But also included from the beginning in this question was the other question of the right response to God and, thus, the question of the liturgy. My studies on the liturgy are to be understood from this perspective. I was concerned, not about the specific problems of liturgical studies, but always about anchoring the liturgy in the foundational act of our faith and, thus, also about its place in the whole of our human existence.⁴¹

Radical obedience to what God had said is, to Ratzinger, a logical consequence of this understanding of theology. Scott Hahn was right to point out in this context that, with regard to the German scholar’s theology, one can draw the conclusion that there has been no other Catholic theologian in the last century, or perhaps ever, who would practice theology so deeply integrated with the Bible and based on biblical categories.⁴² One can therefore say that, for Ratzinger, reason has to be obedient to the word of the Scripture and to the ideas that grow out of it. Knowledge of God is not the fruit of reason, which, admittedly, begins with knowing God’s realities, but then thinks about it on its own. It is a never-ending dialogue. Ratzinger emphasises it strongly, commenting on the issue of modern-day preaching; he says that, in speaking about

³⁶ Ratzinger, “Contemporary Man,” 87.

³⁷ Szymik, *Theologia Benedicta*, 66–67.

³⁸ Cf. Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith*, 58.

³⁹ Cf. Szymik, *Prawda i mądrość*, 34–35.

⁴⁰ Ratzinger, “What Is Theology?,” 322.

⁴¹ Ratzinger, “On the Inaugural Volume,” 10.2.

⁴² Hahn, *Covenant and Communion*, 14.

God, it is necessary to refer to the Biblical image of God.⁴³ If so, then, according to Ratzinger, rational knowledge of God finds its ultimate measure in what God has said about Himself. This way, *ratio*, enlightened by faith, imposes some limits on itself and points to the direction of thinking.

Listening to the Word and confronting it is therefore what sets the direction for the reflection that reason undertakes when it reaches for its own knowledge. This conclusion echoes Ratzinger's reply to the question about the specific character of his theology. The German theologian replied then that he has never attempted to develop his own system but instead, he followed the faith of the Church, which also meant its great thinkers, and that his starting point in this was the Word.⁴⁴

Another important issue describing how J. Ratzinger understood the need to shape theological thinking is something that can be described as its ecclesiastical character that emerges from the nature of theology. However, for the later prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith this does not signify some kind of "violence" in which the autonomous *ratio* has to submit to something foreign to it and what is imposed on it as if from outside. Ratzinger states: "If, then, the coordination of Church and theology is described as medieval, that fact should raise the basic question of whether it is not precisely here that enlightened reason finds its limits."⁴⁵

In his argumentation justifying the claim that theology must have an ecclesiastic character by its very nature, the German theologian points to two reasons. The first one is that any human grasp of truth through a theological reflection is, by nature, limited. He remarks, therefore, that the fullness of truth is present only in the Risen Lord and that it was not given in an absolute way at any point in history. It is communicated to us in the entirety of history, maintaining an openness to the future, in which the Spirit leads to a deeper understanding of the truth (cf. John 16:12–13). From this follows the second reason – the subject of the understanding of faith is not an individual person but the Church, which retains the understanding of faith by all ages. Ratzinger states that the basic form of orthodoxy consists in believing with the whole Church and accepting the entire history of that faith. A Christian who believes as a member of the Church, which is a timeless entity, therefore relativises his "today," and his faith has to be experienced in obedience to what has already been given to the Church, while he has to be open to be led by the Spirit that works within the Church.⁴⁶

Behind these words also stand the conviction that the knowledge of faith taking place in the Church has a sacramental structure, as it demands – according to Paul's

⁴³ Cf. Ratzinger, "Preaching God Today," 99–101.

⁴⁴ Ratzinger – Seewald, *Salt of the Earth*, 10.28–10.30.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ratzinger, "The Church and Scientific Theology," 324.

⁴⁶ Cf. Ratzinger, "Die Einheit des Glaubens," 183.

statement “I no longer live” (cf. Gal 2:20) – the substitution of one’s own self with Christ, who gives himself in the Church as the “Body of Christ.”⁴⁷ The Church is what “being contemporary with Christ”⁴⁸ means to a Christian.

Conclusions

An encounter with Joseph Ratzinger’s theological thought allows us to see that he is deeply convinced that it is possible to know God rationally. This does not mean, however, that the German theologian does not see that human knowledge is limited in the face of the mystery of God. The apophatic dimension of theological knowledge is first related to the fact that, ultimately, the object of that knowledge is God as infinite Love, and the knowledge of love, by its very nature, requires an attitude of surrender rather than the will to possess. Therefore, God remains incomprehensible to human reason and can only be known if one turns to Him with humility. Secondly, the elusiveness of the mystery of God is also the result of the nature of human cognition, which is always limited to aspects in relation to the incomprehensible fullness of God. Thus, in Ratzinger’s thought, a certain limitation is inherent in the very nature of the human cognitive act. The limit is the way in which God can be known and how the human *ratio* is capable of attaining this knowledge.

However, Ratzinger’s reflection on the rational knowledge of God is dominated not so much by a theoretical analysis of the apophatic dimension of that knowledge, as by the attempt to answer the question of how one can truly know God and where certain limits in this knowledge are.

The analysis conducted in this article has led to the following conclusions. Firstly, in his theological works, Joseph Ratzinger points out that the conviction about the possibility of rational knowledge of God meets with criticism nowadays for two reasons. First of all, it is related to the heritage of modern philosophical reflection. It moved away from grand metaphysics and from asking questions about truth and the purpose of life; moreover, under the influence of Kant and Schleiermacher, it concluded that matters related to religion evade objective knowledge and are accessible only in a subjective experience. The second reason, meanwhile, has the character of a general belief that dominates modern thinking. Things are considered rational if they can be verified along the lines of natural sciences.

⁴⁷ Ratzinger, “The Church as an Essential Dimension of Theology,” 393–394. For more see Szymik, *Theologia benedicta*, 77–93 (Szymik titled this part of the commentary to J. Ratzinger’s theology “Proces ‘podmiany podmiotu’ a kościelność teologii” [The Process of ‘Substitution of the Subject’ and the Ecclesiastical Character of Theology]).

⁴⁸ Ratzinger, “The Church as an Essential Dimension of Theology,” 399.

Thus, the first limit in the rational knowledge of God is, according to Joseph Ratzinger, linked to the narrow understanding of rationality. It is therefore a limit related to the very understanding of rationality. Only a *ratio* that is prepared to search for the deepest truth and purpose of reality and man can open itself to the mystery of God.

The second limitation of human reason in attaining knowledge of the mystery of God consists in the fact that this knowledge cannot be the fruit of an autonomous quest but must result from an encounter with what is given “from outside.” Reason has to open itself to Revelation, in which God reveals Himself to man. It can therefore be suggested that, according to Joseph Ratzinger, Revelation delineates some kind of “space” within which *ratio* can truly know God. Ratzinger does not undermine the possibility of natural knowledge of God but points to the actual fallibility of this knowledge and to its limited character. He understands Revelation as a limit that determines the certainty of the knowledge of God.

The third type of “limit” in the rational knowledge of God in the German theologian’s thought can be described as a kind of “order of theological thinking” or “obedience to a specific method.” At the centre of the rational knowledge of God one has to place the knowledge of Christ, in whom God ultimately revealed Himself. This knowledge, in turn, not only requires engaging the *ratio* but also is closely linked to the imitation of Christ and a personal dialogue with Him that introduces a person to a living bond with God. This is why spiritual practice and liturgy are irreplaceable. This is also where the need for obedience to the Word contained in the Holy Scripture finds its justification. Finally, the order of theological thinking also means that it feeds on the doctrine of the Church, recognising it as the expression of what embodied the mystery of Christ in history.

Of course, the analysis of Joseph Ratzinger’s thought outlined above is a synthesis, and each of the topics raised in it could be elaborated in more detail and would lead to the discovery of further, more specific, questions related to the knowledge of the mystery of God.

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