



Catholics and Lutherans on Scripture. A Proposal by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI

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Abstract: Luther emphasized the centrality of the word of God while formulating the principle of *sola Scriptura*, which later evolved. The Council of Trent and Vatican II present Scripture and tradition as complementary elements that originate from the same source, seeking their compatibility with the historical-critical method and the findings of contemporary exegesis. Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's "hermeneutics of faith" goes in the same direction but with a personal development, as can be noticed in *Jesus of Nazareth*, published between 2007 and 2013. The article's main contribution is the comprehensive description of Ratzinger's ideas about interpreting Scripture. Along with the succinct summary of Ratzinger's biblical thought, the article also presents some critical comments on his ideas and works in confrontation with the Protestant doctrine about reading and interpreting the Bible.

Keywords: Revelation, Scripture, tradition, Trent, Vatican II, historical-critical method, exegesis, hermeneutics

Little is known about what happened on October 12–14, 1518, when Luther went to Augsburg to attend the imperial diet led by Cardinal Cajetan. According to the Protestant version, the journey was difficult, causing him digestive disorders, nervous fatigue, and exhaustion. It is said that he even fainted. Faced with Cardinal Cajetan, Luther replied: "His Holiness abuses the Scriptures. I deny that he is above the word of God." This attitude was confirmed three years later at the Diet of Worms, where he appeared before the emperor and the imperial court; there he was again invited to recant, which he refused, appealing to the "testimony of Scripture or by reason," of which – moreover – elsewhere he makes strong claims for its insufficiency in the face of faith. To that, the German reformer added, according to tradition: "My conscience is subject to the word of God, and it is neither right nor safe to act against my own conscience. God help me! Amen."¹

¹ WA 7, 838; Grosse 2017, 171–92; Möhler 1985, 309–11, 313–15, 321–27, 334–35; Schütte 1966, 354–64; Ortenkemper and Wetter 2006, 43–53; Gómez-Chacón 2023, 345–74; a former version of this text was published as Blanco-Sarto 2021, 415–31; see also Blanco-Sarto 2023, 271–96.

1. The Lutheran Principle

Looking at the reformer's literary work, it is easy to see that the Bible is at the center of his preaching: from the commentaries on the Psalms in Wittenberg to his death with yet another revision of his German translation of the Bible. As he once said to a group of friends in his *Conversations*, Scripture is "an immense forest with all kinds of trees, from which one could pick the most varied fruits; that in the Bible one could find every comfort, doctrine, teaching, warning, promise, threat, etc.; and that there was no tree in this forest which he had not shaken and from which he had not cut a couple of pears or apples." (Tischreden, WA 34, II, 674) With this picture, Luther's love for the word of God is beyond doubt. The question remains, however, as to the place of Scripture in the whole of Revelation. The principle of *sola Scriptura* entailed the conviction that Scripture alone was the source of Revelation to the point of identifying both. The usual version affirms that *sola Scriptura* constitutes an exclusive principle refractory to any external interference. However, noting the hermeneutical reality, the later Protestant motto reads: *sola Scriptura numquam sola*.² At the heart of the Reformation is the Word of God, and this is the nucleus around which all dialogue between Catholics and Protestants must take place. Indeed, the Bible should be the *magna carta* of any theological agreement between the two confessions. Benedict XVI stated this in 2005, precisely in the country where the Reformation was born, with a clear reference to the question of *sola Scriptura*:

The real question is the presence of the Word in the world. In the second century the early Church primarily took a threefold decision: first, [a] to establish the canon, thereby stressing the sovereignty of the Word and explaining that not only is the Old Testament *hai graphai*, but together with the New Testament constitutes a single Scripture which is thus for us the master text.

However, at the same time the Church has formulated [b] an Apostolic Succession, the episcopal ministry, in the awareness that the Word and the witness go together; that is, the Word is alive and present only thanks to the witness, so to speak, and receives from the witness its interpretation. But the witness is only such if he or she witnesses to the Word.

Third and last, [c] the Church has added the *regula fidei* as a key for interpretation. I believe that this reciprocal compenetration constitutes an object of dissent between us, even though we are certainly united on fundamental things. (Benedict XVI 2005)³

² On this topic, see Blanco-Sarto 2017, 149–52. We have not found the origin of this expression, although it appears frequently in Lutheran texts even from the Lutheran–Catholic dialogue (see, for example, Fischer 2007, 58; Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko 2017, no. 73).

³ In the same vein, on the relationship between canon and codex see Blanco-Sarto 2006, 39–67; Chapa 2021, 153–79; on text, canon and rule of faith, Chapa 2021, 194–201.

The Bavarian pope thus mentioned the importance of the mediation of the Church as the receiving authority of revelation. The word of God belongs to the people of God. Therefore, the Church gives rise to the biblical canon, creates an interpretative continuity that follows the apostolic preaching, and establishes the rule of faith that allows a correct reading of Scripture. The Church thus becomes the home of the Word, the habitat, the interpretative sphere where the Word can be correctly understood. The real theological question is the primacy and priority of the word of God in the Church, as Pope Francis also stated in 2017, when commemorating the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation: this anniversary constituted “for Catholics and Lutherans a privileged occasion to live the faith more authentically, to rediscover the Gospel together anew.” (Francis 2017) Luther’s reading of Scripture was above all a spiritual one, partly in contrast to its scholarly reading (see Mannermaa 2010, 223–31). However, as one Lutheran professor stated, “Luther did not separate Scripture from later Church interpretations or doctrinal formulations, as if they were separate entities.” (Mannermaa 2010, 224) When the teachings of the Fathers and the Magisterium coincided with the usual sense of Scripture, then that teaching could be said to be true. In short, no theologian – Catholic or Lutheran – denies the pre-eminence and superiority of the authority of Scripture over the Church. However, the German reformer displayed a certainty in his own understanding of Scripture that would make today’s reader dizzy: “When I am clear and it is evident to me,” he said, referring to the debate against John Eck, “that one interpretation of Scripture is clear, I will oppose any meaning that contradicts this meaning, even if it is that of the Fathers themselves, just as Augustine also warned and often did.” (WA Br. 1, 468, 10)⁴

This more individual (than plural and choral) reading has been discussed not only in theological but also in philosophical circles, especially after the developments of modern hermeneutics, such as the Gadamerian “fusion of horizons” (see Viveros 2019, 341–54). It consists in the *paradosis* of the *kerygma* understood over the centuries. On the contrary, at one point, the German reformer even places himself above the authority of the apostle: “I fight with a fierce and troubled conscience. In any case I beat Paul on this point, ardently wishing to know what Paul meant,” he boldly states (WA 54, 186). His assurance in proposing his interpretation of the doctrine of justification as the hermeneutical criterion of all Christian doctrine would support this presumed superiority: “Scripture showed a new face to him,” Tuomo Mannermaa (2010, 226–27) comments. “He felt that he had been born again and that the gates of paradise had been opened to him.” In this way, he also maintains a correspondence between Scripture and the content of his catechism, which he summarizes. We are thus faced with a new interpretative criterion, for Scripture as *norma normans* is identified with the *norma normata* of the teachings of the Lutheran text: “The catechism

⁴ On the relationship between Bible and Church, see Chapa 2021, 217–18.

guides us in the reading of Scripture,” (Mannermaa 2010, 230) the German reformer maintains. Thus, the Scriptures are to be read within the hermeneutical context of the confessional writings, rather than the framework offered by the tradition contained in the writings of the Fathers, councils, and popes. We are thus faced with a paradigm shift and a change of interpretative framework with regard to the reading of the Word of God (see Mannermaa 2010, 228–29).⁵

However, the Lutheran theologian Sven Grosse proposes that the principle of *sola Scriptura* is to be derived from Scripture itself (even though this principle cannot be demonstrated and justified in Scripture: see Grosse 2017, 151). He draws on the conception of Irenaeus of Lyons when he speaks of a tradition in the sense of teachings expressed by a *viva vox*, and affirms that bishops and priests have received a certain *charisma veritatis*, so that they can exposit the Scriptures to Christians “without risk” and in a reliable way (Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, IV; 26,5 [FC 8/4, 212, 6–14]). “For Irenaeus,” concludes Grosse, “there are both: a guidance of Christians by a magisterium which possesses a special charisma for the exposition of the Scriptures, and an independent interpretation by Christians, which follows from the very clarity of the Scriptures.” (Grosse 2017, 155) Thomas Aquinas also starts from Scripture, without equating it with tradition, while confusion would come when Sylvester Prierias – in polemic with Luther – taught that the Bible was subordinate to the papal Magisterium and actually received its authority from it. The Council of Trent, on the other hand, spoke in a more balanced way about the primacy of Scripture by referring to the Old and New Testaments, God being “the author of both, and also the traditions themselves,” preached “orally by Christ or by the Holy Spirit dictated and by continuous succession preserved in the Catholic Church.” (Concile de Trente, *Decretum de libris sacris et de traditionibus recipendis*, DH 1501)⁶

The dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Council on the word of God in the Church expressly contradicts Prierias by saying that “this magisterium is clearly not above the word of God, but serves it,” (DV 10) and, a little earlier: “This tradition, which derives from the apostles, progresses in the Church with the assistance of the Holy Spirit” (DV 8); that is, it proposes a view of tradition as a *viva vox* in the line with Irenaeus. In fact, the Church “grows in the understanding of the things and words handed down, whether by the contemplation and study of believers, [...] or by the proclamation of those who with the succession of the episcopate have received the certain charism of truth.” (DV 8) To this, the interpretative task is added, in which the Church is assisted by the Spirit. Citing DV 9, Grosse concludes: “Tradition thus has the task of explaining the word of God, and thus also Scripture,” to which he then adds: “It is not denied that the certainty given by Scripture is sufficient. It is only said that to it, is added the certainty given by

⁵ On the relationship between Scripture, liturgy and canon, see Chapa 2021, 203–18.

⁶ The position of the Catholic Vicente Balaguer (2017, 180–83) can also be seen in the same line.

the explanation that tradition makes Scripture.” (Grosse 2017, 159) Thus, the problem also lies in the relationship between the various ecclesial traditions, in order to see whether they can be brought into a single tradition of the entire Church, which goes back to the moment of its founding by Christ. In the above-mentioned hermeneutical framework of the apostolic tradition, of the Fathers, or of the confessional writings, is there one and the same current that refers back to its own origin?

“But this importance of tradition and the magisterium,” our Lutheran author concludes, “has its limit in the authority of Holy Scripture. It must therefore be possible in principle to evaluate these explanations of tradition and the magisterium in the light of the Bible.” (Grosse 2017, 162; there he quotes Ratzinger 1967, 524b–25a) As Vatican II affirms, Scripture is to be read *cum sancta traditione* (see DV 24), which – as pointed out by Vicente Balaguer on the Catholic side, “is the rule of faith and soul, strength, vigour, etc., for life in the Church” (DV 21, 24), adding that “This formula is significant and perfectly acceptable both for the *sola Scriptura* approach of the Reformation and for the Roman Church” (Balaguer 2017, 185; see also Balaguer 2017, 183–87). This continuous confrontation with the word of God will offer legitimacy to the authority of the various traditions. This is why the hermeneutical question – how to read Scripture – is today at the heart of theological dialogue in the ecumenical sphere. “Now,” he adds, “tradition perceives Scripture as something unique. It perceives that it is ‘inspired’ and that it conveys the word of God, *verbum Dei*, being the Word of God: *locutio Dei* (DV 9).” (Balaguer 2017, 187) Both the formulation of the sacred text and its reading in tradition are inspired by the Spirit. The problem is not so much the authority of Scripture, but how one reads it and what its interpretative framework is: in short, what concept of tradition one adopts. Grosse concludes: “Ratzinger is certainly right that his warning is formulated against an absolute contrast between Scripture and Church. He also makes it clear that there is not only the risk of a tradition that distorts the Bible but also the opposite risk, which can be described as not *sola Scriptura* but *nuda Scriptura* or *spoliata Scriptura*.” (Grosse 2017, 164; see Balaguer 2017, 171–80)⁷

⁷ In this way, the Lutheran theologian from Basel also criticizes his German colleague in the end: “The opposition between exegesis and magisterium, which Joseph Ratzinger puts forward, then becomes superfluous,” because “the magisterium also has to carry out exegesis in order to arrive at its formulations.” At this point, what the young Ratzinger considered necessary is possible: that Scripture can correct it. “Tradition and the magisterium have an important auxiliary function, but not the last word,” concludes the Lutheran theologian. That is to say, in terms that could be considered convergent with the affirmations contained in *Dei Verbum*. In this sense, the Lutheran motto *sola Scriptura numquam sola* means that every text needs an interpretative context, a hermeneutical framework – which could well be identified with tradition and the later Magisterium – that enables a right understanding according to the Spirit (see Grosse 2017, 165). Ratzinger maintains that the Magisterium had a perhaps too naïve view of tradition and that it did not adequately emphasize the primacy of Scripture (Ratzinger 1967, 525).

2. Scripture and Tradition

“Naturally, I am a diligent reader of Sacred Scripture,” (Ratzinger and Seewald 2002, 237) confessed the theologian Ratzinger, while maintaining that his theology has always had “a biblical character” (JRSG 13/1, 268), adding “exegesis has always remained for me the center of my theological work.” (Ratzinger 1998, 52–53) The Scripture is at the center of his theology, indeed, it constitutes its soul (see *DV* 8). To this, he adds a personal confession: “For me, first of all, the starting point is the Word. To believe in the word of God and to strive to know it in depth, to delve into it and to understand it, and then to go deeper with the principal teachers of the faith.” (JRSG 13/1, 268) It is also illustrative that this German theologian also held the See of Peter. The importance he attached to his biblical training, especially to the historical-critical method, is well known, as is the attention he paid to his theological developments: “Revelation is not for him – as Thomas Söding affirms – a mere object of reflection: the whole history of his life and spirituality, as far as can be known, is marked by the experience of the living word of God.”⁸ Indeed, Revelation transcends both Scripture and tradition, but at the same time makes itself known through both, and it is precisely from this transcendence of Revelation in relation to Scripture that tradition is born, which “is always, in essence, interpretation.”⁹

In the introduction and commentary to the Dogmatic Constitution on Scripture *Dei Verbum*,¹⁰ Ratzinger considered it essential to deal with the historical-critical method and the achievements of the biblical movement not only in the Protestant sphere. He also alluded to the dialogical, personalistic, and sacramental language contained in the document, and noted that the aforementioned complementarity between Scripture and tradition is not found in the *partim-partim* correlation rejected by Trent itself, but in his formulation of the *et-et* of Scripture *and* tradition: Revelation is contained in *both* Scripture *and* tradition. He thus advanced the theory of the one source proposed by *Dei Verbum* (no. 7) and, moreover, placed Revelation within the framework of salvation history. Thus, the idea of a personal God appeared as the center and summit of this revelatory action, which was occupied by Christ himself. In this integrating perspective, everything was seen “within the overall unity of the mystery.” (See Ratzinger 1967, 498–500)¹¹ For Ratzinger, tradition is

⁸ See Söding 2007, 25; Groß 1990, 304–6; Vallauri 1989, 174–223; Voderholzer 2005, 400–414; Blanco-Sarto 2005, 389–400; Boeve 2010, 13–18, 33–37, 42–45; Uríbarri Bilbao 2009, 25–65; Zatwardnicki 2023, 311–42.

⁹ JRSG 9/1, 410; Ratzinger 1967, 727; see also 723. On this subject, see Chapa 2021, 214–15.

¹⁰ “Einleitung” and commentaries on Chapters 1, 2, and 6 in Ratzinger 1967, 498–528, 571–81. On this point, see Söding 2007, 29–32; Söding 2006, 545–57; Verweyen 2007, 35–38.

¹¹ For example, with regard to the interpretation of tradition concerning the dogma of Mary’s immaculate conception, “This argument is compelling if you understand ‘tradition’ strictly as the handing down of fixed formulas and texts. [...] But if you conceive of ‘tradition’ as the living process whereby the Holy Spirit introduces us to the fullness of truth and teaches us how to understand what previously we could

inseparable from the present time, “in response to the challenges of the present time,” and is also a distinctive core of his thought: “Ratzinger’s theology must be judged on this double and positive contribution,” says Aidan Nichols (1988, 296).

Ratzinger had also carried out a series of investigations into the relationship between Scripture and tradition already during the drafting of *Dei Verbum*, in collaboration with Karl Rahner. This gave rise to a study which, without being obviously concrete, provided insights that would later contribute to the final drafting of the text. The similarities with the conciliar text are evident, so that, in *Revelation and Tradition*, he carried out a detailed historical examination of the concept of tradition and its relationship with Scripture, especially in the Council of Trent. Ratzinger had found surprising results in this historical research, for he came to the conclusion that both – Scripture and tradition – do not form two different sources, but one single source in which they are intimately united, with the aforementioned “theory of the one source.”¹² He further states that the first step in the transmission of Revelation is tradition: he thus places Scripture in the context of the living Church: “It seems to me that the first and most important fact,” says Ratzinger, “is that the Council [of Trent] saw more clearly the connection of the concept of Revelation with that of tradition.” (JRSG 9/1, 428) There is nothing in tradition that is not already contained in Scripture, and tradition “is always, by essence, interpretation,” he says, “it exists independently only as an explanation, as an exposition, ‘according to Scripture.’” (JRSG 9/1, 410) Tradition thus clearly becomes subordinate to the biblical text, which merely explains its understanding. As he would affirm years later,

... Scripture and the Fathers form a whole, like the question and the answer (Wort und Antwort). These two realities are distinct, they do not have the same status, they do not possess the same normative force. The question comes first, the answer comes second, and this sequence is irreversible. But even if they are different, even if they cannot be mixed, they cannot be separated. Only when the word finds an answer can it be effective.¹³

still not grasp (cf. Jn 16:12–3), then subsequent ‘remembering’ (cf. Jn 16:4, for instance) can come to recognize what it had not caught sight of previously and yet was already handed down in the original Word” (Ratzinger 1998, 59).

¹² See JRSG 9/1, 413–31. An intervention of Ratzinger on October 10, 1962, appears in 2008, 36–48; translated as “Bemerkungen zum Schema *De fontibus revelationis*” in JRSG 7/1, 157–82. The draft prepared with Rahner appears in “*De Revelatione Dei et hominis in Iesu Christi facta*,” in JRSG 7/1, 183–220, as well as the draft for the 19th General Congregation, “Die eine Quelle der Offenbarung,” in JRSG 7/1, 239–43, and “Zur Konzilsdiskussion über das Verhältnis von Schrift und Überlieferung,” in JRSG 7/1, 473–78. On this problem see Balaguer 2017, 180–83. In this sense, the influence of the doctrine of revelation in St. Bonaventure, on which Ratzinger based his habilitation thesis, has been highlighted: see Verweyen 2010, 28–34, and especially 35–71 and 73–107.

¹³ JRSG 9/1, 515. See also: Ratzinger 1967, 521–24, 525–27 (n. 18), 572; Söding 2007, 48–57; Terra 2007, 58, 66; Murphy 2008, 7–8; Urbarri Bilbao 2009, 53–56; Hahn 2009, 50–53, 83.

Divine Revelation transcends all human words, including those of Scripture, and this is why Ratzinger will say elsewhere in graphic terms: “Revelation is not a meteor fallen to earth that now lies around somewhere as a rock mass from which rock samples can be taken and submitted to laboratory analysis.”¹⁴ Tradition thus becomes a living thing, a *vox viva* – the echo that corresponds to the Word – and Revelation is not only constituted by the words pronounced by Christ but also by the *verba gesta* that he uttered throughout his life. Tradition does not consist of traditions in the plural, but of what Vatican II considers to be intimately united with Scripture: a single source – as the conciliar text itself concluded – in which Revelation transcends both, as well as the different readings that can be made of it. No interpretation can exhaust the richness of the biblical text and the content of Revelation. Thus, the concept of tradition proposed by Vatican II is a broad and living concept that transcends mere traditionalism, for the word of God always transcends any human word (see Ratzinger 1967, 498–99; Chapa 2021, 216–17). Finally, the German theologian also suggests that “the relationship between a critical and an ecclesial exegesis, between historical research and dogmatic tradition should be clarified after the [Second Vatican] Council” (Ratzinger 1967, 499) while maintaining that “the [conciliar] text unites fidelity to Christian tradition with a yes to critical science.” (Ratzinger 1967, 503) For all these reasons, *Dei Verbum* is “one of the outstanding texts of the Council and one that has yet to be truly received.” (Ratzinger 1998, 129; see Rowland 2008, 99–104; Zatwardnicki 2023, 311–42)

3. A Plural Reading

The style of exegesis preferred by the young Ratzinger in his student years was rather a discreet and rigorous interpretation of the biblical text. Ratzinger (1998, 53) confessed: “Friedrich Stummer [1886–1955] – the professor of the Old Testament – was a quiet and reserved man whose strength was strictly historical and philological work; he would hint at theological themes only with the greatest restraint. But I greatly appreciated this scholarly carefulness, and, besides being an eager listener at his lectures, I also participated in his seminars.”

Ratzinger therefore cherished an open and pluralistic hermeneutic, in which exegesis should be both scientific and ecclesial, where both the Old and New Testament, the Fathers of the Church, and modern exegetes can fit together (see, for instance, Pontifical Biblical Commission 2001). The future of exegesis, according to Ratzinger, would lie in its being serious, profoundly scientific, and in full communion with the faith of the entire Church. Thus, the reading of the Bible – he added

¹⁴ Ratzinger 1998, 127; on the *Dei Verbum*, see also Alberigo 1996, 98–99, 105–7, 110–11, 272–73.

in 2003 – presupposes “attentive listening, knowledge of the limits of the various paths, full seriousness of the *ratio*,” but also the readiness to limit oneself and to surpass oneself in thinking and living with the subject, which “the different writers of the Old and New Covenant guarantee us is a single work, the Sacred Scripture.” (Ratzinger 2003)¹⁵ Israel and the Church, Old, and New Testament on the one hand, and Scripture and reason, Bible and dogma on the other, are complementary instances which, according to the German theologian, must be mutually complementary. In addition to the rational, historical, and ecclesial dimensions, another dimension, which could be called Christological, was required. Ratzinger had already reached a number of theoretical conclusions in his early 1965 paper and proposed, in the first place, Christ as the center of Revelation: “The reality which takes place in Christian Revelation is none other than Christ himself. It is he, in the proper sense, Revelation.”¹⁶

Christ will be the hermeneutical key to all Scripture, and to read the Bible will be above all to look at Christ.¹⁷ This “Christological hermeneutics” considers his incarnation, death, and resurrection as the interpretative key to all Scripture (Luther had also spoken allegorically of the Scriptures as “the swaddling clothes” wrapped around Christ’s body in the manger; see Hahn 2009, 78–82, 100–102). Eventually, the Bavarian theologian dared to present his own – historical, ecclesial, and Christological – exegetical proposal in his last work on Jesus of Nazareth. He wrote to a well-known theologian in 2003, “the years that God still gives me I want to dedicate to a book on Jesus Christ, along the lines of Romano Guardini’s great work, *The Lord*.”¹⁸ The alternation between the scientific and the spiritual, and the rejection of closed positivism in order to seek a broader hermeneutic of the *sensus plenior* proposed by Guardini seemed to him to be a successful formula, which could, however, remain an unfulfilled promise. Ratzinger invited us to turn our critical and believing gaze – with faith, history, and intelligence – once again toward Jesus. Here he could apply all the aforementioned exegetical presuppositions: “I have tried to present an exegesis, an interpretation of Scripture, which does not follow a positivist historicism, but which also incorporates faith as an element of interpretation.” (Ratzinger 2010, 177)

¹⁵ On the importance of the concept of covenant in Ratzinger’s biblical theology, see Uríbarri Bilbao 2009, 28–40; Hahn 2009, 115–22, 151–54.

¹⁶ JRSG 9/1, 403. On this subject, see: Piñero Mariño 2008, 127–72; Cordovilla 2008, 123–44; Voderholzer 2008b, 99–121; Morales Ríos 2007, 415–39; García Quesada 2007, 213–25; Martin 2007, 285–314; Farkasfalvy 2007, 438–53; Simini 2007, 441–48; Schneider 2007, 378–92; Verweyen 2007, 84–97; Sanz Valdivieso 2008, 93–111; Luis Carballada 2007, 571–82; Schöpsdau 2008, 34–38; Uríbarri Bilbao 2009, 25–65; Rausch 2009, 65–101; Bellandi 2009, 117–28 (this author insists on the German theologian’s harmony with the proposals of DV 12); Hahn 2009, *passim*.

¹⁷ A good example of this Christological reading – in this case, of the Sermon on the Mount – can be found in: JRSG 4/1, 445–46; see also JRSG 13/1, 586–87; Ratzinger 2003.

¹⁸ González de Cardedal 2005, 35; see Uríbarri Bilbao 2009, 60–62; Voderholzer 2008b, 120–21; Rausch 2009, 70.

Jesus of Nazareth is a book intended not only for theologians or exegetes but also for all the people of God and any reader of varying degrees of faith, as a well-known philosopher once pointed out (Trias 2007, 34). This did not mean that it constituted an act of the pontifical magisterium since he writes “anyone could contradict me,” but at the same time it called for a minimum of harmony, “without which there can be no understanding.” (Ratzinger [Benedikt XVI] 2007, 23) Benedict XVI valued the virtues of the historical-critical method (“it is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work”; Ratzinger [Benedikt XVI] 2007, 15), while at the same time recognizing its limits, for it “abandons the word to the past,” forgetting the present and the perennial applications which it always has to the present moment. (See Ratzinger [Benedikt XVI] 2007, 16–17)¹⁹

The word of God was spoken in the past, but it also resounds with life in the present and must be enlightened by the same faith, he recalled again.²⁰ The text requires an interpretative context, hence – for example – the abundance of Old Testament references: Joseph Ratzinger only tried to start from the historical-critical method and exegesis – especially of German origin – to finally go a little further in the understanding of the words about Jesus (see Ratzinger [Benedikt XVI] 2007, 22). The themes were not presented in a systematic way, but the way he comments on a passage of Scripture is reminiscent of the exegesis of the Fathers, where some interpretations give rise to apparent digressions which, however, come from rereading and updating the text. Hence the validity and importance of the “spiritual reading” (allegorical, anagogical) of the biblical text, which must have its concrete application to one’s own life. The questions addressed have thus been conveniently selected since it would be impossible to carry out an exegetical analysis of each scene.²¹ The horizon of the hermeneutical tradition scattered over the centuries and places also illuminates each

¹⁹ On the importance of Scripture in his preaching see Benedikt XVI 2008, *passim*.

²⁰ On this aspect, see Voderholzer 2007, 38–47; Voderholzer 2008a, 31–99; Hernández Urigüen 2009, 1287–305.

²¹ In these pages, contemporary authors were referred to, citing not only the aforementioned German authors – Catholic or Protestant – such as Adolf Harnack or Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Adam and Romano Guardini, Charles Harold Dodd and Joachim Jeremias, Joachim Gnllka or Rudolf Schnackenburg – among many others, but also Russian Orthodox writers (Vladimir Soloviev or Paul Evdokimov), as well as the most disparate sources such as the Jewish Rabbi Jacob Neusner, Confucius, Gandhi and even the now almost inevitable Friedrich Nietzsche. Of course, there was no lack of other authors more distant in time: Fathers, doctors, and saints such as Irenaeus, Jerome, Augustine, Cyprian, Benedict, Bernard, Therese of Lisieux, or Teresa of Calcutta. But above all, the central interpretative key of the reading was once again the person of Christ himself: like the disciples of Emmaus, it is he who “opens the Scriptures” to us and enables us to understand them (see Mark 16:27). This is where Benedict XVI proposed “new rereadings” (see Ratzinger [Benedikt XVI] 2007, 17), in which the Bible is seen as a single book and does not fall once again into the dictatorship of specialists. The living tradition and the analogy of faith were also to be taken into account, as he had previously insisted (see *Dei Verbum*, no. 12; Söding 2007, 58–62). In this sense, the pope–theologian spoke not only of the Second Vatican Council but also of modern American “canonical exegesis,” which proposes a unitary reading of the biblical text (see Ratzinger [Benedikt XVI] 2007, 22; Voderholzer 2008a, 109–12; Martínez Gordo 2008, 4–6).

individual text. As noted by Juan Chapa (2007, 40): “For this reason, he selects certain aspects, which he illuminates and interprets from other parts of Sacred Scripture, also drawing on various ancient and modern interpretations and occasionally interspersing occasional updates to arrive at the most defining features of the life and being of Jesus.”

One can find here a concrete materialization of a reading of Scripture *cum traditione*, that is to say, understood as *viva vox*, where the writings of the Fathers offer a horizon that can be further enriched – in a line of continuity rather than of rupture – with the consonant contributions of contemporary exegesis. But this operation is not without its risks. Thus, throughout the text in which he explores the figure of Jesus, Ratzinger refers once again to his ideas on the interpretation of Scripture. In the account of Jesus’ temptations, when he refers to the second one (Matt 4:5–11), the pope-theologian alludes to how the devil presents himself as “a theologian” and “a good connoisseur of Scripture,” who knows how to quote Ps 9 accurately. He also brings to mind the aforementioned *Legend of the Antichrist*, while noting:

With this account Soloviev wanted to drastically express his scepticism towards a certain scholarly exegesis of his time. It is not a “no” to the scientific interpretation of the Bible as such, but a mostly useful and necessary warning about the wrong paths it can take. The interpretation of the Bible can become an instrument of the Antichrist.

Not only does Soloviev say so, but the account of the temptations itself says so. The worst books that have destroyed the figure of Jesus, that have dismantled the faith, have been written on the basis of alleged results of the same exegesis. (Ratzinger [Benedikt XVI] 2007, 64)

Hard words that make a correct exegesis necessary in these times of exile of the word. But facing the hermeneutical question with an ecclesial and ecumenical sense will help to overcome this difficult stumbling block that separates Catholics from their Protestant brethren. Underlying this is the principle of *sola Scriptura*, understood as *numquam sola*. The problem encountered here is which tradition to use as a hermeneutical framework for reading Scripture, that is, what is the hermeneutical context in which one contextualizes the text. The problem of tradition and traditions is therefore resolved in the continuous and reciprocal confrontation with Scripture. “The great problem of modern exegesis, for Ratzinger, is that in it the Bible has ceased to be the book of the Church, to be a book like any other,” maintains a Spanish exegete (Balaguer 2006, 90).

This is why a “hermeneutic of faith” is required in order to be able to read the sacred texts with full competence. In this hermeneutic, elements come into play that the historical-critical method usually rejects, such as doctrinal, liturgical, and spiritual traditions. In short, it is a matter of attaining the *sensus plenior*, which also contains a reading that is not only literal and ecclesial but also spiritual, analogical, and moral. According to Ratzinger, this is the best way to read the Bible

(see Hahn 2009, 47; see also Hahn 2009, 41–50, 60–62, 92). “We see that the essence of this ‘spiritual reading,’” says Hahn, “lies in the *typological* reading of Scripture, which appreciates the unity of God’s action in history and understands the unfolding of Israel’s history in its culmination in Jesus Christ.”²² Scripture tells a long story that leads one to Jesus as the Son of God.

As Thomas P. Rausch (2009, 65–66) points out, Ratzinger proposes – like the Reformers – Scripture as a true theological priority, although he finds its hermeneutical place in the Church; it constitutes a “unique and transcendent knowledge,” superior to the lights of natural intelligence, thus giving priority to “divine initiative.” In short, he sees “the Second Vatican Council as an overcoming of a legalistic concept of Revelation in favor of a more personalistic one.” This proposal – modern and traditional at the same time – can have interesting ecumenical results if common criteria are adopted in this respect. However, there is a temptation for both Catholics and Lutherans to instrumentalize the word of God. For this reason, Scripture *una cum traditione* offers us some guarantees for a symphonic interpretation in harmony with the entire Church of all times and places. The proposal of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI (where the Bible and dogma, Old and New Testaments, and the reading of the Fathers with modern exegetical methods are united, as already noted in this paper) can offer some clues as to how to read Scripture in these times of obligatory ecumenical dialogue.

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²² As Hahn himself points out, Ratzinger’s biblical theology proposes “a way of reading Scripture authentically.” In other words, he proposes a way of reading Scripture as it has been written, that is, as a living word spoken in the history of the Church, a word that can only be understood within the broad unity of the Church’s experience of faith. “This experience includes dogma and liturgy, and is not limited to the expectations and contexts of the original text.” Theology and exegesis according to Ratzinger is to combine prayer and research, science and spirituality in the understanding of faith (see Hahn 2009, 50–53, 187). Thus, in the area of biblical theology, he concludes that from the German author, Old and New Testament, Scripture and liturgy, faith and reason, exegesis and dogma are to be seen as united, i.e., in harmony with the statements contained in Christology and ecclesiology (see Hahn 2009, 23–24). This is what the reading of the Bible in the Church is all about.

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