



Mutuality of Scripture, Metaphysics and Dogmatics. A Basic Hermeneutical Insight in Pope Benedict XVI's *Jesus of Nazareth*

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Abstract: The subject of this article is the Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's trilogy on Jesus of Nazareth. Central to the analysis is an attempt to reconstruct the place and role of metaphysics in the Pope's analysis and, more broadly, in his understanding of biblical hermeneutics. One of the central ambitions of our author was to develop an integral method of reading and understanding Scripture, in which historical-critical, metaphysical and dogmatic themes presuppose and complement each other. The article first examines the modalities of the appearance of metaphysical threads in Benedict XVI's meditations, then analyzes his understanding of prayer in a metaphysical key, and finally sketches the concept of a new human being made possible by the work of Jesus and needing metaphysical categories to be fully described. Thus, it turns out that Ratzinger was able to show a truly biblical metaphysics in Jesus of Nazareth and prove that metaphysical thinking is not at odds with the assumptions of the historical-critical method, if the latter, of course, is not understood in a reductionist manner and in accordance with modern prejudices. In this way, I argue, Ratzinger sketches in his trilogy an integral theological method for reading the biblical text and ultimately synthesizes the biblical, metaphysical and dogmatic approaches.

Keywords: Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, exegesis, Christology, metaphysics, dogmatics, methodology, hermeneutics

“God is the criterion of being.” (*JN II*, 319)¹

A careful reading of the biography of Jesus of Nazareth proves the theological depth of Pope's emeritus thoughts. In Ratzinger's commentaries, the details of Jesus' life are presented in such a way as to show the theological vision of the world that life, message and work of Jesus of Nazareth bring with it. The author of the biography thus points to the true depth of Revelation that took place in Jesus and was given to us by the apostles in the form of written gospels. His “spiritual Christology” can be rightly described from its formal perspective as a unification of “ontology and soteriology, theology of the cross and of the incarnation, Christology, pneumatology and ecclesiology. For this, it is necessary to overcome the fracture between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, and to defend the *homousios* and divinity of Jesus Christ as

¹ As is well known, the Pope Benedict XVI wished his trilogy to be accepted not so much as a papal work, but as Joseph Ratzinger's personal contribution to the Christological and exegetical debate.

defined at Jesus Christ as defined at Nicaea and III Constantinople.” (Blanco Sarto 2020, 5)

The subject of this article, therefore, is the three volumes of *Jesus of Nazareth* written by Benedict XVI between 2007 and 2012.² In my article, I would like to touch upon one of the essential themes of the papal narrative: the relationship between metaphysics and theology,³ just as, according to Benedict, it emerges from the apostolic narration of the history of Jesus. I would like to do this from the specific perspective that is Ratzinger’s biblical thought.⁴ In his theological biography of Jesus, the pope reveals to the reader basic assumptions about the Church’s reading of Scripture. One of them seems to be a strong emphasis on the metaphysical meaning of the biblical text. Here, the theological nature of the inspired text interacts with the metaphysical layer present in it. The sensitivity to the theological and metaphysical dimensions of the written Word of God thus becomes an essential moment in Ratzinger’s biblical hermeneutics.⁵ This is not, it should be added immediately, about any external and violent imposition of metaphysical carbon paper on the biblical text, but an attempt to point out that it implicitly contains a certain metaphysics and systematics that must be taken into account when interpreting it.

This subject is important for two main reasons. Firstly, it is one of the most debated issues in modern theology and exegeses,⁶ secondly, it is of great ecumenical

² The general introduction and interpretation of the first volume can be found in: Hoping and Schulz 2007. Commentary on the whole trilogy cf. Fondazione Vatican Joseph Ratzinger-Benedetto XVI 2014.

³ In the broader perspective of the relationship between theology and philosophy (not only metaphysics), this problem was dealt with by Davide De Caprio (2023). The authors of a collective work edited by Tracey Rowland (Rowland, Sada, and Assunção 2024) also move in a similar perspective.

⁴ Ratzinger elaborated the same idea systematically earlier in his *Theologische Prinzipienlehre* (cf. Ratzinger 1987, 171–90). Cf. Woźniak 2016 and Pidel 2023, 92: “Having asserted the analogical unity of Scripture in the 1960s, Ratzinger turns in the next decade to justifying his analogical hermeneutics through a kind of personalist metaphysics of history.”

⁵ General introduction to Ratzinger’s hermeneutics can be found in: Proniewski 2014.

⁶ Ratzinger expressed his opinion on the relationship between theology and historical-critical exegesis, as well as on the state of the latter, during a famous symposium on biblical hermeneutics in January 1988 in New York City. Cf. Ratzinger 1989, 1–23. It is worth noting that Ratzinger sees the fundamental and actual problem of historical-critical methods from a dual perspective. First, “one can note that in the history-of-religions school, the model of evolution was applied to the analysis of biblical texts. This was an effort to bring the methods and models of the natural sciences to bear on the study of history. Bultmann laid hold of this notion in a more general way and thus attributed to the so-called scientific worldview a kind of dogmatic character.” Second, and more importantly, “we must go yet a step further in order to appreciate the fundamental decision of the system which generated these particular categories for judgment. The real philosophic presupposition of the whole system seems to me to lie in the philosophic turning point proposed by Immanuel Kant. According to him, the voice of being-in-itself cannot be heard by human beings. Man can hear it only indirectly in the postulates of practical reason, which have remained, as it were, the small opening through which he can make contact with the real, that is, his eternal destiny. For the rest, as far as the content of his intellectual life is concerned, he must limit himself to the realm of the categories. Thence comes the restriction to the positive, to the empirical, to the ‘exact’ science, which by definition excludes the appearance of what is ‘wholly other,’ or the one who is wholly other, or a new initiative from another plane.” All this results, thirdly, in “that revelation must recede into the pure

importance.⁷ In our case, the latter deserves special mention. Benedict XVI proposes us a very unusual approach to this issue. The originality of this approach should be measured by its original biblical character. This is not an abstract starting point, but a concrete rooting in the story of Jesus as told by the apostles. In other words, in order to avoid unnecessary discussions about the literary and theological nature of the gospel at this point, the Pope returns to the biblical text and this returns to it not so much on the basis of scientific reading, but on the basis of pious meditation. There is no doubt that such meditation is colored with confessional convictions of the author, but it is an effort to reach the text itself as it is given to us.

The method of papal reading is therefore determined by a simple return to the sources themselves in their own natural context. Such an approach may turn out to be creative. It addresses the fundamental themes of ecumenical discord from the perspective of the methodology of reading a biblical text. This approach turns out to be a breakthrough, especially in the relationship between metaphysics, history and theology. It ultimately shows to what extent the biblical text itself contains and demands a certain metaphysics and how this metaphysics itself does not remain far from the original evangelical narrative.

1. The Evangelical Narration About the Identity of Jesus: Biblical Modality of Metaphysics

As it is well known, Joseph Ratzinger did not write systematic Christology.⁸ He simply did not have enough time to do it. The papal biography of Jesus of Nazareth is an attempt to make up for this lack. Although it does not fulfill the features of a systematic dogmatic treatise, it does, however, meet the basic criteria for this type of work. What is more, it seems that this work is the most mature realization of Ratzinger's ideal of existential⁹ dogmatics.¹⁰

formality of the eschatological stance, which corresponds to the Kantian Split. As far as everything else is concerned, it all needs to be 'explained.' What might otherwise seem like a direct proclamation of the divine can only be myth, whose laws of development can be discovered." (Ratzinger 1989, 14–16)

⁷ Cf. Pablo Blanco-Sarto's contribution to this issue of *Verbum Vitae*: Blanco-Sarto 2024.

⁸ His Christology is described sometimes as "spiritual" (cf. McGregor 2016). Generally, on the Ratzinger's Christology one should refer to Meiers 2019.

⁹ The turn in Ratzinger's thought toward a more existential rather than purely speculative theology is evident throughout the whole work of the Bavarian theologian. The choice of the subject of his doctorate (Augustine's ecclesiology; Ratzinger 2011b) and habilitation (Bonaventure's theology of history and Revelation; Ratzinger 2009) clearly indicates such a basic option that guided and directed Ratzinger from the very beginning of his academic career. Such an attitude was probably due to a number of factors for our author: from his personal experience of Nazi totalitarianism during the war, to his fascination with the thoughtful path of his personal mentor, to his experiences in the 1960s. Probably not an insignificant role was played by the love of music that accompanied him from his early years. Ratzinger thus

In the context of an exegetical discussion on the identification of Jesus with the Son of Man, the Pope notes: “It is true that Jesus speaks in the riddle form that is characteristic of him, leaving the listener to take the final step toward understanding. But there is a functional identification in the parallelism of confession and denial—now and at the judgment, before Jesus and before the Son of Man—and this only makes sense on the basis of ontological identity.” (*JN I*, 411)

The above text shows that Benedict is convinced that the evangelical text allows us to state that Jesus is identical to the Son of Man. The commentator emphasizes that it is not so much about some moral identification as about the true consciousness of Jesus that he is the Son of Man announced by Daniel. Jesus’ awareness of being the Son comes from the depths of his being: therefore, the Pope speaks about an ontological identity. This strong emphasis and distinction deserve attention. It reveals not only the exegetic and theological convictions of his author, but also his certainty about the metaphysical deposits of the Revelation itself.¹¹ The Bible is not a textbook for metaphysics, but (a) it contains its fragments and (b) it expresses its own convictions in the form of metaphysical statements. Of course, this is not systematic metaphysics, in form of well-developed concepts or a compact system. However, it is true metaphysics, which is built in the continuity of the vision of the world and its relations with God, which were already characteristic of the beliefs of the authors of the Old Testament. This metaphysics is much more existential: its categories are consistent with the fundamental concepts of Revelation in its intertestamental continuity. Anyway, Benedict states implicitly, Scripture contains strong ontological statements about existence and identity. Moreover, the Christological question is largely a question of the ontological identity of Jesus of Nazareth with the messianic figures present on the pages of the First Covenant.

A closer reading of the papal commentary proves that the main category of the ontology of the gospel are the concepts of sonship and fatherhood. “The term

situates himself on a certain historical path of dogmatic development in an existential key. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are his predecessors Engelbert Krebs and his disciple Romano Guardini. Both left the outlines of dogmatics in the existential key (cf. Krebs 1921, 1925; Guardini 1976). Ratzinger’s biographer Peter Seewald claims that our author signed a contract with the Wewel publishing house back in the 1950s to write his personal dogmatics. He was even expected to write a good couple of hundred pages toward that publication. Eventually the publication did not come out, which was to cause Ratzinger problems with the publisher (cf. Seewald 2020, 441–42, 579). On the existential tenor of Ratzinger’s theology cf. Heim 2007.

¹⁰ Pope defines Christology in this way: “Jesus always speaks as the Son, that the relation between Father and Son is always present as the background of his message. In this sense, God is always at the center of the discussion, yet precisely because Jesus himself is God—the Son—his entire preaching is a message about the mystery of his person, it is Christology, that is, discourse concerning God’s presence in his own action and being. And we will see that this is the point that demands a decision from us, and consequently this is the point that leads to the Cross and the Resurrection.” (*JN I*, 105)

¹¹ More on the general “philosophical workshop” can be found in Ferdek 2020.

‘Son,’ along with its correlate ‘Father (Abba),’ gives us a true glimpse into the inner being of Jesus—indeed, into the inner being of God himself.” (*JN I*, 428; cf. *JN I*, xiv)

There is no doubt that this is an unusual ontology. Its basic notions are categories close to everyday human existence. In the evangelical notions of Father and Son, Benedict sees the unveiling of the whole depth of Jesus’ being, as well as of God himself. Trinitarian connotations are clear here: the existence of God is determined not by a single existential category, but by the interrelated notions of fatherhood and sonship.¹² Jesus understands himself as a Son who is in a unique relationship with God the Father. Jesus’s *I am*, so important in the narrative of John’s gospel because of his reference to the divine name of Jhwh, turns out to be woven from a relationship. In this way, the category of relations is the third essential operator of the metaphysics that pope emeritus discovers within the evangelical narrative. “Jesus is wholly ‘relational,’ that his whole being is nothing other than relation to the Father. This relationality is the key to understanding the use Jesus makes of the formulae of the burning bush and Isaiah. The ‘I am’ is situated completely in the relatedness between Father and Son.” (*JN I*, 433)

These statements turn out to be crucial for understanding the ontological identity of Jesus. The existence of Jesus is identified with a relationship: from a metaphysical point of view, Jesus is a relationship with the Father. The central point of the meaning of this statement is the fact that for our biographer, even Jesus’s “I” is first of all a reference to the Father. It is the Father, therefore, who is the deepest reality that enlivens the self of Jesus. What Benedict discovers here – following, of course, the lines of ancient theology of the Fathers – is a completely new concept of the individuality (Cf. Torrance and Zachhuber 2014).

The metaphysics of the gospel can be described as a metaphysics of the relationship or relational ontology: the mystery into which Jesus invites man is his own relationship with the Father, a relationship of which he is the first beneficiary and the most important witness. This is why one can say that this relationship shapes not only his own existence, but also his work. Let us consider the following three statements by Benedict:

- (a) “The unity of his will with the Father’s will is the core of his very being.” (*JN I*, 205)
- (b) “Fulfillment of the Law [...] is accomplished in Jesus’ being and doing.” (*JN I*, 325)

¹² *JN I*, 359: “Jesus’ own ‘I’ is always opened into ‘being with’ the Father; he is never alone, but is forever receiving himself from and giving himself back to the Father. ‘My teaching is not mine’; his ‘I’ is opened up into the Trinity. Those who come to know him ‘see’ the Father; they enter into this communion of his with the Father. It is precisely this transcendent dialogue, which encounter with Jesus involves, that once more reveals to us the true Shepherd, who does not take possession of us, but leads us to the freedom of our being by leading us into communion with God and by giving his own life.”

(c) “Being with Jesus and being sent by him seem at first sight mutually exclusive, but they clearly belong together. The Apostles have to learn to be with him in a way that enables them, even when they go to the ends of the earth, to be with him still. Being with him includes the missionary dynamic by its very nature, since Jesus’ whole being is mission.” (JN I, 231; cf. JN I, 143)

The presented juxtaposition of Pope Benedict’s comments indicates both the key role of ontological thinking (the category of being) in Christology,¹³ as well as the connection existing between ontology and action. Ontological categories are also expressed in Biblical Christology in terms of action. The existence of Jesus as defined in all its dimensions (including the unity of the person and his I) by the relationship is expressed in the Son’s action to such an extent that Benedict can bravely state that the whole of his filial being is mission. Relation as the basic category of the Son’s being does not define this being only internally, but also externally in its action. We are dealing here with something more than just an application of the principle of *agere sequitur esse*. In terms of the evangelical relational ontology, being not only defines action and action implies being, but even being and action are identical.¹⁴ The combination, fusion of being and action makes the relational ontology extremely dynamic (cf. JN II, 131).¹⁵ The most basic form of dynamics of being in mission is Jesus’s being-for (JN II, 188). The final horizons of the presented ontology reach their fullness in the voluntary death on the cross: „He himself is the gift—he is ‘life.’ For precisely this reason, his whole being consists in communicating, in ‘pro-existence.’ This is exactly what we see in the Cross, which is his true exaltation.” (JN I, 439) In this way, Jesus’ Passover is the place where the relational is fully revealed. Thus it becomes a true paschal ontology,¹⁶ which is all focused on Revelation.

The relation ontology, read from the perspective of key concepts of fatherhood and sonship, finds its culmination in the papal interpretation of the title *Kyrios*. First of all, it is connected with the concept of the Son, the meaning of both is almost

13 JN I, 23: “This is also the point around which I will construct my own book. It sees Jesus in light of his communion with the Father, which is the true center of his personality; without it, we cannot understand him at all, and it is from this center that he makes himself present to us still today.”

14 Cf. Eberhard Jüngel’s interpretation of Karl Barth Trinitarian ontology in: Jüngel 1986. Introduction to Jüngel’s Trinitarian theology can be found in: DeHart 2000.

15 One can find here easily the echo of Bonaventure’s Trinitarian theology, which is characterized by internal dynamics introduced by his conception of the constitution of the Trinitarian person by the mode of atemporal and no spatial coming to being (*origo*). Cf. Woźniak 2007.

16 JN II, 131: “In this passage, one may object to the sharp distinction between substantial being and completion of the sacrifice: Jesus’ ‘substantial’ being is as such the entire dynamic of ‘being for’; the two are inseparable. But perhaps Bultmann meant this as well. He should, moreover, be given credit when he says of John 17:19 that ‘there is no disputing the allusion to the words of the Lord’s supper.’”

identical (*JN I*, 440).¹⁷ Both point in the same direction. They are paraphrases of God's name, whose application to the mystery of Jesus leads to his recognition as a person in close relationship with God, even as a living God present among people. In the horizon of such an application and theological problems that it brought with it to early Christianity, the Pope interprets *homoousios* as a term whose meaning does not differ from what conveys to us about Jesus the testimony of the Scripture. Although it does not appear in Scripture, it does reflect biblical way of thinking. It points out that the closeness of Jesus and God, which the apostolic testimonies speak of, should be interpreted and accepted as an ontological category that identifies the existence of Jesus as divine.¹⁸

2. Intermezzo: Relational Ontology and Prayer as *actus metaphysicus*

From the perspective of Jesus' identity, the Transfiguration of Jesus on Tabor is an important scene for Benedict.

The Transfiguration is a prayer event; it displays visibly what happens when Jesus talks with his Father: the profound interpenetration of his being with God, which then becomes pure light. In his oneness with the Father, Jesus is himself "light from light." The reality that he is in the deepest core of his being, which Peter tried to express in his confession—that reality becomes perceptible to the senses at this moment: Jesus' being in the light of God, his own being-light as Son. (*JN I*, 389)

The Transfiguration thus becomes a key confirmation, a manifestation of the deepest identity of Jesus as the Son. It is worth noting that the Pope links his meaning to the confession of Peter. Benedict masterfully notes that both the confession of Peter (the Luke version) and the Transfiguration itself are events taking place in the space of prayer. In Luke 9:18, Peter's confession – which is described

¹⁷ Cf. *JN II*, 423 where Benedict commenting on John 1:18: "it becomes clear what 'the Son' is and what this term means: perfect communion in knowledge, which is at the same time communion in being. Unity in knowing is possible only because it is unity in being."

¹⁸ *JN I*, 400: "The First Council of Nicea (325) summed up the result of this fierce debate over Jesus' Sonship in the word *homoousios*, 'of the same substance'—the only philosophical term that was incorporated into the Creed. This philosophical term serves, however, to safeguard the reliability of the biblical term. It tells us that when Jesus' witnesses call him 'the Son,' this statement is not meant in a mythological or political sense—those being the two most obvious interpretations given the context of the time. Rather, it is meant to be understood quite literally: Yes, in God himself there is an eternal dialogue between Father and Son, who are both truly one and the same God in the Holy Spirit."

by Benedict as both “ontological” and a “salvation history” type of confession¹⁹ is preceded by a one sentence statement that the apostles were asked by Jesus about his identity while Jesus was in solitary prayer with them. Similarly, the Transfiguration is done during Jesus’ prayer. “The disciples are drawn into his solitude, his communion with the Father that is reserved to him alone. They are privileged to see him as the one who speaks face-to-face with the Father, person to person. They are privileged to see him in his utterly unique filial being.” (*JN I*, 367)

It follows that prayer, in the interpretation of the pope-biographer, becomes an event of ontological significance: the whole truth of Jesus’ existence becomes visible at the moment of his prayer. Prayer creates space for a metaphysical insight into reality: “Jesus’ prayer is the true origin of the term ‘the Son.’” (*JN I*, 428) It becomes a true *actus metaphysicus*.

The Christological ontology presented above finds its transmission moment in what Benedict teaches in his life of Jesus about prayer. In fact, he proposes a kind of metaphysical approach to prayer:

The Sermon on the Mount, as we have seen, draws a comprehensive portrait of the right way to live. It aims to show us how to be a human being. We could sum up its fundamental insights by saying that man can be understood only in light of God, and that his life is made righteous only when he lives it in relation to God. But God is not some distant stranger. He shows us his face in Jesus. In what Jesus does and wills, we come to know the mind and will of God himself. If being human is essentially about relation to God, it is clear that speaking with, and listening to God is an essential part of it. This is why the Sermon on the Mount also includes a teaching about prayer. The Lord tells us how we are to pray. (*JN I*, 180)

The retired Pope’s reasoning seems to be fundamentally transparent. Jesus in his own being reveals who God is. The content of this Revelation is the Trinitarian life as a *communio* and relationship. His privileged moment is the prayer of Jesus. It is in this prayer that the Revelation of the depths of the Trinitarian life takes place. This Revelation of the depth of the divine being in Jesus’ prayer remains essential for the understanding of who man is. If being human is essentially a relationship with God (Cf. *JN III*, 40), then it must be built on listening and talking to him. In this context, there is an important attempt to define prayer. Pope states in this topic that: “This orientation pervasively shaping our whole consciousness, this silent presence of God at the heart of our thinking, our meditating, and our being, is what we mean by ‘prayer without ceasing.’ This is ultimately what we mean by

¹⁹ *JN I*, 376: “it would be clearer to speak of an ‘ontological’ and a ‘salvation history’ type of confession. All three forms of Peter’s confession transmitted to us by the Synoptics are ‘substantive’—you are the Christ, the Christ of God, the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Cf. *JN I*, 537.

love of God, which is at the same time the condition and the driving force behind love of neighbor. This is what prayer really is—being in silent inward communion with God.” (JN I, 182)

Let us note that in a rather original way, Benedict XVI combines prayer, especially the constant prayer, with the lasting presence of God in man. Prayer is not, therefore, originally an act of man, but an act of God who dwells in man. This presence is the basis for our own acts of prayer, in which we orient our entire existence towards God. The more God is in us, the more we can pray. At the same time, as pope states immediately, “praying actualizes and deepens our communion of being with God.” (JN I, 183) The ontological dimensions of prayer therefore lie between the affirmation of God’s presence in man as a condition for prayer and the deepening of our personal relationship with God. Prayer is born out of presence and increases it. Prayer, the content of which is our whole life, is ultimately nothing more than being in silent inward communion with God. Prayer is being in inward²⁰ communion: before being an act, it is fundamentally being in relationship with God. In this way, prayer is expressed in metaphysical terms, just as it is in the great mystical tradition of the Church, represented exemplarily, for instance, by Teresa of Avila. Let us note that the use of the metaphysical categories to describe prayer gives them a new character. Being seen from the perspective of prayer is no longer a category of pure reason or its idealised object. Instead, it becomes an icon of mystery, a sign of an invitation to communion with God. It is in prayer, therefore, that it becomes apparent that God is the criterion of being and not the other way around.

What are the effects of prayer, understood in the way described above, in our lives? The Pope lists a few of them: praying shows us the way toward being human (JN I, 188), actualizes and deepens our communion of being with God (JN I, 183), configures us to the image of the Son and forms our being (JN I, 185). The effects of prayer touch man in his deepest metaphysical deposits. Prayer is not only a pious practice, it has its own ontological significance. Its action extends to the very depths of human existence and shapes it in the likeness of the Son. Therefore, prayer is an extremely metaphysical activity. It draws its power from the prayer of Jesus, from his relationship with the Father, which “embraces the whole compass of man’s being in all ages and can therefore never be fully fathomed by a purely historical exegesis, however important this may be.” (JN I, 186) From this perspective, prayer is the power to transform human existence, a fragment of Triune’s work of doing everything new. This transformation is a process-oriented, dynamic one, as we can read in following fragment of Benedict’s text: “This gives the concept of being God’s children a dynamic quality: We are not ready-made children of God from the start,

²⁰ Cf. LG 1, where the Church is described and defined as *veluti sacramentum intime cum Deo unionis*. One can see a kind of familiarity between Benedict’s definition of prayer and Council’s description of the mystery of the Church.

but we are meant to become so increasingly by growing more and more deeply in communion with Jesus. Our sonship turns out to be identical with following Christ.” (*JN I*, 192)

3. Being Human: The Identity of Jesus as an Antropological Paradigm

The metaphysics of prayer is in the papal biography of Jesus conceived as a mediator between Trinitarian Christology and anthropology. To the extent that the depth of Jesus’ life becomes available to the disciples, especially in the Lord’s prayer, it is also the starting point for a deeper meditation on man and his humanity. Christology is the mechanism that opens up both the truth about God and man. The relational ontology,²¹ the summit point of Ratzinger’s Trinitarian Christology, determines the vision of human being. One can summarize all that fundamental content of pope’ thought in his own words: “He (Christ) comes from God and hence establishes the true form of man’s being.” (*JN I*, 416) Christ becomes here – very similar as in Hans Urs von Balthasar and his concept of revelation (Balthasar 1982, 463–525) – a form of humankind and by the same token relational ontology is applied to anthropology. Pope Benedict concludes: “The new humanity that comes from God is what being a disciple of Jesus Christ is all about.” (*JN I*, 417) Being a disciple acquires in this way an ontological status in which discipleship means new being. Benedict once again complements the dictionary of classical metaphysics, making its significant transgression. The new being of man is presented in terms of imitating (being a disciple) the Son of God who became man.

²¹ Without a doubt, it should be said that the key concept of Ratzinger’s entire theology is precisely relationship. It appears as the foundation of his understanding of the Trinity, Christ, the Church, the Eucharist and eschatological reality. This is already evident in the *Introduction to Christianity*, which is fundamental to understanding Ratzinger’s legacy (Maspero 2023b, 5–33). Cf. Ratzinger 1990, 132: “Therein lies concealed a revolution in man’s view of the world: the sole dominion of thinking in terms of substance is ended; relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality. It becomes possible to surmount what we call today ‘objectifying thought’; a new plane of being comes into view. It is probably true to say that the task imposed on philosophy as a result of these facts is far from being completed—so much does modern thought depend on the possibilities thus disclosed, without which it would be inconceivable.” And Ratzinger 1990, 102–3: “the philosophical God is essentially self-centered, thought simply contemplating itself. The God of faith is basically defined by the category of relationship. He is creative fullness encompassing the whole. Thereby a completely new picture of the world, a completely new world order is established: the highest possibility of Being no longer seems to be the detachment of him who exists in himself and needs only himself. On the contrary, the highest mode of Being includes the element of relationship. It is hardly necessary to say what a revolution it must mean for the direction of man’s existence when the supreme Being no longer appears as absolute, enclosed autarchy but turns out to be at the same time involvement, creative power, which creates and bears and loves other things. . . .” More extensively on the ontology of relation cf. Kraschl 2012; Maspero 2014; Maspero 2023a.

Christ becomes a model of humanity. Being a form of humanity is realized in the whole life of Jesus, the Son of God in the flesh. “If we may say that God’s immanence in the Old Testament was effected in the form of the word and in the form of liturgical celebration, that immanence has now become ontological: in Jesus, God has truly become man. God has entered our very being. In him God is truly ‘God-with-us’. The Incarnation, through which God’s new being as man was effected, becomes through his sacrifice an event for the whole of mankind.” (*JN II*, 135)

The central moment in understanding humanity is the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God. The Eternal Son incarnates, becomes an integral man from the moment of his conception in the womb of a Virgin, through death (which is described as a vehicle of transmission of the new humanity), until his resurrection and ascension. In such an integral incarnation, as its effect, a new humanity is created. Its principle is precisely the relational ontology, in which being becomes a community, transcending alienation and inauthenticity (*JN II*, 179–80), in which sin, which is the denial of relationship, introduces it. The whole mystery of salvation lies in the creation of a new man through the incarnation, the entry of God into the world, which transcends all the epiphanies of the Old Testament and has ontological significance.

In his incarnation, culminating in the obedience unto death expressed in sacrifice, Jesus is established as a form of new humanity. The Pope notes:

Thus the prayer “not my will, but yours” (Lk 22:42) is truly the Son’s prayer to the Father, through which the natural human will is completely subsumed into the “I” of the Son. Indeed, the Son’s whole being is expressed in the “not I, but you”—in the total self-abandonment of the “I” to the “you” of God the Father. This same “I” has subsumed and transformed humanity’s resistance, so that we are all now present within the Son’s obedience; we are all drawn into sonship. (*JN II*, 221)

This quotation perfectly summarizes the papal interpretation of the prayer in the Garden of Olives. In his opinion, the saving dimension of this prayer is to give a new shape to human freedom. It becomes dialogical. Synergy is the focal point of a sonship seen from the perspective of obedience. The grammar of the relationship that enters the human world in the mystery of incarnation, transforms human freedom. A new human being is characterized by a new freedom: its measure is not so much opposition and opposition, but synergic acceptance, cooperation of man with God. Man’s new existence, his discipleship, is based on filial obedience in which new, original form of freedom is inaugurated. Thanks to the incarnation, man is transformed by the obedience of the incarnate Son and becomes a son of the Father in Jesus Christ. The ontology of the relationship which Jesus reintroduces into the world thus establishes a relational transformation of human freedom. Freedom is ultimately about the possibility of unification.

The summit of the salvation process is the resurrection: “What is radically new about the ‘theophany’ of the risen Lord is that Jesus is truly man: he suffered and died as man and now lives anew in the dimension of the living God. He appears now as true man and yet as coming from God—as being God himself.” (*JN II*, 362)

Ratzinger sees Christ’s resurrection as a paradigmatic event in the scale of the whole humanity. It shows Jesus in the fullness of humanity, which draws itself from the relationship with God. The mystery of the Resurrection is to show the true roots of humanity in all its fullness, in its rooting in the mystery of God. The resurrection as a manifestation of the divinity of the Son becomes at the same time a manifestation of the deepest truth of human being. The revelation of the mystery of God thus becomes the unveiling of the mystery of man. These two mysteries are not mutually exclusive but remain in an organic relationship established freely by God. The importance of the resurrection lies, among other things, in ultimate showing the importance of relational thinking for the integral understanding of man, his freedom and action.

Man’s new existence is incomprehensible without the Church. Just as the new man comes from Jesus, from his prayer and sacrifice, from his resurrection, so the Church is born, arises, comes into existence from the mysteries of the Lord’s life (Cf., *JN II*, 181, 237, 367). As such it has the same task as Jesus had:

If being a Christian essentially means believing in the risen Lord, then Peter’s special witnessing role is a confirmation of his commission to be the rock on which the Church is built. John, in his account of the risen Lord’s threefold question to Peter, “Do you love me?” and Peter’s threefold commissioning to feed Christ’s flock, clearly underlined once more Peter’s continuing mission vis-à-vis the faith of the whole Church (*Jn* 21:15–17). So the Resurrection account flows naturally into ecclesiology; the encounter with the risen Lord is mission, and it shapes the nascent Church. (*JN II*, 422)

Here we find again a dynamic dimension of the relational ontology. The Church draws her being from the mystery of Jesus sent by the Father.²² Her being, as his, is a missionary being. “The continuation of the mission is ‘sacramental,’ contents pope Benedict, that is to say, it is not self-generating, nor is it something man-made, but it is a matter of being incorporated into the “Word that existed from the beginning (cf. 1 *Jn* 1:1).” (*JN II*, 144) The continuation of the Church’s mission, a mission that

²² *JN II*, 143: “Throughout John’s Gospel, then, and especially in chapter 17, Jesus, the Holy One of God, is the one sent by God. His whole identity is ‘being sent.’ What this means becomes clear from a passage in chapter 7, where the Lord says: ‘My teaching is not mine’ (7:16). He lives totally ‘from the Father,’ and there is nothing else, nothing purely of his own, that he brings to the Father. In the farewell discourses, this characteristic identity of the Son is extended to include the Holy Spirit: ‘He will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak’ (16:13). The Father sends the Spirit in Jesus’ name (14:26); Jesus sends him from the Father (15:26).”

belongs to its metaphysical essence and determines it, depends on the Church's unity with Christ. In the mission of the church, the same thing reveals itself as his being. The fact that the Church cannot work without Jesus, without communities with him means, above all, that it cannot exist without him. Therefore, not only the mission of the Church, but her very existence depends on unity with Jesus, on being in him. It is the relationship with Jesus that determines the metaphysical depth of the Church.

The relational ontology of the Church requires the exceeding of the individualistic mentality, which is so deeply rooted in our times. The Church is a divine-human community emerging from the body of Jesus who has not spared himself. "The understanding of the great mystery of expiation is also blocked by our individualistic image of man. We can no longer grasp substitution because we think that every man is ensconced in himself alone. The fact that all individual beings are deeply interwoven and that all are encompassed in turn by the being of the One, the Incarnate Son, is 'something we are no longer capable of seeing'" (*JN I*, 216–17)

Such a thinking is summed up by Benedict in simple ecclesio-ontological formula "being incorporated into his body, being pervaded by his presence is what matters." (*JN II*, 97) A true incorporation into Jesus leads to the absorption of our human self into the self of Jesus (cf. Gal 2:20) (cf. *JN II*, 102). This is how new human being is produced and simultaneously with him a new community of faithful is brought into existence (*JN II*, 298). This new being is no longer a loner, closed and immersed in its alienation, but an open being, a being in community.

4. Toward a Conclusion: Bible, Metaphysics and Dogmatics

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, Ratzinger/Benedict XVI did not write a systematic treatise on Christology. Nevertheless, his three-volume biography of Jesus can be considered a dogmatic work, a true Christological treatise and at the same time a genuine biblical theology. Indeed, we are dealing here with a renewed form of the dogmatic treatise which is shaped entirely by biblical meditation. We can name it a biblical dogmatics.

Benedict succeeded, first, in fully integrating biblical and systematic data. His way of reading Scripture is not limited to critical-historical exegesis but draws on the richness of Tradition. At the same time, the total priority of Scripture is visible. The dogmatics proposed by the Pope is not a silogistic abstract, but a lively meditation on Christian existence in the light of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, a similar consensus can be observed between dogmatics based on biblical meditation and metaphysics. In this respect, Jesus of Nazareth of Benedict is a groundbreaking work. It is a response to the old accusations against dogmatics that it is not biblical, but metaphysical, which disturbs the original rhythm of Revelation.

The Pope proves that metaphysical, biblical and dogmatic thinking do not have to oppose each other. Such a synthesis of basic components is possible thanks to a new understanding of both metaphysics and dogma. For Benedict, both forms of thinking are linked by their focus on the reality of life. For Ratzinger, metaphysics is nothing more than a systematic confirmation and transmission belt of the fundamental ideas of Revelation concerning new existence, new life, which God in his Son and Holy Spirit offers to the world. This Revelation in all its existentiality is the central event here. Metaphysics is only a way of permanently inscribing the event of Revelation into human thought. It is worth quoting in this respect the words of the papal commentary to the parable of the workers in the vineyard: “The vine, we said, can no longer be uprooted or handed over to be plundered. It does, however, constantly need purification. Purification, fruit, remaining, commandment, love, unity—these are the key words for this drama of being in and with the Son in the vine that the Lord’s words place before our soul.” (*JN I*, 333)

This text directly reveals how Ratzinger understands the task of dogma and metaphysics. They are attempts to understand the drama of world life that the Son of the Father accepts and lives in himself in order to give life in all its fullness to those who are immersed in sin.

In this way, the Pope sketches the outline of an integral dogmatic which, based on the Revelation recorded in Scripture and Tradition, aspires to describe the drama of human existence transformed by Trinitarian missions. Such dogmatics is strictly existential and metaphysical: the metaphysics contained therein serves to confirm the fundamental truths associated with the new being and existence of creation in Christ.²³

At the same time, he gives us creative insight into the nature, structure and methodology of biblical hermeneutics. Scripture should be read harmoniously, in the spirit of the analogy of faith, which links together not only the individual dogmas and truths of faith, but also the truth of Scripture with dogma and the broad metaphysical view. The Ratzinger/Benedict objections against the one-sided and reductionist use of the historical-critical method are, of course, well-known (*JN I*, xii–xiii, xvi–xvii; cf. Hahn 2019, 25–40; Zatwardnicki 2014). They do not in any way imply a rejection

²³ Cf. Blanco Sarto 2011, 421: “Respecto a la figura de Cristo, Ratzinger propone una «cristología espiritual», en la que se unen ontología y soteriología, teología de la cruz y de la encarnación, cristología, pneumatología y eclesiología. Cristo, verdadero Dios y verdadero hombre, sirve de piedra-clave para articular todas estas perspectivas teológicas, de las que la divinidad de Jesucristo constituye su propio fundamento. Para esto se requiere superar la fractura entre el Jesús histórico y el Cristo de la fe, y defender el homousios y la divinidad de Jesucristo definidos en Nicea y III Constantinopla. La cristología calcedoniana presenta también aquí una importancia decisiva. Ratzinger recuerda como consecuencia la centralidad de la figura salvífica de Cristo, en la que no solo hay que recordar su divinidad, sino también su carácter único de mediador en la salvación. Solo él puede ser el mediador y redentor. La búsqueda del rostro de Cristo culminará en la última obra teológica del actual Benedicto XVI.” Cf. as well Blanco Sarto 2011, 22–25, 162, 272, 312, 392, 397–98, 419.

of it, but only a conceding of its exclusive competence in understanding and interpreting Scripture (cf. *VD* 32).²⁴ The basic plane of interpretation should always remain the faith of the Church, of which Scripture, being the written Word of God, is the most fundamental testimony. Being open in the process of interpreting Scripture to its ecclesiastical interpretation in accordance with the analogy of faith makes it possible to notice the metaphysical component of the biblical testimony. The post-biblical interpretation of Scripture in the dogma of the Church by means of concepts drawn from metaphysics is not an aberration and a harmful mutation of the inspired text. But the most important thing is – as Benedict masterfully proved in the pages of *Jesus of Nazareth* – that the Gospel contains within itself *implicite* the entire structure of metaphysical thinking, which, although not formalized and systematized, is as present as possible and is even at the heart of the New Testament message. His text clearly indicates that the apostolic experience that underlies the writing down of the writings of the New Testament is about a real existential transformation, which such is based on the true entry of the Son of God into the world. All these parts of the New Testament discourse basically concern what is the subject of all classical metaphysical reflection. They concern reality. That is why only an interpretation in a metaphysical key – not exclusively, of course – makes it possible to reveal the true layers of the apostolic message and what it is based on, that is, the event of the incarnation itself. Ratzinger has succeeded in showing in his biography of Jesus that all categories of New Testament theology are implicitly and possibly metaphysical. Ultimately, a metaphysical reading is a necessary component of the historical-critical method. If Scripture is to retain its value as history, it needs both the historical-critical method and a metaphysical sensibility to properly understand its message.

All this has obvious implications for theological exegesis itself and for ecumenical dialogue. In terms of exegesis, the presuppositional rejection of a metaphysical interpretation of the Gospel message must be overcome. The theological (dogmatic) moment and the metaphysical one should be considered, at least declaratively and presuppositionally, in the process of arriving at an understanding of the text under study, as possible modalities of its integral meaning.

²⁴ Benedict XVI, “Before all else, we need to acknowledge the benefits that historical-critical exegesis and other recently-developed methods of textual analysis have brought to the life of the Church. For the Catholic understanding of sacred Scripture, attention to such methods is indispensable, linked as it is to the realism of the Incarnation: ‘This necessity is a consequence of the Christian principle formulated in the Gospel of John 1:14: *Verbum caro factum est*. The historical fact is a constitutive dimension of the Christian faith. The history of salvation is not mythology, but a true history, and it should thus be studied with the methods of serious historical research’. The study of the Bible requires a knowledge of these methods of enquiry and their suitable application. While it is true that scholarship has come to a much greater appreciation of their importance in the modern period, albeit not everywhere to the same degree, nonetheless the sound ecclesial tradition has always demonstrated a love for the study of the letter.” Cf. *JN* I, xv.

In the field of ecumenism, this is at least my personal opinion, pope Benedict succeeded in proving – against all denominational prejudices – that a metaphysical (and consequently dogmatic) reading of the inspired text is possible and even desirable. His theological meditations on the life of Jesus prove the existence of such a possibility on the basis of the text itself. In my opinion, this is an achievement on the scale of Barth's epochal recovery of Trinitarian theology from its very biblical root. It is, indeed, a proposal for an integral biblical hermeneutics for our epoch.²⁵

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²⁵ Ratzinger called it "a method C" of exegesis: "You can call the patristic-medieval exegetical approach Method A. The historical-critical approach, the modern approach . . . is Method B. What I am calling for is not a return to Method A, but a development of a Method C, taking advantage of the strengths of both Method A and Method B, but cognizant of the shortcomings of both." (Stallworth 1989, 107–8) For the extensive treatment of this method cf. Ramage 2017, 56–100.

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