

# **Biblia Benedicti**

## **Hermeneutical and Exegetical Legacy of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI**

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# Table of Contents

## EDITORIAL

ADAM KUBIŚ

Biblia Benedicti. Hermeneutical and Exegetical Legacy of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI .....	1
--	---

## ARTICLES

ŚŁAWOMIR ZATWARDNICKI

<i>Regula Fidei</i> in the Light of Joseph Ratzinger's Writings .....	7
---	---

PABLO BLANCO-SARTO

Catholics and Lutherans on Scripture. A Proposal by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI .....	47
---	----

KRZYSZTOF GÓŹDŹ

Introduction to Joseph Ratzinger's Opera Omnia .....	63
--	----

SCOTT HAHN

Normative and Performative: The Authority of Scripture for Catholic Theology and Worship in the Thought of Pope Benedict XVI .....	81
---	----

NINA SOPHIE HEEREMAN

Joseph Ratzinger's Christological-Pneumatological Exegesis of the Old Testament .....	101
---	-----

MATTEO CRIMELLA

Hermeneutical and Exegetical Assumptions in the Work <i>Jesus of Nazareth</i> by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. Some Examples .....	125
--	-----

EZIO PRATO

"La parola di Dio è il fondamento di tutto". Egesi storico-critica ed ermeneutica teologica secondo Joseph Ratzinger – Benedetto XVI .....	141
---	-----

ISACCO PAGANI

<i>Deus Caritas Est</i> . Benedict XVI's First Encyclical and Its Johannine Foundation in the Exegesis of St. Augustine .....	161
--	-----

STEFAN SZYMIK

Church Tradition and Its Biblical Foundations in the Teaching of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. An Outline of Problems .....	177
---	-----

ROBERT J. WOŹNIAK

Mutuality of Scripture, Metaphysics and Dogmatics. A Basic Hermeneutical Insight into Pope Benedict XVI's <i>Jesus of Nazareth</i> .....	199
---	-----

WOJCIECH WĘGRZYŃIAK

Benedict XVI's Interpretation of the Psalms .....	217
---	-----

## REVIEW

ŚŁAWOMIR ZATWARDNICKI

Aaron Pidel, <i>The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture: Testing the Ratzinger Paradigm</i> (Verbum Domini; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press 2023) .....	245
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## EDITORIAL







## EDITORIAL

## Biblia Benedicti. Hermeneutical and Exegetical Legacy of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI

ADAM KUBIŚ 

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Benedict XVI, in his address at the opening of the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 6, 2008), said:

exegesis, the true reading of Holy Scripture, is not only a literary phenomenon, not only reading a text. It is the movement of my existence. It is moving towards the Word of God in the human words. Only by conforming ourselves to the mystery of God, to the Lord who is the Word, can we enter within the Word, can we truly find the Word of God in human words. Let us pray to the Lord that he may help us search the word, not only with our intellect but also with our entire existence. (Benedict XVI 2008)

A direct fruit of the synod was the apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, where the Pope mentions the serious risk of a dualistic approach to sacred Scripture, distinguishing two levels of approach to the Bible: scientific exegesis vs. theology, *ratio* vs. *fides*, historical-critical analysis vs. *lectio divina*. Considering the first level, the Bible is seen as a pure historiography, a human history with no divine element. The other level of approach tends towards the spiritualization of the meaning of the Bible, with no respect for the historical character of revelation. The Pope exhorts to abandon this dualistic approach to sacred Scripture. A positivistic and secularized hermeneutic ultimately based on the conviction that the divine cannot enter and be present within human history must be replaced by a hermeneutic of faith (VD 35). In fact, the two levels of approach exist only in reciprocity. Eventually, the Pope postulates:

In applying methods of historical analysis, no criteria should be adopted which would rule out in advance God's self-disclosure in human history. The unity of the two levels at work in the interpretation of sacred Scripture presupposes, in a word, *the harmony of faith and reason*. On the one hand, it calls for a faith which, by maintaining a proper relationship with right reason, never degenerates into fideism, which in the case of Scripture would

end up in fundamentalism. On the other hand, it calls for a reason which, in its investigation of the historical elements present in the Bible, is marked by openness and does not reject *a priori* anything beyond its own terms of reference. (VD 36)

This is only one of the late Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's hermeneutic and exegetical insights and ideas. His prolific and rich biblical legacy was the subject of reflection during an online symposium organized by the Department of the Exegesis of the Gospels and Apostolic Writings at the Institute of Biblical Studies, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), in particular by Prof. Krzysztof Mielcarek, Head of the Department, Rev. Prof. Stefan Szymik, MSF, and Rev. Prof. Adam Kubiś, held on 25 and 26 October 2023.

The symposium was divided into three sessions. The morning session of 25 October, chaired by Rev. Prof. Dariusz Dziadosz (KUL) and Rev. Dr. Marcin Zieliński (KUL), consisted of four papers: “«La Parola di Dio è il fondamento di tutto». Crocevia dell'esegesi contemporanea secondo Joseph Ratzinger/Benedetto XVI” by Rev. Ezio Prato, Professor of Fundamental Theology at the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy in Milan and Major Seminary in Como, Italy; “*Deus caritas est*, ossia il centro della fede cristiana. La prima enciclica di Benedetto XVI e il suo fondamento giovanneo” by Rev. Isacco Pagani, Professor of Sacred Scripture at the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy in Milan, Italy; “Presupposti ermeneutici ed esegetici nell'opera *Gesù di Nazaret* di Joseph Ratzinger/Benedetto XVI” by Rev. Matteo Crimella, Professor of Sacred Scripture at the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy in Milan, and “*Sola Scriptura numquam sola*. The Biblical Hermeneutical Question between Catholics and Lutherans. A Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's Proposal” by Pablo Blanco Sarto, Professor of Fundamental Theology at the University of Navarra in Pamplona, Spain. All four papers have been published in elaborated and enlarged forms in this special issue of *Verbum Vitae* (cf. Prato 2024; Pagani 2024; Crimella 2024; Blanco-Sarto 2024).

The evening session of 25 October, chaired by Rev. Prof. Adam Kubiś (KUL) and Rev. Prof. Henryk Drawnel, SDB (KUL), included five talks. Prof. Scott Hahn from the University of Steubenville, Ohio, USA, presented a paper entitled “The Symphony of Scripture. The Unity of the Old and the New Testaments in Pope Benedict XVI's Writings.” In turn, Prof. Anthony Giambrone, OP, from the École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem (Israel) delivered a talk “«The Ratzinger Paradigm» and *La méthode historique*.” Prof. Gary Anderson from the University of Notre Dame (USA) discussed the problem of “Priesthood and Church in the Old Testament and the Church.” The next discourse entitled “Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's Christological-Pneumatological Exegesis” was given by Prof. Nina-Sophie Heereman, Professor of Sacred Scripture at St. Patrick's Seminary and University (USA). Finally, Prof. Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger from the University of Vienna (Austria) reflected on Ratzinger's legacy in this talk “The Mystical Contact of

the Hagiographers with God (JRGS 2,518). Joseph Ratzinger's Spiritual Interpretation of Scripture." Two of the lecturers offered their papers for publication in the present volume (cf. Hahn 2024; Heereman 2024).

The last session, held on 26 October and chaired by Rev. Prof. Stefan Szymik, MSF and Prof. Krzysztof Mielcarek, offered five papers presented in Polish: "Wprowadzenie do *Opera Omnia* Józefa Ratzingera/Benedykta XIV" [Introduction to Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's *Opera Omnia*] by Rev. Krzysztof Gózdź (Professor of Dogmatic Theology at KUL and Head of the Editorial Committee of the complete works of Joseph Ratzinger in Polish), "Hermeneutyka wiary w pismach Józefa Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI" [Hermeneutics of Faith in the Writings of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI] by Rev. Janusz Kręcidło, MS (Professor of Sacred Scripture at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland), "*Regula fidei* w świetle pism Józefa Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI" [*Regula fidei* in Light of the Writings of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI] by Sławomir Zatwardnicki (Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Wrocław, Poland), "Milczenie Boga a chrystologiczna interpretacja Pisma Świętego" [The Silence of God and the Christological Interpretation of Sacred Scripture] by Rev. Waldemar Linke, CP (Professor of Sacred Scripture at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw)<sup>1</sup> and "Biblijne źródła Tradycji apostoelskiej Kościoła w nauczaniu Józefa Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI" [Biblical Roots of the Church's Apostolic Tradition in the Teaching of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI] by Rev. Stefan Szymik, MSF (Professor of Biblical Hermeneutics at the Institute of Biblical Studies, KUL). Three of the papers are being published in *Verbum Vitae* (cf. Gózdź 2024; Zatwardnicki 2024a; Szymik 2024).

This issue of *Verbum Vitae*, dedicated entirely to the hermeneutical and exegetical legacy of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, also includes two additional articles, namely "Mutuality of Scripture, Metaphysics and Dogmatics. A Basic Hermeneutical Insight in Pope Benedict XVI's *Jesus of Nazareth*" by Rev. Robert J. Woźniak, Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Poland (cf. Woźniak 2024) and "Benedict XVI's Interpretation of the Psalms" by Rev. Wojciech Węgrzyniak, Professor of Sacred Scripture at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow (cf. Węgrzyniak 2024).

The final text published in this issue is a thorough review of *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture: Testing the Ratzinger Paradigm*, a monograph written by Fr. Aaron Pidel, SJ, Assistant Professor of Theology at Marquette University, USA. The author of the review is Prof. Sławomir Zatwardnicki. Pidel sought to answer two questions: "what it means that the Bible is the word of God (and not just a word about God), and how true the Bible is and to what extent the word of God expressed in human language can be expected to transcend the cultural level of its time." (Zatwardnicki 2024b) The review of Pidel's work is noteworthy

<sup>1</sup> On a similar topic see Linke 2024.

as it was Ratzinger who “laid a groundwork for a comprehensive theory of biblical inspiration and truth.” (Pidel 2023, 8)

I thank all the contributors to this volume of *Verbum Vitae*, especially the conference participants who prepared and submitted their papers for publication. Certainly, the reader will find these texts thought-provoking and inspiring.

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## ARTICLES







# Regula Fidei in the Light of Joseph Ratzinger's Writings

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**Abstract:** The study of the theological significance of *regula fidei* was embedded in Ratzinger's theology of the word of God through its connection with Christology, pneumatology and ecclesiology. The Bavarian theologian derived his reflections on the word of God from the historical structure of revelation and the genesis of Scripture in the Church. The article begins with a characterisation of the concept of Tradition, of which the rule of faith is a constituent element. The perspective adopted has made it possible to identify the main areas of the theology of the Word of God in which the rule of faith plays a role. Subsequently, the article addressed the relationship of revelation to the oral (*regula fidei*) and written (Scripture) canons, the connection between the Creed and the Church's liturgy, the relation of the oral and written canons, and the relevance of the Magisterium of the Church to the rule of faith. The theological approach to the rule of faith has also served to deepen reflection on the theology of the word of God, including the primacy of Scripture in the "one living organism of the word of God."

**Keywords:** *regula fidei*, rule of faith, Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, revelation, liturgy, Magisterium of the Church, organism of the word of God, primacy of Scripture, theology of the word of God

As noted by Scott Hahn (2009, 16–17; 2021, 17–19),<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ratzinger is not so much a systematic theologian as a symphonic one. Whoever studies the work of the Bavarian theologian encounters an organic thought in which all the elements come together to form a harmonious whole, without which they cannot be properly understood. As a result, a person discussing a particular issue from Ratzinger's legacy, firstly, cannot isolate it from the others in order not to lose sight of the synthesis and, secondly, must choose one of the many perspectives from which the issue can be considered. In *nexus mysteriorum*, "the slightest stirring in one place produces a wave of vibration in all directions." (Sesboüé 2007, 14) And Ratzinger's theology, wrote Kevin E. O'Reilly, is characterised precisely by an awareness of the links between the mysteries of faith (2020, 56).

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This article is an extended version of a speech given at the annual international conference of the Institute of Biblical Studies "*Biblia Benedicti*. Hermeneutical and Exegetical Legacy of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI" (John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Lublin, October 26, 2023).

<sup>1</sup> Naturally the American theologian is not the only one to characterise Ratzinger in this way. Of the others, it is worth mentioning at least Pablo Blanco Sarto (cf. his articles: Blanco Sarto 2013, 2018, 2020).

The search for the theological meaning of the rule of faith<sup>2</sup> must be framed within the broader background of Ratzinger's theology of the word of God, and that considered in its relation to Christology, pneumatology and ecclesiology (O'Reilly 2020, 56). In particular, looking closely at the process of the establishment of Scripture and the Church must prove fruitful because, as Hahn writes, Ratzinger's "hermeneutic of faith arises organically from the historical structure of revelation itself, that is, from the historical processes whereby the Scriptures were written down and handed on in the Church." (Hahn 2009, 46; 2021, 58)

This article proposes to start with Ratzinger's characterisation of the phenomenon of Tradition (par. 1), of which both Scripture and *regula fidei* are constituent elements. The perspective adopted will make it possible to identify the main areas of the theology of the word of God (par. 2–7) in which *regula fidei* plays a role. The theological approach to the rule of faith will also secondarily contribute to a deeper reflection on "Biblia Benedicti."

## 1. *Regula fidei* as an Element of Tradition

According to Ratzinger, the phenomenon of Tradition stems from the historical dimension of faith. As the author of the entry "Tradition" ("Tradition – Systematisch") in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* wrote, "the bond with the unique event of Christ [*Die Bindung an das einmalige Christuserlebnis*], which is the salvific transformation of human existence, does not take place except through incorporation into history, growing out of this source and representing the form of His permanent presence among men [*bleibenden Anwesenheit unter den Menschen darstellt*]." (Ratzinger 2018r, 384) The Bavarian theologian listed a number of elements that comprise Tradition, which must be considered together:

1. Scripture as part of Tradition transcending Scripture. The link between the two is already apparent from the very distinction between the two Testaments: the word of the New Testament is the living word interpreting the Old Testament, and the latter can only be Scripture in an ecclesiastical Christological reinterpretation (Ratzinger 2018r, 385). The establishment of the canon does not conclude this process, even if its continuation will henceforth have to take into account the New Testament writings created under inspiration. The account given of Jesus is not about archival confirmation of the past, but about the present presence of the Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Cor 3:17: "Now the Lord is the Spirit"). From this it follows that

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<sup>2</sup> Although the issue of *regula fidei* is the subject of many studies (cf. the literature collected in Zatwardnicki 2023d), I am not aware of any publications devoted entirely to Ratzinger's understanding of the rule of faith.

the word of the Lord, although it must not be detached from its historical foundation, unfolds and must be understood as present (cf. Ratzinger 2018r, 386; cf. Paciorek 2017, 210–11).

2. Apostolic succession, which functions as a safeguard of the word once delivered against gnostic speculations or references to alleged unwritten apostolic traditions. *Successio apostolica*, Ratzinger believes, has the character of a principle: “the primordial presence of the word is a personal presence in the form of a witness who, of course, as a witness, must not be arbitrary and who, precisely for this reason, ensures the primordially of the word [*Reinheit des Wortes*].” He adds nothing to it, he preaches it and interprets it, and in his testimony “one word is assimilated into each present and is thus faithfully preserved [...]” (Ratzinger 2018r, 386 [quot. and paraphrase])

3. *Regula fidei* (and the later, not entirely identical to the rule of faith, *symbolum*) as the first “canon” of the Church. The Bavarian theologian referred in this connection to the medieval conviction that Scripture should be interpreted “according to *fides*, that is, according to the directive of the Creed.” (Ratzinger 2018r, 386) It was not about material supplementation of Scripture by *symbolum*, but about a hermeneutical problem already solved in the early Church:

Scripture is to be interpreted in the light of *regula fidei* and for the sake of *regula fidei*. Thus, in a sense, the principle of “*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*” is confirmed, since *regula* is taken from Scripture itself. However, it is clearly transcended by this, since the “canon within the canon” [*Kanon im Kanon*] is established by none other than the authority of the Church as an expression of its faith which primarily explains Scripture. (Ratzinger 2018r, 387; cf. Zatwardnicki 2022, 203; Humphrey 2013, 162)<sup>3</sup>

The rule of faith is more than a sum of claims, the *regula* as “*fides quae*” cannot be separated from “*fides qua creditur*.” This, according to Ratzinger, is an expression of the fact that Scripture cannot have an effect except in the faith of the Church. Relevant here is the connection indicated by Ratzinger between the rule of faith and the liturgical-sacramental life and the catechumenate, to which I shall return later in this article. For now, suffice it to say that *regula fidei* is not merely a verbal formula, but the faith of the Church realised and expressed in the life of the Church (Ratzinger 2018r, 387).

4. The constant presence of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete promised by Jesus, who “takes care to ensure the preservation of the revelation once given [*die einmalige*”

<sup>3</sup> Robert Sokolowski, indicating the link between *Credo* and Scripture, pointed out that the formulation of the Creed is something that Scripture itself could not do (2013, 194–95). Christopher Seitz notes that when *regula fidei* was created, Scripture was still primarily the Old Testament, so the rule of faith, contrary to repeated opinions, could not be a summary of all Scripture (cf. 2011, 193).

*Offenbarung*], which sometimes – precisely in order to remain the same – must be uttered in a different way.” (Ratzinger 2018r, 387–88 [quot. from p. 388])

5. Dogmas, i.e. binding claims arising from the authority given to the Church to interpret Scripture, as an objectified Tradition. In this secondary sense, Tradition transcends Scripture materially, but the latter’s importance cannot be diminished. Therefore, dogmas must not be understood as if only the Church’s expounding was clear and Scripture completely obscure. Indeed, a dogma also, as an objectified tradition, needs an interpretation that demands a return to the source (cf. Ratzinger 2018r, 388; 2018n, 511).<sup>4</sup>

In his *Attempt to Define the Concept of Tradition* (*Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriffs*), Ratzinger identified various sources of the reality of Tradition, which are simultaneously the planes that constitute the reality of Tradition. These are:

1. Surplus of reality [*Der Überhang der Wirklichkeit*] of revelation vis-à-vis Scripture.

2. “Impossibility of objectivising [*Nichtobjektivierbarkeit*]” (Bultmann) of revelation related to the nature of New Testament Revelation (*Pneuma vis-à-vis grammata*), which in the practice of the Church and medieval theology was expressed by placing *fides* above *scriptura*, the Creed (rule of faith) above what is written.

3. The presentness of the Christ-event, the presence of the Spirit of Christ in the Church-Body of Christ, and the related mandate to interpret “Christ yesterday” towards “Christ today” (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 45 [reg. all three points]; 2018m, 364. Cf. Brotherton 2015, 101; McCaughey 2018, 130–31; Pidel 2023, 113–14; Zatwardnicki 2022, 176).

In Ratzinger’s view, these sources correspond to layers of transmission. The original *paradosis* consists in the Father sending his Son and the Son allowing himself to be delivered. This tradition is continued in Christ’s abiding presence in the Church and his indwelling of believers through faith. Therefore, the decisive fundamental reality transmitted in Tradition is the full mystery of Christ, which is the proper content of the transmission preceding all explications (including inspired Scripture). This Tradition has its instrument in those exercising authority in the Church, but the Tradition has also already been expressed in what has become the rule of faith (*symbolum, fides quae*) (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 46; 2018m, 364–65).<sup>5</sup>

Referring, in turn, to the lecture *The Problem of the History of Dogma from the Perspective of Catholic Theology* (*Das Problem der Dogmengeschichte in der Sicht*

<sup>4</sup> A similar feedback occurs between the rule of faith and Scripture [Wall 2000, 105].

<sup>5</sup> The Bible is the linguistic expression of revelation, which is not exhausted in words. Therefore, it is only where revelation “reaches” the recipient that a greater union with the word is possible and what could not be derived from the letter alone is discovered. This fact, according to Ratzinger, allows one to justify the phenomenon of Tradition and the Magisterium (cf. Ratzinger 2018l, 832).

*der katholischen Theologie*), it can be added that the form of dogma in the ancient Church was the Church's faith unveiling Scripture, which could not be reduced to a mere formula. These statements are important for our argument: in the early Church, Scripture is read within the framework of the Church's faith, which is expressed in – but not reducible to – a verbal formula. In other words: the rule of faith is to be seen as an expression of the Church's faith inherent in the life of that Church, in which the revelation event is still ongoing. Tradition is the expounding of “the Scripturally attested Christ-event in the history of the Church's faith,” an interpretation carried out “under the guidance of the Spirit or through the risen Christ present because of Him,” (Ratzinger 2018n, 505) Ratzinger concludes.

As Pope Benedict XVI, Ratzinger expressed his conviction that the meaning and value of living Tradition and Scripture in the Church can be better understood when one recognises the bond that exists between the Holy Spirit and the word of God (VD 17). If God gave the world his only-begotten Son (cf. John 3:16), “the divine word, spoken in time, is bestowed and ‘consigned’ to the Church in a definitive way, so that the proclamation of salvation can be communicated effectively in every time and place.” (VD 1. Cf. DV 7 quoted by the Pope) However, the Tradition initiated by the Apostles is a living and dynamic reality, developing under the lead of the Holy Spirit (VD 17; DV 8). This means that “[t]he living Tradition is essential for enabling the Church to grow through time in the understanding of the truth revealed in the Scriptures,” and even that “[u]ltimately, it is the living Tradition of the Church which makes us adequately understand sacred Scripture as the word of God.” (VD 17. Cf. DV 8) Here, within this function inherent in all of Tradition, Benedict XVI also locates the task of the Magisterium of the Church:

In short, by the work of the Holy Spirit and under the guidance of the magisterium, the Church hands on to every generation all that has been revealed in Christ. The Church lives in the certainty that her Lord, who spoke in the past, continues today to communicate his word in her living Tradition and in sacred Scripture. Indeed, the word of God is given to us in sacred Scripture as an inspired testimony to revelation; together with the Church's living Tradition, it constitutes the supreme rule of faith. (VD 18. Cf. DV 21)

This view is slightly different from the claims of the young Ratzinger. In his commentary on DV 21, he seemed to regret the change introduced during the Council's work, weakening the normative character inherent in Scripture “possessing in a specific form the quality of a *regula*, as a self-contained, clearly delimited entity, a *regula* which, precisely because it stands so unalterably and indestructively in itself, requires that man constantly measures himself against it.” (Ratzinger 1969, 264; 2016e, 691) In number 21 of the *Dei Verbum* constitution, the Council Fathers state that the Church “has always maintained [Scripture – SZ] [...], and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition [*una cum Sacra Traditione*], as the supreme rule of faith [*supremam*

*fidei suae regulam*],” while no. 24 refers to sacred theology, which “rests on the written word of God [*verbo Dei scripto*], together with sacred tradition [*una cum Sacra Traditione*], as its primary and perpetual foundation.” Ratzinger comments that the formula used “expresses the fact that not only is Scripture related to tradition, but also that tradition, in its turn, is based upon Scripture.” (Ratzinger 1969, 268; 2016e, 697)<sup>6</sup> In the formulation “[f]or the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God [*verbum Dei continent*] and since they are inspired, really are the word of God [*vere verbum Dei sunt*],” (DV 24) he saw an attempt to work out “the essential difference between Scripture and tradition and the special pre-eminence of Scripture,” which is “the fundamental form of ‘tradition.’” This special significance of Scripture stems from the fact that “it is as a whole, the word of revelation, because it is inspired, which cannot be said of any other document of the Christian past.” (Ratzinger 1969, 270; 2016e, 699)<sup>7</sup>

This conviction, in turn, was reflected in the papal exhortation *Verbum Domini*: “Although the word of God precedes and exceeds sacred Scripture, nonetheless Scripture, as inspired by God, contains the divine word (cf. 2 Tim 3:16) ‘in an altogether singular way.’” (VD 17) However, “the Word of God must not remain confined to writing,” as emphasised by Benedict XVI in his message to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, and therefore “becomes a supreme law of [...] faith and life force” not as an inert deposit, but in the living Tradition of the Church which “progresses with the help of the Holy Spirit.” (Benedict XVI 2012b, 2012a; DV 8, 21)

## 2. Revelation and the Oral and Written Canons

Ratzinger, as a conciliar expert, objected to the title of the schema *De fontibus revelationis*, which reflected the view popular after the Council of Trent – but not expressed by it – of two sources of revelation implying an incorrect account of Divine Revelation (cf. Ratzinger 2016d, 140–41).<sup>8</sup> The theologian pointed out that, according to the traditional understanding, “Scripture and tradition are not the sources of

<sup>6</sup> As Ratzinger wrote elsewhere, a theologian receives the statements of faith from the Church bound by the “double unity of testimony: Scripture and Tradition,” the Church-guardian of the word of God, for which “the norm is the historically transmitted word of revelation.” (cf. Ratzinger 2018q, 223)

<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the principle of wholeness means that individual biblical texts are to be understood and traced to their divine origin only in relation to the whole (cf. Benedict XVI 2023, 60). According to Ratzinger, in light of the broad horizon indicated in *Dei Verbum*, it becomes possible “to determine the concept of Tradition, which also goes beyond Scripture while having it as its centre, since Scripture is above all and by nature ‘tradition.’” (Ratzinger 2003; cf. 2018s, 734)

<sup>8</sup> Instead, he proposed a change to, for example, *De revelatione*. He also postulated that the document should begin with the chapter *De revelatione ipsa* and the term *fontes* should be replaced with another (cf. Ratzinger 2016d, 142).



revelation, but instead revelation, God's speaking and his manifesting of himself, is the *unus fons* [one source], from which then the two streams Scripture and tradition flow out." (English quot. after: Wicks 2008, 270; Ratzinger 2016d, 140–41)<sup>9</sup> As Ratzinger recounts, the Fathers understood *paradosis* not as individual sentences existing "alongside" Scripture (as in gnosis), but as the integration of Scripture into the living organism of the Church and the Church's ownership of Scripture. For the Fathers, Tradition meant "*scriptura in ecclesia*," Scripture made alive through the living assimilation by the Spirit-filled Church (cf. Ratzinger 2016d, 145–46; Gaál 2010, 88).<sup>10</sup> Medieval theologians, including Saints Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, for all their reverence for Scripture, are not "scripturalists, since they both know well that revelation is always more than its material principle, the Scripture, namely, that it is life living on in the Church in a way that makes Scripture a living reality and illuminates its hidden depths." (English quot. after: Wicks 2008, 276; Ratzinger 2016d, 147; cf. Hemming 2008, 114–15)

According to Ratzinger, the schema failed to distinguish between the order of being (reality) and the order of cognition (access to reality). It is only in the latter order that one can speak of Scripture and Tradition as sources, but not of Revelation itself, but of its cognition (Ratzinger 2016b, 141). The conciliar advisor believed that it should be assumed that revelation is prior to the material testimonies of revelation (cf. Ratzinger 2016d, 141–42). "Then it is clear that revelation itself is always more than its formulated witness in Scripture, for revelation is the living reality that surrounds Scripture and expands it. [...] Scripture and Tradition are material principles of our knowing revelation, not revelation itself." (English quot. after: Wicks 2008, 271–72; Ratzinger 2016d, 142–43)

Ratzinger owes this firm view, persisting in his theology and affirmed, *nota bene*, in the *Dei Verbum*<sup>11</sup> constitution, to his research on the work of St Bonaventure. From the research it follows, as he wrote in his habilitation dissertation *The Theology of History in St Bonaventure (Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura)*, that the Seraphic Doctor did not call Scripture itself revelation. He associated *revelatio* with a certain inner understanding (*intelligentia*) of Scripture consisting in grasping its spiritual sense. If, under inspiration, there was a transition from *mundus sensibilis* to *mundus intelligibilis*, and thus a revelation or uncovering (*revelatio*) took

<sup>9</sup> German: "nicht Schrift und Überlieferung die Quellen der Offenbarung, sondern die Offenbarung, das Sprechen und Sich-selbst- Enthüllen Gottes, ist der *unus fons*, aus dem die beiden rivuli Schrift und Überlieferung hervorfleßen." (quot. after: Wicks 2008, 296)

<sup>10</sup> Similarly, medieval theology, including Thomasian theology, "does not know [...] the two material principles of the history of dogmas – Scripture and Tradition, but only one material and formal principle: Scripture (which is materially sufficient) and the *auctoritas ecclesiae* or *Romani pontificis* interpreting the Scripture." (Ratzinger 2014a, 627)

<sup>11</sup> This was emphasised by Ratzinger himself, according to whom *Dei Verbum* "defines the concept of Revelation, which is not to be wholly identified with its written testimony which is the Bible [...]" (Ratzinger 2003; 2018s, 734)

place, the inspired writer, in turn, had to convey this *visio intellectualis* wrapping it in the “swaddling clothes” of the written word. Consistently, revelation is not found in the letter, but in what is hidden behind it and needs a new unveiling (cf. Ratzinger 1989, 63 [together with n. 1], 67 [together with n. 22]; 2014b, 455 [together with n. 1], 460 [together with n. 22]; Pidel 2023, 56–57; McCaughey 2018, 125).

The risk of overemphasising the revelatory actualism marked by subjectivism (at the expense of the objectivism of the fact of revelation) was dismissed by medieval theologians by linking Scripture to the faith of the Church. Scripture would become revelation only in the Church’s living understanding of Scripture, into which the reader entered through faith (a “mystical” attitude, analogous to that of the hagiographer receiving revelation) (cf. Ratzinger 1989, 67–68; 2014b, 461–62).<sup>12</sup> This is how Ratzinger explained it: “For the deep meaning of Scripture in which we truly find the ‘revelation’ and the content of faith is not left up to the whim of each individual. It has already been objectified in part in the teachings of the Fathers and in theology so that the basic lines are accessible simply by the acceptance of the Catholic faith, which – as it is summarized in the *Symbolum* – is a principle of exegesis.” (Ratzinger 1989, 67; 2014b, 460–61)

In his contribution *Revelation – Scripture – Tradition: St. Bonaventure’s Text and Its Significance for Contemporary Theology* (*Offenbarung – Schrift – Überlieferung. Ein Text des hl. Bonaventura und seine Bedeutung für die gegenwärtige Theologie*), the Bavarian theologian stressed that “to refer exclusively to Scripture as ‘revelation’ is a risky simplification,” since “Scripture is the material principle of revelation.” Revelation “remains outside Scripture and is not completely objectified in it. Therefore, Scripture, in order to be revelation, needs an interpretation that is consistent with revelation.” (Ratzinger 2014a, 634–35; cf. also 2018l, 831; 1983, 27) Thus, revelation and Scripture cannot be reduced to one another *tout court*, which Ratzinger emphasised in *Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriffs*:

Revelation [*Offenbarung*] means God’s whole speech and action [*gesamte Sprechen und Tun Gottes*] with man; it signifies a *reality* [*Wirklichkeit*] which scripture makes known but which is not itself simply identical with scripture. Revelation, therefore, is more [*überschreitet*] than scripture to the extent that reality exceeds information about it. It might also be said that scripture is the material principle [*Materialprinzip*] of revelation [...], but that it is not revelation itself. (Ratzinger 1966, 35; 2018m, 356; Wicks 2010, 642–43; Hemming 2008, 115)<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Also in his article *On the Problem of the Demythologisation of the New Testament*, the Bavarian theologian recalled that in medieval theology, it was still believed that the letter of Scripture was not “revelation,” it was only Scripture understood in the light of faith in Christ (cf. Ratzinger 2018j, 655).

<sup>13</sup> However, it is not the case, Ratzinger added, that Scripture merely informs about facts existing outside of it. The reality of revelation as the reality of the word touches the addressee in the word of preaching. However, the word is not the reality of revelation. The linguistic character of revelation does not invalidate the distinction between the word and the reality occurring in it (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 70, n. 12; 2018m, 356, n. 12).



In his argument, Ratzinger highlighted the connection between revelation and the subject receiving it, without which it would not exist. Revelation becomes a reality only when there is faith that causes the veil covering the heart to be taken away (cf. 2 Cor 3:14–16) (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 36; 2018m, 356–57). In turn, in many other places, including in the lecture “Sources and Transmission of the Faith” (“Glaubensvermittlung und Glaubensquellen”), Ratzinger emphasised after Henri de Lubac that the faith of the believer does not exist outside the faith of the Church; by professing faith, the individual transcends the boundaries of their own “I” and becomes part of the Church subject with its knowledge that transcends time and boundaries. The act of faith is always an act of participating in the *communio* of witnesses, co-believing with the whole Church. It follows that faith cannot be experienced more directly from Scripture alone, to the exclusion of the faith of the Church, for this would be going beyond the certainty of the Church’s memory transcending the individual “I” (cf. Ratzinger 1983, 26; 2018l, 830; cf. O’Reilly 2020, 53).

Ratzinger recommended viewing the sources of faith in relation to the source from which they originate; this source is God acting through Christ, and this source can only be accessed in the living organism of the Church. If Scripture is isolated from the life foundation of divine communication taking place in the “We” of the community of believers, then it becomes merely a “letter” (*Buchstabe*), a “flesh” (*Fleisch*) (cf. Ratzinger 1983, 27; 2018l, 831–32). “That the Bible [...] says more than we are now able to comprehend from its letter, comes from the fact that it expresses a Revelation, reflected but not exhausted by the word.” (Ratzinger 1983, 28; 2018l, 832)]<sup>14</sup> The exclusion of this self-transcendence of Scripture results in a one-dimensional interpretation by the historical-critical method. Affirming that the content of the Bible, which is the record of the process of revelation, can only be recognised when the reader is included in this process changes the competence to interpret it (cf. Ratzinger 1983, 27–28; 2018l, 831–32). Then this competence belongs “to a whole network of references by which the living God communicates himself in the Christ by the Holy Spirit,” and “it is expression and instrument of the communion thanks to which the divine ‘I’ and the human ‘Thou’ touch one another in the ‘We’ of the Church through the intermediary of Christ.” Therefore, it is only when the revelation “reaches” the recipient and becomes a living revelation that a deeper union with the word takes place than when the text is analysed (Ratzinger 1983, 28; 2018l, 832).

What, then, is the relationship of revelation thus understood to the rule of faith and the rule of Scripture? This problem was addressed by Ratzinger in his paper *Das Problem der Dogmengeschichte in der Sicht der katholischen Theologie*.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pidel (2014, 319): “[...] Ratzinger’s ontology of Scripture carries a further implication. Since the subject that produced Scripture lives on in the Church, it follows that Scripture (*qua* revelation) will overreach its own textual canon.”

The Bavarian theologian, having opposed the axiom that revelation ended with the death of the Apostles (cf. Ratzinger 2018n, 502–3), identified two poles of revelation, past and present:

In the Bible, revelation is not understood as a system of propositions, but as the event of a new relationship between God and man that has happened and is still happening in faith [*das geschehene und im Glauben immer noch geschehende Ereignis*]. This perfective nature of this event is reflected in the fact that for the believer the relationship between God and man has been realised in Christ in a supreme, unsurpassed, and ever new way. It retains its presentness, however, because it is always to be realised anew. (Ratzinger 2018n, 503)

It can be said that “the word of revelation uttered in Christ remains present in history and reaches men.”<sup>15</sup> Verbal formulas may be only or as much as a testimony and explanation of a revelation event, but they are not revelation itself. The “moment of closure and exemplarity” related to κανὼν τῆς πίστεως oraz κανὼν τῶν γραφῶν was explained by Ratzinger as follows: “by establishing an oral and written canon (*regula fidei* and sacred texts), the Church has subjected herself to a permanent norm of explication. However, this norm is not a finite and closed set of propositions of revelation, but rather a norm that gives form to the everlasting and advancing history of faith.” (Ratzinger 2018n, 503; cf. Nichols 2007, 163; Zatwardnicki 2022, 212) If I understand this correctly, the oral and written canons constitute the normative criterion for interpreting revelation, or even the condition for abiding in revelation which, however, is not exhausted in them.

In an article entitled “On the Problem of the Demythologisation of the New Testament” (“Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung des Neuen Testamentes”), obviously prompted by the views of Rudolf Bultmann, Ratzinger took the position that attempts at “demythologisation” (*entmythologisierung*) are also important for Catholic theology, except that what is revelation is not determined by a single theologian on the basis of scientific data, but is decided by the living community of faith which, being the Body of Christ, is Christ present in time and deciding on his work. In this sense, it is God himself – acting through the community of faith that formulates dogmas (the extension of the Symbol) as criteria defining the boundary between the seed and the husk – who provides the measure of what is possible and real (*des Möglichen und des Wirklichen*) (cf. Ratzinger 2018j, 655, 659–60).

<sup>15</sup> This is actually a quotation from another text (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 26; 2018m, 349).

### 3. Interpreting Scripture "According to Faith"

In *Attempt to Define the Concept of Tradition*, Ratzinger pointed out that, just as the old and new covenants "are different in kind, so too is the fact of scripture not identical in the two cases." (Ratzinger 1966, 37; 2018m, 357) The title of "Scripture" [*Schrift*] was reserved by both New Testament hagiographers and the early Church as a whole to the Old Testament. The "new" Scripture was not placed alongside it, since it was understood that it was the Christ-event [*Christus-Ereignis*] that was the interpreting spirit [*auslegenden Geist*] of Scripture, the true meaning of Scripture (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 38; 2018m, 357–58; similar reflections in: 2016a, 417). Saint Paul even contrasted the New Covenant as *pneuma* with the Old Covenant as *gramma* (cf. 2 Cor 3:6–8). According to the apostle, the Lord Himself is the Spirit (*Pneuma*) (v. 17) which is the meaning, the true and living (non-literal) content of Scripture. As Ratzinger notes, the oldest creeds [*Glaubensbekenntnisse*] (e.g. "Jesus is the Christ") express this conviction of the fulfilment of the Old Testament message about the Messiah in the historical Jesus (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 37; 2018m, 358).<sup>16</sup>

The Bavarian theologian maintains that this state of affairs is not merely transitory and that its essence, even if more difficult to discern, remains permanent even after the New Testament literature has taken shape. The salvific-revelatory Christ-event makes it necessary for Scripture to assume a different place than was accorded to it in the Old Covenant (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 38–39; 2018m, 358–59). Thus began an ongoing process of interpreting Scripture in the light of Christ lasting "within the spiritual reality of Jesus Christ [*Geistwirklichkeit Jesu Christi*], who remains with his own 'always, to the close of the age' (Mt 28:20), who by his going through the Cross has come again in the Holy Spirit (as John expresses it) and, through the Spirit, expounds to the disciples what they once were still unable to bear, when the Lord still visibly dwelt among them (Jn 16:12 f.)." (Ratzinger 1966, 39; 2018m, 359)

This Christocentrism of revelation is decisive for a proper grasp of the relationship between the reality of revelation itself and its verbal, including inspired, expoundings. Since for Christians, Ratzinger emphasises, the reception of revelation means entering into the reality of Christ, who is revelation in the proper sense of the word (cf. John 14:9), individual propositions in this process play a secondary role. Reception of revelation, i.e. the reality of Christ, involves faith through which

<sup>16</sup> Cf. also Emery de Gaál (2010, 125): "They are crystallizing moments when early Christians 'explosively' discovered their faith contained an explicit Christology. He called these very early statements '*praesymbola*' and thus coined a new term. A *praesymbolum* is not the sum of a gospel narrative that came about later but its inner structure. It precedes canon formation and even the written form of many New Testament texts." Hugolin Langkammer divides the post-paschal creeds into: formulas of faith, acclamations and doxologies (cf. 1976, 43–44). The biblical scholar notes that the earliest creeds link the earthly Jesus to the risen Christ, which is relevant in the age of modern Christological and exegetical research (cf. 1976, 49).

Christ dwells in a Christian's heart (cf. Eph 3:17), as well as the "Body of Christ," i.e. the community he gathered that makes it possible to participate in the presence of Christ (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 40–41; 2018m, 359–60; cf. also: Benedykt XVI 2023, 59). Therefore, Ratzinger writes of "[t]he explication of the Christ-reality, which is revelation and which has its double yet single enduring presence [*zwiefach-eine Anwesenheit*] in faith and in the Church." (Ratzinger 1966, 41; 2018m, 361)

In the next step of his argument, Ratzinger emphasises that the explication of this Christ-reality, present in faith and in the Church, takes place in preaching which is intrinsically explanatory. This takes two forms: The Old Testament is explained in the light of and in relation to the Christ-event, while the Christ-event itself is explained in the light of the *Pneuma* and in the light of the presence of the living Lord in the Church, which is his Body, in which his Spirit is at work (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 41–42; 2018m, 361). It can therefore be said – and Ratzinger does so in the text of the "Conciliar Discussion on the Relationship between Scripture and Tradition" ("Zur Konzilsdiskussion über das Verhältnis von Schrift und Überlieferung") – that the principle of Scripture was transcended with the coming of Christ. In contrast, Scripture itself is conditioned by the existence of ecclesiastical Tradition, for it is only in the faith of the Church that Scripture becomes Scripture. This also becomes apparent in the conclusions reached by historical-critical research: indeed, already in the New Testament itself, we are dealing not with a mechanical transmission of the "archival" words and deeds of the Lord, but with a certain development arising precisely from the conviction that the Risen Lord, by means of the Spirit, lives in the Church (Ratzinger 2016a, 416–17).<sup>17</sup>

Similar thoughts, with a more direct reference to *regula fidei*, were expressed by Ratzinger in *Das Problem der Dogmengeschichte in der Sicht der katholischen Theologie*. According to the scholar, the original form of the concept of Tradition consisted "in the division of Scripture into Old and New Testaments, and this in such a way that the New Testament appears as a Christological interpretation of the Old, as a 'Tradition' [*Tradition*] which gives 'Scripture' [*Schrift*] its meaning." (Ratzinger 2018n, 504) Even though, as a result of the amalgamation of the two Testaments into a single "Scripture," the concept of Tradition has begun to overlap to some extent, the conviction remains that all "Scripture," not excluding the New Testament, must henceforth be interpreted "according to faith" (cf. Ratzinger 2018n, 504).

This faith is understood as the Trinitarian baptismal confession (the extended Christological confession) or the associated *regula fidei* (cf. Ratzinger 2018n, 504; cf. also Królikowski 2020, 53). This rule of faith is regarded as:

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ratzinger 2018r, 385 on the distinction between Old and New Testaments as a transgression of the principle of Scripture, and on how the Old Testament ("Scripture" in the early Church) can only be Scripture in an ecclesiastical Christological interpretation, which in turn shows the bond of Scripture and Tradition.

the proper canon of the Church – the canon that constitutes the canon for the “canon” [*eigentliche Kanon der Kirche, der den Kanon für den „Kanon“ bildet*]. This notion of canon, or the conviction that Scripture is to be interpreted according to faith, is a form of the notion of dogma in the ancient Church. Dogma is not understood here as a claim, it is rather the faith of the Church that unveils and interprets Scripture. It should be clear that there is not yet a dissonance here between the concept of Tradition and the concept of dogma, but above all that this understanding of the Christian canon necessarily implies a dynamic element, since according to it Scripture always requires interpretation and the faith that unveils it is always more than a mere formula. (Ratzinger 2018n, 504–5; cf. Zatwardnicki 2022, 306)<sup>18</sup>

In both the rule of faith and the subsequent dogma, one can see an interpretation that makes it possible to express the ambiguous, figurative language of the Bible in terms that are unambiguous and reveal the essence of the message of Scripture (cf. Ratzinger 2018n, 511).<sup>19</sup>

In a commentary on one of the documents of the International Theological Commission, Ratzinger pointed out that the early Church rejected a political interpretation of the Old Testament and followed a Christological expounding of the Old Testament (cf. Ratzinger 2018f, 152).<sup>20</sup> Oriented towards the Lord risen from the dead who is Spirit, the Old Testament was “pneumatised” (spiritualised) [*pneumatisiert (vergeistigt)*]. However, this pneumatisation is at the same time an incarnation, an attribution to the Spirit dwelling in the Body of Jesus. Given that the Lord entrusted his word to the recollective action of the Holy Spirit present in the community of disciples, it should be added that the concretely incarnational character of the pneumatisation is expressed in the fact that the word was committed to the recollective faith of the Church, which makes possible a “simultaneity” [*Gleichzeitigkeit*] with the word (i.e. recognition of the present in the word of the past) (cf. Ratzinger 2018f, 153, 155–56).

Elsewhere, the Bavarian theologian showed the related fact that the Church appeared in place of the Kingdom of God as a result of Israel's failure to convert. Its establishment as a decision made in the Holy Spirit justifies, according to Ratzinger, the existence of an ecclesiastical interpretation of the New Testament (dogma) – different from the biblical theology – which, he argues, is called Tradition. It goes all the way back to the heart of Scripture, since the origins of ecclesiastical theology are

<sup>18</sup> The International Theological Commission pointed out that the interpretation of dogmas is a spiritual event connecting to life with Christ in the Church (cf. 2000, B, III, 4).

<sup>19</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas believed that the truth of faith, scattered throughout Scripture, had to be expressed in the form of a summary of its content so that it would be accessible to all believers (cf. *ST* II–II, q. 1, a. 9, ad. 1; Nichols 2002, 29).

<sup>20</sup> Ratzinger defended this Christological interpretation against modern accusations, arising from a developed historical consciousness and its distinctive criteria of interpretation (cf. 2018o, 725–28).

already present in the pages of the New Testament (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 44; 2018m, 362–63; Pidel 2023, 112).

#### 4. *Regula fidei* and the Sacramental-Liturgical Life

Ratzinger emphasises the connection of *regula fidei* with baptism and the catechumenate, which helps to dismiss the temptation to see the rule as a verbal expression functioning “separately” from the broadly understood (and lived) faith of the Church (cf. Ratzinger 2018r, 387; cf. also Królikowski 2018, 68–69 on the relationship of the rule of faith to baptism). He shows “the bond that exists between the Church’s faith and her liturgical-sacramental life, through which the Church realises her faith and at the same time continues to experience anew its sealing by the Lord’s saving action.” The Bavarian theologian believes that “in the liturgical life of the Church one can therefore find the most effective form of active transmission.” (Ratzinger 2018r, 387; cf. also: 2018p, 629)<sup>21</sup>

In the ancient baptismal rituals, as Ratzinger noted in his text “Baptism and the Formulation of the Content of Faith – Liturgy and the Development of Tradition” (“Taufe und Formulierung des Glaubens – Traditionsbildung und Liturgie”), there was no baptismal formula in the form we know today, but rather it featured a Symbol divided into questions and demanding answers. This baptismal dialogue would constitute the oldest surviving form of a creed [*Glaubensbekenntnis*] (cf. Ratzinger 1987, 109; 2018a, 419).<sup>22</sup> According to the Bavarian theologian: “We can state with certainty, then, that the formulation of the content of faith in fixed formulas – *symbola* – originally occurred primarily in the context of baptism: it is referred to the baptismal event in which it originates, which occasions the need for such formulas and to which they continue to be referred.” (cf. Ratzinger 1987, 109; 2018a, 419)<sup>23</sup>

Baptism as not the only, but the primary “place” for the formation of confessions of faith determined the formation of two types of confession: *regula (didascalia)* as

21 “For Benedict an essential aspect of *sentire cum ecclesia* is accepting the liturgy as a normative witness to tradition.” (Ciraulo 2015, 232) Larry Hurtado (2005, 25) compares the emergence of Christ worship to a “volcanic eruption,” but the “point-based” experience of a powerful religious experience had to find a continuation in the Church community. The continuation of the source experience must be sought in the liturgical-sacramental life of the Church (cf. Zatwardnicki 2023b, 129–30).

22 Today’s confession of faith accompanying the sacrament of baptism “represents the surviving remnant of the former double rite of *traditio et redditio symboli*.” (Ratzinger 1987, 106; 2018a, 416)

23 In an interview with a German journalist, Ratzinger referred to Rom 6:17 for confirmation that the formulas of faith associated with baptism had already developed at an early stage (cf. Ratzinger 2002, 261). Tomas Bokedal (2013, 233–34, 246) claims that *regula fidei* was the sum of the content of the apostolic teaching contained in Scripture and in the (pre)baptismal creeds and apostolic teaching patterns. Cf. also: Quasten 1963, 1102.



a compendium of doctrine related to the catechumenate and the Symbol, i.e. the “declarative” [*declaratorische*] and “interrogatory” [*interrogatorische*] confessions of faith belonging to the essence of baptism itself. Both types fulfil the functions from which they grew and express and realise the two planes of faith (cf. Ratzinger 1987, 109–10; 2018a, 419–20 together with note 29 on page 419; cf. also: Królikowski 2020, 54). For faith, Ratzinger continues,

[...] encompasses the level of the *didascalía* [*Didaskalie*], the comprehensive instructional manual, which is standardized and fixed in its overall structure but flexible and not susceptible of standardization in its individual ramifications. Faith also encompasses the level of the act of *pactio*, of the neophyte's Yes to the summons of the creed, and is here, in its trinitarian and salvation-historical structure, an organically constructed form, a *symbolum*, in which question and answer are united in the indissolubility of a definitive event. (Ratzinger 1987, 109–10; 2018a, 420)

In this form of celebration of the sacrament, faith was expressed both in the act of decision, when the catechumen was subscribed to the Church's confession of faith which simultaneously constituted the promise of new life, and in the developed *didascalía* regulated by the baptismal dialogue (cf. Ratzinger 1987, 110; 2018a, 420).

According to Ratzinger, the subsequent separation of the Symbol from the baptismal formula and locating it within baptismal preparation blurred the distinction between the *didascalía* (*regula*) and the Symbol. As a result, the sacrament became fossilised in ritual and theology in pure doctrine; there was a devaluation of the Symbol into what we today call dogma. Above all, however, the dimension of *pactio* gave way to the act of administering baptism itself, and thus the connection between baptism, confession and faith was lost. What was lost was the conviction that faith is not merely a private decision of the converting person, but it is also an encounter, an act of opening oneself to and being welcomed by a community of believers (cf. Ratzinger 1987, 110; 2018a, 420–21). “Thus the act of faith can take place and be what it is supposed to be in no other way than by referring itself publicly to the Church and letting itself be received in the mutuality of question and answer, letting itself be buried, immersed, made one with the one subject of the *credo*: *Mater Ecclesia*.” (Ratzinger 1987, 111; 2018a, 422)

Ratzinger referred to the relationship of the rule of faith to the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church also in other places.

In a lecture entitled *What in Fact is theology?* (*Was heißt Theologie?*), he first emphasised that scientific research has confirmed the Catholic belief in the connection between the People of God and the Word of God, the Church and Scripture. According to the Bavarian theologian, it should be accepted that the word of God given in Scripture is not merely a book. The human subject of this word is the People of God preserving their identity throughout history. If part of the essence of Scripture is to

unite synchrony and diachrony, present and past, then Scripture can be “contemporary [*Gleichzeitigkeit*] to believers of each time only in the Church. The confession of faith, Ratzinger noted, was shaped throughout the path of faith of the community of believers, from Abraham to the end of the creation of the canon.” (Cf. Ratzinger 1998; 2018b, 330–31)<sup>24</sup> The original place of existence of the Christian confession was, as Ratzinger emphasises, “the sacramental life of the Church.” Yet, the Symbol of the Church “is not a piece of literature: for a long time, people quite consciously avoided writing down the rule of faith [*Glaubensregel*] that produced the Creed, just because it is the concrete life of the believing community [*konkretes Leben der glaubenden Gemeinschaft*].” (Ratzinger 1998; 2005, 35; 2018b, 331)<sup>25</sup>

In his published lecture “On the Question of the Historicity of Dogmas” (“Zur Frage nach der Geschichtlichkeit der Dogmen”), Ratzinger showed that the original form of dogma was the baptismal symbol and its initial, dialogical part. The “place” of this “dogma,” understood as a binding pledge of faith and the binding of the believer’s existence to a particular path, was baptism as the liturgical sealing of conversion and the manifestation of this binding. The etymology of the term “symbol” (the Greek *symbollein* means the assembling of the parts [„halves”] of an identifying sign enabling people to recognise each other) indicates that the language of faith refers back to the other believers and represents the unity of the spirit, which in turn demands the unity of the word in order to be able to praise God together (cf. Ratzinger 2018i, 532, 534). “The primary meaning of dogma is to enable a communal liturgy, to enable communion in the sacred.” (Ratzinger 2018i, 534) *Symbolum* (and secondarily also dogma) is “communicative, liturgical, verbal” in nature, and its sense is “the word as a form of communication of thought, thought as communication,” and thus “making a way for the collective utterance of what can never be sufficiently uttered [...]” and thereby “making possible the community of the spirit through the community of the word.” (Ratzinger 2018i, 535)<sup>26</sup>

The verbal character of the dogma is thus ascribed to making communal liturgy possible. Then, it is also a matter of developing a “grammar of faith” [*Grammatik*

24 Cf. Ratzinger (cf. 2018f, 163): “A Christian believes always together with the whole of history, not only synchronically but also diachronically. Ultimately, the unifying point of their faith is not a particular time (or a particular system), but one living entity, the Church, which exists in and encompasses the various times [...]”

25 In “Die Bedeutung der Väter im Aufbau des Glaubens,” Ratzinger considered the role of the Church of the first centuries in the formation of the Christian canon and the rule of faith (and its continuation in the Symbols) in a selection of writings (cf. Ratzinger ; 1987, 149–50; 2018t, 459). In doing so, he noted that “[i]n the ancient Church, the reading of Scripture and the confession of faith were primarily liturgical acts of the whole assembly gathered around the Risen Lord.” (Ratzinger 1987, 150; 2018t, 459–60)

26 Cf. Zatwardnicki (2023b, 132): “Thus, in the beginning there was worship and a concomitant confession, for Christian faith was never reduced solely to inner experiences; indeed, the very fact of communal worship demanded adequate means of expressing this worship. In the rule of faith, therefore, one can see the ‘recapitulation’ of the beliefs born ‘at once,’ although their full assimilation and expression in this particular form of content and structure took time.”



*des Glaubens*], a kind of *regula loquendi*, through which a mystery (e.g. the Trinity) found in the biblical message becomes conceivable because it is utterable in human language (cf. Ratzinger 2018i, 535–37; Nichols 2007, 166). Ratzinger thus derives the common confession from the very necessity of faith:

It is clear that all speaking is merely an attempt to grasp the ineffable, and is therefore subject to the strict law of analogy: it is more dissimilar than similar (“*symbolum*”!). Finally, it is also evident that the binding power of this grammar (in parallel with other grammars) is based not on the necessity of a thing that can only be expressed in such a way, but on the necessity that can be confessed collectively. Confession as something collective is, of course, a necessity of faith. (Ratzinger 2018i, 537)<sup>27</sup>

The question of the Symbols was also addressed by Ratzinger in his statements on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In the texts “Why a Catechism of the Catholic Church?” (“Wozu ein Katechismus der katholischen Kirche?”) and “What does it mean to believe?” (“Was heißt ‚Glauben‘?”) Ratzinger pointed out that baptismal catechesis always followed the baptismal creed – the Symbol of the Apostles – and thus was not merely a theory, but was integrated into the process of life. The *Symbolum* as a confession of faith in the Triune God is an elaboration of the baptismal formula, with which it remains connected. The *Apostolicum* in its Trinitarian structure is, like the baptismal formula itself, a confession of faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this way, it properly establishes a hierarchy of truths (all of which are derived from the truth of the Triune God), and shows that faith is an event – an encounter with God who is the Father, who has embraced humanity in the Son, and who unites us together in the Holy Spirit (cf. Ratzinger 2018k, 877; 2018c, 886).<sup>28</sup> In his publication “The Way to the Catechism of the Catholic Church” (“Hinführung zum Katechismus der katholischen Kirche”), Ratzinger recalled that the Old Christian catechumenate listed the following as the fundamental elements of being a Christian: faith, sacraments, commandments and the Lord’s Prayer. Corresponding to this were the *traditio* and *redditio Symboli*, meaning the transmission of the creed and the confession by the candidate for baptism, the mystagogical catechesis introducing

<sup>27</sup> The inseparable, and resulting from the biblical concept of faith, connection between the object of the act of faith and the object of faith, i.e. trust in God (*fides fiducialis*) and the confession of faith (*fides dogmatica*), is pointed out by Królikowski (2020, 61–62).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. also: Ratzinger (2018d, 900; 2018f, 173): “The structure of the *Creed* – in the light of Matt 28:19 – is Trinitarian: the faith is faith in the triune God.” That Scripture itself does not establish a hierarchical order of the transmitted deposit of revelation was pointed out by Paweł Leks (1997, 42). Cf. also: Królikowski (2018, 72–73): “The *Creed*, intrinsically connected to the liturgy, thus goes beyond a simple enumeration of the main theological truths – it appears primarily as a mystically and ecclesially concentrated expression of the history of salvation concretely realised and continued in the sacrament in the time of the Church. The liturgy is about the lived – personally and communally – experience of faith in pursuit of salvation.”

the sacramental life, learning the Lord's Prayer and the moral instruction. The Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explained that everything is interconnected here: in order to be a Christian, one must learn to believe, to follow the Christian way of life and prayer, and one must engage in the mysteries of faith, i.e. the liturgy of the Church (cf. Ratzinger 2018d, 897).

## 5. Κανὼν τῆς πίστεως vs κανὼν τῶν γραφῶν

In the second volume of the trilogy on the person and work of Jesus, Ratzinger wrote that in faith in Christ – whose essence is “being sent” by the Father – the structure of mission is also present. The Son, departing to the Father, promises to send the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:13), and after his resurrection, he incorporates the disciples into the stream of mission (cf. John 20:21). As the author maintains, the formula of “apostolic succession” precisely expresses the “being sent” of the disciples and their connection with the word of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Ratzinger 2011b, 98–99; 2015, 450–51). However, three elements together determine the unity of the Church:

Together with “apostolic succession”, the early Church discovered (she did *not* invent) two further elements fundamental for her unity: the canon of Scripture and the so-called *regula fidei*, or “rule of faith.” This was a short summary – not definitively tied down in every detail to specific linguistic formulations – of the essential content of the faith, which in the early Church's different baptismal confessions took on a liturgical form. This rule of faith, or creed, constitutes the real “hermeneutic” of Scripture, the key derived from Scripture itself by which the sacred text can be interpreted according to its spirit. (Ratzinger 2011b, 99)<sup>29</sup>

In one of his speeches, the Pope added that this threefold decision was the response of the early Church to the question of the presence of the Word in the world. The establishment of the canon emphasises the sovereignty of the Word, while the establishment of the episcopal ministry expresses the awareness that the Word is alive and present only through the testimony that constitutes the interpretation given by the witness testifying about the Word. *Regula fidei*, on the other hand, is the key to the interpretation of the Word of God. Benedict XVI expressed his conviction about the reciprocal compenetration of these three elements. He emphasised that it testifies

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ratzinger 2015, 451; Ratzinger [Benedict XVI] 2011, 112; Hahn 2009, 47; 2021, 60; Jenson 2010, 71. Bogdan Ferdek writes (2010, 179–80) about the “Ratzinger quadrilateral” formed by symbols of faith, liturgy, episcopate, and Scripture (cf. also: Blowers 1997, 199, 225–26). The author emphasises that *regula fidei*, although open to further change, was already functioning in its integrity at a time when the canonicity of the books of the Bible was a matter of debate.

to the humility of the Lord that he entrusted his word and its interpretation to witnesses, with their testimony always being compared with *regula fidei* and the integral word (cf. Benedict XVI 2005; Hahn 2009, 48; 2021, 61; cf. also: Dieter 2018, 463).

In his commentary “Unity of Faith and Theological Pluralism” (“Die Einheit des Glaubens und der theologische Pluralismus”), Ratzinger wrote that the formulas “the confession constitutes the Church [*das Bekenntnis konstituiert Kirche*]” and “the Holy Spirit constitutes the Church [*der Heilige Geist konstituiert Kirche*]” refer to the same two-fold reality, since “celebration and proclamation take place ‘in the power of the Holy Spirit.’” (Ratzinger 2018f, 167) The Bavarian theologian strongly opposed the views of Ernst Käsemann maintaining that the canon of the New Testament alone establishes the unity of the Church. In Ratzinger’s conviction, only the prior unity of the Church could establish the canon in its unity and still remains the assumption of this canon and its unity (cf. Ratzinger 2018f, 167–68). Ratzinger argues that:

After great struggles, the Church recognised in these books the legitimate expression and measure of its faith, and on the basis of this faith, it was able to read them as one book. Without the faith of the ancient Church and without its unity, there is no New Testament canon, just as without this faith, there is no unity between the Old and New Testaments. In this sense, this faith, as a hermeneutical point [*hermeneutische Punkt*] that creates unity, is itself an essential part of the New Testament as a canon. [...] It is only the hermeneutic of the ancient Church that forms it as *one* book. (Ratzinger 2018f, 168–69; cf. a similar statement in: Ratzinger and Rahner 2016, 181–82)

Only by recognising all this can one attempt to reconcile the relationship between the diverse forms of biblical books and the unity of ecclesial faith. Because the Church, in the act of establishing the canon, and thus creating one whole from many books, accepted the books as they are, they – and not just the canon as a whole – are the measure for the Church (cf. Ratzinger 2018f, 169).<sup>30</sup> The Church’s fundamental decision thus establishes the counterpoint of plurality and unity in the Church: the New Testament must be read no differently than in the Church, while the Church must be experienced in the light of the New Testament testimony. In this way, it will be confirmed that the judgment of the ancient Church arose from the internal perspective of the New Testament writings and was not imposed on them (cf. Ratzinger 2018f, 169).<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Here we encounter a certain circularity: “just as the Christian community shaped the canon, so the community and its basic identity were shaped by the canon.” (O’Collins 2018, 144) Cf. also Armstrong (2010, 44): “The development of a definitive body of Christian literature came to define the orthodoxy by which the final form of the canon was adjudicated.”

<sup>31</sup> In this context, cooperation between exegesis and systematic theology is necessary, due to the need to speak about the entirety of the Christian reality (the role of systematic theology), but with consideration of exegetical research (historical-critical method) (cf. Ratzinger 1969, 267; 2016e, 695–96).

For the matter of *regula fidei*, it is important to consider Ratzinger's lecture "Theology and Magisterium" ("Teologia e magistero"), where he emphasised that Scripture as the Word of God is "above" the Church (or vis-à-vis it), but it is also "within" the Church because it is not a "naked" [*nacktes*] word, but a mediated [*vermitteltes*] one. According to Ratzinger, the Incarnation of the Logos extends to the entire dialogue between God and man, and the inspired authors are to be seen as belonging to the future Body of Christ (cf. Ratzinger 2018p, 627).<sup>32</sup> Due to the humility of the Word and its nuptial union with the Church ("one body" from Eph 5:31), the Church becomes *hen pneuma* (cf. 1 Cor 6:17) with the Lord and speaks with him in one voice. Human word has been received by Christ, and rejecting the human and ecclesiological mediation of the Word of God would be akin to Monophysitism (cf. Ratzinger 2018p, 627–28).<sup>33</sup> The Bavarian theologian identifies two factors in the dialogue between the Lord and the Church: the establishment of the canon and the Symbol of faith, which

at various stages of its development is present in Scripture, but the primary place of the Symbol is the sacramental life of the Church (primarily baptism, the act of conversion). Through the Symbol, the praying and supplicating [*bettende und bittende*] Church is present in Scripture, the praying and preaching [*betende und predigende*] Church is the condition (not the cause!) [*Voraussetzung (nicht die Ursache!)*] of Scripture. The canon was created according to the criterion of the Symbol, and therefore the Symbol is the first hermeneutical instance of interpreting Scripture. (Ratzinger 2018p, 629; cf. 2018f, 175; Kasper 2014, 98)

In the published paper entitled "Importance of the Fathers for the Structure of Faith" ("Die Bedeutung der Väter im Aufbau des Glaubens"), Ratzinger expressed the relationship between Scripture and the Fathers in terms of the relationship between the word, which by its nature is relational and presupposes a speaker, and the response given by the one who listens to the word and accepts it. Although the response does not have the same rank as the word, nevertheless, "[o]nly because the word has found its answering word [*Ant-wort*] does it continue to be a word and to become effective." (Ratzinger 1987, 147 [quot. and paraphrase]; 2018t, 456) The word and response can neither be mixed nor separated; the response remains constitutive for the continuation of the word (cf. Ratzinger 1987, 147–48; 2018t, 457–59). According to Ratzinger, the uniqueness and irrevocability of the first response given by the Church Fathers are determined by four processes:

<sup>32</sup> Similar views were expressed by Ratzinger together with Rahner in a sketch of a schema titled *De revelatione Dei et hominis* (cf. Ratzinger and Rahner 2016, 179–81).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. also: Ratzinger (1969, 270; 2016e, 699): "Scripture, too, is the word of God only as and in the human word; it also includes an element of mediation and cannot be dissolved into a direct immediacy of the divine." Cf. also Rosik 2009, 229–30.

1. The canon of Scripture originates from the Fathers and the early Church, which entails the selection of books comprising the New Testament and the association of the Greek canon of the Jewish Bible as the Old Testament. The establishment of the canon and the establishment of the early Church are one and the same process but viewed from different perspectives (Ratzinger 1987, 148–49; 2018t, 457; cf. also: O'Reilly 2020, 37, 39, 57–58).<sup>34</sup>

2. The early Church, in selecting the writings belonging to the canon, applied the criterion known as the rule of faith (κανὼν τῆς πίστεως, *regula fidei*, *regula veritatis*). This canon played an important role in distinguishing false from true sacred writings. *Regula fidei* finds its continuation in both conciliar and extra-conciliar Symbols, in which the Church of the Fathers sought to specifically define Christian content of faith while also rejecting errors (cf. Ratzinger 1987, 149–50; 2018t, 459; cf. Hahn 2009, 53; 2021, 67–68; O'Reilly 2020, 58; Lienhard 2019, 68; Sosnowski 2021, 250).<sup>35</sup>

3. Ratzinger points to the liturgical heritage left to the Church by the Fathers, which is important because the reading of inspired texts and the common confession of faith took place during church liturgy.

4. The Fathers also advocated for the rationality of faith (understood as *philosophia*) and thus initiated the programme *credo ut intelligam*, which is a condition for the survival of Christian faith (cf. Ratzinger 1987, 150–52; 2018t, 459, 461).

In summary, according to Ratzinger, the lasting significance of the Fathers can be expressed in the characteristic unity of Scripture, liturgy, and theology typical of patristic thought (cf. Ratzinger 1987, 151–52; 2018t, 461; cf. Michalik 2023, 272).<sup>36</sup>

Ratzinger also addressed the relationship between the formation of the canon and the rule of faith on other occasions. He emphasised that the canon did not originate from the oral transmission of the Apostles, but is an expression and result of the same authority of the Church, by virtue of which the Church first established *regula fidei* as a canon, which then served in the establishment of the biblical canon (Ratzinger 2018r, 388). Both the formation of the New Testament and the recognition of the canon were ecclesial events occurring in the act of common faith (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 23; 2018g, 790). The canon was formed according to the criterion of

<sup>34</sup> The Church did not inherit a ready-made canon from the apostles; it had to listen to the Holy Spirit operating within it and choose those books in which it recognised this Spirit (cf. Ratzinger 2016d, 144; Rahner 1969, 196).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission (2014, para. 61): “Criteria for this discernment were gradually established, among which were public and universal reading, apostolicity understood as the authentic tradition of an apostle, and especially the *regula fidei* (Irenaeus), that is, that the text does not contradict the apostolic tradition transmitted by the bishops in all the churches.” Cf. also: O’Collins 2018, 5, 140, 143–45; Williams 2006, 23.

<sup>36</sup> Ratzinger wrote with greater reserve about the role of the Fathers of the Church in a commentary on *DV* 23 written much earlier (cf. Ratzinger 1969, 267; 2016e, 695).

the Christian confession, with *regula fidei* associated with the Symbol not being written down for a long time, as it was simply the life of the believing community (Ratzinger 1998; 2018b, 331).

## 6. The Magisterium of the Church and the Rule of Scripture

It was pointed out above that, in Ratzinger's view, one expression of the dialogue between the Lord and the Church is the Symbol, already present in the books of the New Testament, whose proper place was the sacramental life of the Church. This means, according to the Bavarian theologian, that the Church is a condition of Scripture. It is not only a question of the role played at the stage of the formation of the biblical canon, but of the constant reference of the authority of the teaching Church – as the concretisation of the living voice of the Church in constant dialogue with the Lord – to Scripture. “The Symbol is the living voice of the living Church [*lebendige Stimme der lebendigen Kirche*]. The principle of the ‘Magisterium’ [*Prinzip ‘Lehramt’*] is contained in the always living reality [*in der immer lebendigen Wirklichkeit*] of the Symbol.” (Ratzinger 2018p, 629 [quot. and paraphrase])

Ratzinger came to the same conclusions in a lecture given on the occasion of being awarded the *honorary doctorate* of the University of Pamplona. The axis of the argument became the question of the relationship of the Magisterium of the Church to Scripture and theology. Is the office held by virtue of apostolic succession grounded in the biblical word or does it, as the Reformers would have it, ‘colonise’ the word of God? (Ratzinger 2018b, 327 [introductory remarks to the lecture]; 1998). Ratzinger showed that the principle of Scripture postulated by the Reformers (*sola Scriptura* and the related conviction of the *perspicuitas* of Scripture) was called into question for several reasons: (1) by virtue of the objective internal structure, the word contains more than what is written in the book; (2) research has shown that the word involves oral transmission on the one hand, and subsequent interpretations (so-called *relectures*) on the other; (3) the history of exegesis has proved to be a history of contradictory interpretations, and the biblical word identified with the book a victim of manipulation (cf. Ratzinger 2018b, 329–31; 1998).<sup>37</sup>

Ratzinger expressed the conviction that the word does not belong to the author, but lives in history, and hence its scope and depth (in this transcendence of human authorship incidentally lies, in his view, the essence of inspiration) (Zatwardnicki 2023a). Scripture is not a meteorite falling from the sky, the word of God reflects

<sup>37</sup> Luther's conviction of *perspicuitas* has been challenged by historians and hermeneuticists (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 27; 2018h, 795). The view of the unambiguity of Scripture is closely related to the Reformation rejection of the office (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 29; 2018m, 351).



the thinking and life of God's people at a given stage of salvation history. In this identity-preserving community in history, the Creed was formed, which then became the criterion for the formation of the canon. The place of the Symbol was the sacramental life of the Church, and the rule of faith assigned to this Symbol was the concrete life of the community (cf. Ratzinger 2018b, 330–31; 1998). Therefore, Ratzinger argues, “the authority of the Church that speaks out, the authority of the apostolic succession, is written into Scripture through the Creed and is indivisible from it.” (Ratzinger 2005, 35; 1998; 2018b, 331–32)

This statement is important insofar as the Magisterium of the Church, Ratzinger argues later in the lecture, should not be seen as a second authority existing parallel to Scripture or even less as a substitute for it. “The teaching office of the apostles’ successors does not represent a second authority alongside Scripture but is inwardly a part of it,” and the task of this *viva vox* is to safeguard the authority of Scripture and to protect its unambiguity (*perspicuitas*) in the thicket of emerging exegetical hypotheses (Ratzinger 2005, 35; 2018b, 332; 1998).<sup>38</sup> Thus, we are dealing with a mutual relationship: “Scripture sets limits and a standard for the *viva vox*; the living voice guarantees that it cannot be manipulated.” It is important to add that such a role can be played by the Magisterium of the Church only under the condition of acknowledging the guiding power of the Holy Spirit: “An ecclesiastical authority can become arbitrary if the Spirit does not guard it.” (Ratzinger 2005, 35–36; 1998; 2018b, 332)

Following the *Vaticanum Secundum*, Ratzinger emphasised in his commentary *Unity of Faith and Theological Pluralism* that the Magisterium of the Church serves the word of God and does not stand above it (DV 10). “In this lies the essence of the Church, which is not its own possession, but what is most essential for it is precisely what does not belong to it, but what it has received.” (Ratzinger 2018f, 170)<sup>39</sup> The Bavarian theologian noted that in recent centuries there has been an overemphasis on episcopal and papal teaching (Ratzinger 2018f, 170), with the result that “the formal principle of the Magisterium [*das formale Prinzip der Lehramtlichkeit*] dominated over the intrinsic weight [*Eigengewichtigkeit*] of the individual material elements [*materialen Elemente*].” (Ratzinger 2018f, 171)<sup>40</sup> Instead of wrongly making the Magisterium of the Church a formal principle, the theologian continued, it should be perceived in a material connection with the Church's Creed and Scripture:

<sup>38</sup> Ratzinger noted that the isolation of the Bible from ecclesiastical traditions (so-called biblicism) makes the Bible fall prey to ambiguity and arbitrariness (2016c, 517).

<sup>39</sup> It is important to recall one of Ratzinger's most famous maxims that the Church is not ours, but his (cf. Seweryniak 2011, 29; cf. also Ratzinger 2018r, 389–90).

<sup>40</sup> In his commentary on DV 23, Ratzinger emphasised that progress is a matter of science, and that “the teaching office has the negative function of describing impenetrable terrain as such.” (Ratzinger 1969, 268; 2016e, 696)

The Magisterium of the Church is first expressed in its material connection with the *Credo* of the whole Church and with Scripture read in the light of the *Credo*. Only this *Credo* establishes the Church as a distinct entity. The Magisterium is the authentic expression of this entity because, by the power of the Holy Spirit, which enables the acceptance of *Credo*, it expresses *Credo* and preserves it. The Magisterium is not a formal principle [*ist kein rein formales Prinzip*], but an expression of the material bond [*materialen Bindung*]: it has no authority over *Credo*, but all its authority is rooted in and flows from *Credo*. (Ratzinger 2018f, 171)

In *Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriffs*, Ratzinger recalled that while revelation is indeed present in preaching, preaching is always an expounding of what has already been said. Therefore, Tradition always exists as an expounding “according to the scriptures” [*Auslegung “gemäß der Schrift”*]. Although it is accomplished by virtue of the Lord’s spiritual authority and thus in the faith, life and worship of the Church (and not merely in exegesis), it remains bound by the one-time salvific and revelatory events and Scripture as their witness (cf. Ratzinger 1966, 47; 2018m, 365–66).<sup>41</sup> Therefore, Ratzinger writes about two official instances allowing the Church to persist in revelation. The first is the Magisterium of the Church, which derives its authority from the contemporaneity of Christ with the time of the Church (cf. Heb 13:8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”) and from the presence of his Spirit in the Church. The second is the office of testimony of the once-for-all given Word of Scripture [*das Zeugenamt des einmaligen und ein für alle mal gesetzten Schriftwortes*], drawing its solemnity from the uniqueness of the historical salvific work of Christ and ensuring the purity of the *efapax* (cf. Heb 10:14; 7:27), once-for-all given testimony (cf. Ratzinger 2018m, 366–67; 1966, 48–49; cf. 2018r, 388 [on the permanent presence of Jesus’ promised Paraclete as a constitutive part of Tradition]). In other words, the Bavarian theologian opts for dual criteria, the counterpoint of faith and knowledge:

On the one hand there is what the ancient Church called ‘the rule of faith’ [*Glaubensregel*], and with it the regulative function of the official witnesses as against scripture and its interpretation [...] On the other hand, however, there is also the limit set by the *littera scripturae*, the historically ascertainable literal meaning of scripture [...]. What can be unambiguously recognised from scripture, whether by scientific methods or by simple reading, has the function of a real criterion, the test of which even the pronouncements of the magisterium itself have to meet. (Ratzinger 1966, 48–49; 2018m, 366–67; cf. Bossu and Advani 2020, 76–77; Pidel 2023, 130)<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Ratzinger and Karl Rahner wrote about the mutual relationship that unites the Church and Scripture, from which it follows that the Church proclaims only Scripture, and Scripture lives in the proclamation and faith of the Church, elucidating and defining its meaning (cf. Ratzinger and Rahner 2016, 183).

<sup>42</sup> Also as the author of the entry ‘Tradition,’ Ratzinger emphasised the *Moment der Bindung*; although the canon is internally open, ecclesiastical interpretation must not be detached from its historical basis



Reflecting on the *Conciliar Discussion on the Relationship between Scripture and Tradition*, Ratzinger referred to exegetical studies which have shown that Tradition is the inner principle of the creation of Scripture. According to the Bavarian theologian, even the existence of Scripture is still conditioned by the existence of Tradition (cf. Ratzinger 2016a, 415–17; cf. also: Scheffczyk 2001, 33). He recommends assuming that Scripture and Tradition coexist inseparably and are mutually subordinate to each other, performing their proper and unchanging functions:

Scripture provides a connection to history, to the singular Christ-event, and to His message; it serves as a protective wall, safeguarding faith from dilution in the speculations of arbitrary thought. Tradition, on the other hand, embodies the living “Today” of the faith, which must be realised, developed and preserved anew in every time; it preserves the Church from the mummification of what is past. Taken together, Scripture and Tradition embody the collaboration of singularity and continuity, which is essential for the Christian faith. (Ratzinger 2016a, 417)<sup>43</sup>

## 7. The Primacy of Scripture and the Concept of the “Living Organism of the Word of God”

At the end, it remains to resolve how Ratzinger understood the mutual relationship between Scripture, Tradition, and the rule of faith as its component, as well as the Magisterium of the Church. We know that, as a conciliar *peritus*, he maintained that “the three realities, Scripture, Tradition, and the Church’s Magisterium are not static entities placed beside each other, but have to be seen as one living organism of the word of God, which from Christ lives on in the Church.” (English quot. after: Wicks 2008, 277; Ratzinger 2016d, 147; Pidel 2023, 63)<sup>44</sup> However, is it possible to

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(cf. Ratzinger 2018r, 385–86; cf. also DeClue 2008, 653). This is also relevant for theologians, for if the word of God is the measure of theology, then the word needs the authority of the Magisterium (cf. Ratzinger 2018e, 611).

<sup>43</sup> A slightly different take (Scripture as a voice in ‘today’) in: Ratzinger (2018p, 626).

<sup>44</sup> Regarding the relationship between Scripture, Tradition, and the creeds, see Kenneth Oakes (2021, 21–34). Also, interesting insights can be found in the work of Robert Jenson, who argues that on one hand, the canon serves the Church in preserving the Gospel only in connection with *Credo* of that Church; on the other hand, the creed fulfils its role in relation to the canon. Both the canon and the creed demand sacramentally established ministry. The Lutheran theologian referred to Irenaeus, in whose reasoning one can see an apparent vicious circle: on the one hand, it is the canon that affirms the faith of the Church; on the other hand, the faith affirms the canon. In fact, as Jenson notes, this is not faulty reasoning, since the argumentation is addressed not to heretics who remain outside the Church, but to members of the community (2010, 32, 34).

distinguish a hierarchical order within this structure that would not undermine its organic nature?

In his commentary *Die Einheit des Glaubens und der theologische Pluralismus*, Ratzinger proposed the following hierarchy of historical documents of faith:

1. The essential precedence [*grundsätzlichen Vorrang*] belongs to Scripture read in the light of the ecclesiastical *Credo* [*kirchlichen Credo*]. Ratzinger accepts the basic connection of the Old and New Testaments, as well as the New Testament and *Credo* (already the New Testament books are within the stream of the formation of the Symbol) as the axis of ecclesiastical faith. This particular character of Scripture and the central Symbol is reflected in the liturgy of the Word (cf. Ratzinger 2018f, 175).<sup>45</sup>

2. *Credo* is more important than subsequent conciliar confessions, stemming from the primacy of the early Church (*Vorrang der alten Kirche*). This primacy is derived not by virtue of an “archaeological criterion,” but “by reference to the criterion of content structure [*inhaltlichen Struktur*],” to the “criterion of what is content-centred and universal.” Ratzinger explains that “the statement that shaped the Trinitarian *Credo* and its Christological centre is at the same time the central statement, in relation to which the other statements are developments, actualisations, and deepening, but they cannot have the same rank.” (Ratzinger 2018f, 175)<sup>46</sup>

3. From this it consequently follows that an ecclesial “pronouncement is the more binding on the whole, the more directly it is concerned with the simple realities of God’s salvific action; and it moves away from the centre as these realities are mediated at different levels of differentiated consciousness.” (cf. Ratzinger 2018f, 177) Dogmatic statements are essentially a second-order language, a dependent language, related to the language of the Bible and preaching, which in turn is a confrontation of biblical language with the questions of the people (Ratzinger 2018f, 185–86).

In turn, the text “Standards for Preaching the Gospel Today” (“Maßstäbe der Evangeliumsverkündigung heute”) will provide an understanding of the organic structure of the Word of God, in which all factors are related to each other and, one might even say, to some extent subordinated to each other. Ratzinger believes that all

<sup>45</sup> Even after the written canon has already come into being, it demands a rule of faith that played a role in its origin and that is not, after all, identical to the written canon (cf. Zatwardnicki 2023d, 77).

<sup>46</sup> Ratzinger emphasises the organic unity of the Church’s faith expressed in the organic structure of *Credo* (cf. Ratzinger 2018f, 172–74). He diagnoses that attempts in catechesis to base faith solely on the Bible, bypassing the dogmas which are essentially interpretations of Scripture, were a result of a crisis of faith. There has been a shift away from believing with the Church of all times, and the organic totality of the faith has been lost from sight in favour of fragmentary accounts of it (cf. Ratzinger 1983, 20; 2018f, 822–23). Cf. also: Peter Hofmann (2018, 25): “Ratzinger starts from the communal structure of the (baptismal) faith and emphasises the importance of the symbols of the early Church, which, as creeds of the Church and testimonies of the Fathers, take precedence over contemporary ‘short formulas of faith.’” Protestant theologian Brad East entertains the idea that the entire Tradition of the Church would be a kind of rule of faith, with privilege given to the first seven ecumenical councils (cf. 2021, 17, 127).

points of reference of ecclesial proclamation – Scripture, binding creeds, the living Magisterium of the Church and the faith of the community which has been promised to abide in the truth (*indefectabilitas*) – must be seen from the perspective of mutual overlapping (*gegenseitige Übereinanderschichtung*) in order to fulfil their task (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 27; 2018h, 794–95).<sup>47</sup>

If the norm of preaching is Scripture, Ratzinger wrote, then the transparent clarity (*durchsichtigen Klarheit*, from Latin *perspicuitas*) of Scripture advocated by Luther, which was supposed to be its own interpreter, has been questioned by historians and hermeneuticists (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 27; 2018h, 795).<sup>48</sup> Perspicuity is not possible on the basis of a merely historical study of the Bible, but can be sought from the perspective of the bond of faith and the Church, the theologian argues (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 28; 2018h, 796). Specifically, this means that in approaching Scripture, one must also consider the Church's creed as the guiding principle of Scripture: “[a]nd this is just the reason why from the beginning the Church's faith, in that same fundamental decision by which it found Scripture to be Scripture and decided in favor of it, has also identified the pivotal elements of this Scripture [*die Achse dieser Schrift*] in the formula of the Symbol [or Creed] and thus pointed out the path of interpretation [*Leitweg der Auslegung*] that leads to clarity.” (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 28; 2018h, 796)<sup>49</sup>

However, as Ratzinger admits, “[t]he problem of historicism and the problem of hermeneutics arise” in the interpretation of creed and dogma “exactly as they did in relation to Scripture.” (Ratzinger 2011a, 30; 2018h, 798; cf. 2018i, 528; 2014a, 619; 2016c, 516) Also, the introduction of a third factor – the living voice of the Church as the subject of Scripture and faith – did not solve the problem, and the awareness of erroneous decisions by the Pontifical Biblical Commission or statements by popes gave rise to scepticism about the Magisterium of the Church. Attention then turned towards the faith of the People of God, in which an attempt was made to see the principle of continuity, constancy and preservation. As a result, religious experience could take the place of Church Tradition (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 31–32; 2018h, 798–800).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Benedykt XVI 2023, 59: “There is a double exchange here [ital.: *C'è qui un duplice scambio*], a relationship of subordination and superordination [ital.: *un rapporto di subordinazione e di sovraordinazione*]. On the one hand, the Church clearly submits to the Word of God, always having to let itself be guided and judged by it; on the other hand, however, Scripture, starting from its whole, can only be adequately interpreted in the living Church” [English quot. after: Benedict XVI 2023].

<sup>48</sup> Exegetical research has led some Protestants to make the landmark shift from the principle of *sola Scriptura* to *sola Traditio* (cf. Ratzinger and Messori 1986, 139).

<sup>49</sup> The hermeneutical significance of *regula fidei* does not mean that without it, it is impossible to read Scripture in accordance with the faith of the Church. Rather, it is that the rule makes it possible to identify *ὑποθέσεις* of the inspired books and to refute unorthodox interpretations (cf. Zatwardnicki 2023d, 78–79). The World Council of Churches proposes a basic hermeneutical key to Scripture in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Credo (cf. Wainwright 1995, 639–62).

In Ratzinger's view, it is necessary, having reversed the hierarchy outlined above, to examine the system from the bottom up by looking for the underlying context (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 32; 2018h, 800).

The faith of the People of God (their *sensus fidei*) can serve as an authority in the Church because, in the Holy Spirit, it is the preserver of continuity (a conservative, not productive factor) and the repository of what is common to the entire Church, understood synchronically and diachronically (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 34–35; 2018h, 801–2). “The simple faith of the living Church is an authority for preaching, insofar as and because it embodied the faith of the universal Church and gives a hearing to the authentic acting subject of the Creed: the one, whole Church of all ages.” (Ratzinger 2011a, 35; 2018h, 803)<sup>50</sup>

The Magisterium represents the whole Church, and its statements are meant to express the reality of the whole Church, taken diachronically, which implies thinking not only about the past but also about the future (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 35–36; 2018h, 803–4). As Ratzinger maintains, the fact that the faith “exists diachronically means that its reality must be thought and lived anew into the present. Thus there are necessarily two functions in the Church that supplement each other: the function of adhering to the one faith and the function of opening it up, of making it present.” (Ratzinger 2011a, 38; 2018h, 806)

Also, the criterion of creed and dogma applies because of the representation of the whole Church: “the Creed is a norm [*Das Symbol ist Norm*], because in it the universal Church declares herself in faith and prayer.” (Ratzinger 2011a, 37; 2018h, 805)<sup>51</sup> Similarly, “the Bible has such an absolutely unique normative importance because it alone is really the sole book of the Church as Church.” The Holy Spirit forming the Church is the one who “builds up her central and universal [*zentralen und universalen*] self-expression, in which she does not express just herself but Him from whom she comes.” (Ratzinger 2011a, 38; 2018h, 806)<sup>52</sup>

Ratzinger emphasised both the unity of the Church and the word of God and the need to take into account the fact that the word of God is vis-à-vis the Church.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Ratzinger's reminder from his speech “Glaubensvermittlung und Glaubensquellen” that, according to the testimony of the Apostle John (cf. 1 John 2:20), as well as the later position of St Irenaeus expressed in his dispute with gnosis, the instance of simple ecclesiastical faith is situated above the instance of theological theory never transcending more or less plausible hypotheses (2018l, 827–28 [together with n. 6]; 1983, 25).

<sup>51</sup> Ratzinger writes about the tension between the Church already gathered and the one yet to be gathered, which means that the subject of proclamation is the universal ‘I’ behind *Credo* (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 24; 2018g, 792).

<sup>52</sup> Because a given formula of faith carries greater weight the more universal it is, Ratzinger argues, one can say that the Bible is therefore the most binding book of Christianity precisely because it alone is accepted by the entire *Ecclesia universalis* (Ratzinger 2018f, 174). Cf. also Ratzinger (2011a, 25; 2018g, 792–93): “the reason why the Bible is the central standard is because it is the sole universal book of universal Christianity as a whole, just as the most central creed – the Resurrection of the Lord, the rescue of the truly Just Man from the pit of death – is at the same time the most universal.”

In his article “The Church as a Place of Preaching” (“Kirche als Ort der Verkündigung”), he wrote that the Church receives the word of God but does not identify with it. Therefore, the word of God is the basis of its existence and even the critical instance making a judgement of its specific form of existence (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 23; 2018g, 791).<sup>53</sup> The Word is both in and above the Church, “not to be identified with any one of her empirical stages. The Church of this time and this place must always be measured against the Church of all times and all places, but especially against the exemplary self-expression of the faith that is found in the Bible,” argues Ratzinger (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 23; 2018g, 791; cf. Zatwardnicki 2022, 375–76). Because church preaching is meant to be truly synchronic and radically diachronic, it must at the same time become a call for the here and now, as well as immerse and purify today’s views in the universal faith ‘I’ of the entire Church throughout all times. Also from this perspective, this implies the centrality of the Bible as the only book of the whole, universal Christianity. (cf. Ratzinger 2011a, 24–25; 2018g, 792–93)

## Recapitulation

1. Ratzinger emphasised the priority of the reality of revelation over Scripture as the established testimony of revelation. The Bavarian theologian recognised in Scripture and Tradition the cognitive and material principles of revelation, but not revelation itself. Revelation can become a reality only through faith, and that faith must be shared with the Church. If we consider, as Ratzinger does, that the recipient of revelation also belongs in a certain way to revelation itself (without him, revelation would not have occurred), then the emphasis on the faith of the Church and its expression in *regula fidei* becomes understandable. The same recipient of revelation lives by it and expresses its faith (faith, by its very nature, must be expressed). The *Symbolum* and the dogma that follows it, in Ratzinger’s view, derive from the necessity of the faith to be confessed together.

The whole mystery of Christ – the fundamental reality transmitted in Tradition – precedes verbal explications, including inspired Scripture. If Christ is ultimately the revelation, then the reception of the revelation means entering into the reality of Christ, in which process the verbal assertions have a subservient role. The soteriological-revelatory Christ-event means that Scripture must play a different role from that of the Old Covenant period. Now, the inspired books are interpreted

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<sup>53</sup> This function of Scripture was emphasised very strongly by the Anglican theologian John Webster (cf. Zatwardnicki 2023c, 119).

within the spiritual reality of Jesus Christ, in the light of his presence in the Church, where his Spirit operates.

Ratzinger viewed revelation as both accomplished and continually unfolding, with both poles – the past self-revelation of God realised in Christ, and the present reality of this revelation – being taken into account. Accordingly, he regarded the “moment of closure and exemplarity” in the oral and written canons. The formation of κανὼν τῆς πίστεως and κανὼν τῶν γραφῶν set a permanent standard for interpreting revelation and a requirement for remaining within revelation, although the revelation transcends them.

2. The earliest confessions of faith (“Jesus is the Christ”) were expressions of the conviction that the Lord himself was the spirit of Scripture. The original form of Tradition was the division of Scripture into the Old Testament and the New Testament, which constituted the Christological “Tradition” of interpreting the Old Testament. In the ancient Church, the faith of the Church, which revealed Scripture and could not be reduced to a verbal formula, constituted the primary form of dogma. The New Testament revelation, as *Pneuma* compared to the Old Testament *gramma*, was expressed in medieval theology by placing the rule of faith above what is written (*fides* over *scriptura*). Ratzinger emphasises that the “pneumatisation” of the Old Testament read in the light of the Lord being Spirit is at the same time an incarnation, since the Lord has entrusted his word to the memory of the Church, in which this Spirit operates.

Interpreting the sacred writings “according to faith” meant that they were interpreted in the light of the baptismal creed or the associated *regula fidei*. A rule of faith is a kind of interpretation of the ambiguous and figurative language of Scripture in such a way that the factual essence of what Scripture speaks about is revealed. A rule of faith is, according to Ratzinger, a short collection of the essential content of faith. The terminology of the rule is not fixed in all its details, although in its essential structure the rule is “standardized and fixed.” It takes on a specific liturgical form in baptismal creeds, which serve as a “hermeneutic” of the inspired books, providing a key to interpretation in accordance with the spirit of Scripture.

For a long time, the rule of faith ascribed to the baptismal Symbol was not written down, because the rule was the life of the believing community. Therefore, *regula fidei* is primarily the faith of the Church expressed and lived out in the life of the Church. Only secondarily can we speak of the rule as a verbal formula, expressing the faith of the Church inseparable from its life. The rule of faith as a “canon within the canon” does not mean that we use one text to explain another, but that Scripture should be interpreted in the light of the living faith of the Church – and only secondarily, not without the verbal formula of *regula fidei*. If faith is something more than a formula, then we must speak of the dynamic character of the canon.

3. The rule of faith should be seen in its relationship to the New Covenant established by Christ and continued in the Church. The *locus* of reading inspired texts



and of the common confession of faith is the Church's liturgy, where the Church actualises its faith and experiences the salvific action of the Lord. Ratzinger emphasised the connection of the rule of faith with the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, especially with baptism (and the accompanying catechumenate) as the primary place for the formation of the creeds; the necessity of the formulas of faith derives from baptism, and they are also related to it.

The oldest form of the creed is the baptismal dialogical Symbol. The Bavarian theologian distinguished between two types of creed in the early Church: *regula fidei* (*didascalia*) as a doctrinal compendium involving the catechumenate, and the Symbol as a declarative and dialogical creed belonging to baptism itself. The sacramental life of the Church was the place of the Symbol, and *regula fidei* attributed to the Symbol was the specific life of the community. The theologian noted that the subsequent transfer of the Symbol to the preparation for baptism and its separation from the baptismal formula blurred the distinction between the two types of creed and severed the connection between baptism, creed and faith. The point of the creeds is to enable a common liturgy and communion of spirit through the community of the word.

4. The significance of *regula fidei*, according to Ratzinger, stems from the genesis of the Church, Tradition, and the Scripture that emerged within it. He identifies enduring relationships between them in the experience of the early Church. The nuptial dialogue between the Lord and the Church includes the establishment of the canon and the rule of faith according to which the canon was created. Through the Symbol, present on the pages of Holy Scripture, the Church is present in the Scripture. Therefore, according to Ratzinger's conviction, the Church is a condition (but not the cause) of Holy Scripture. In the opinion of the Bavarian theologian, the fact that the Church, established "in the Holy Spirit," replaced the preached Kingdom of God is the basis for the existence of the ecclesiastical (dogmatic) interpretation of the New Testament by the Church.

Benedict XVI included apostolic succession, the canon of Scripture and the rule of faith among the fundamental elements of the Church's unity. All these elements were, according to the author of *Jesus of Nazareth*, "discovered" by the early Church and therefore come from the Holy Spirit. The connection between the celebration of sacraments and the preaching of the Church with the Holy Spirit allows us to say that the formulas "creed constitutes the Church" and "the Holy Spirit constitutes the Church" express the same reality seen from two sides. It can also be said that the establishment of the canon and the establishment of the Church are two sides of the same process. The Holy Spirit, in constituting the Church, also creates its central expression through which the Church expresses the One from whom it comes. Also, the ecclesiastical authority can properly play its role as a servant of the Word of God if it is guided by the power of the Holy Spirit.

5. Κανὼν τῶν γραφῶν is the result of the same authority of the Church which also created the κανὼν τῆς πίστεως. According to Ratzinger, the Symbol is the living

voice of the living Church, and the principle of the Magisterium is contained in the living reality of the Symbol. Through the Symbol, whose presence is reflected on the pages of the New Testament, the authority of the speaking Church (i.e. the authority of the successors of the apostles) was recorded in the Scripture and remains inseparable from it. In other words, the authority of the Church neither replaces nor exists “alongside” the Scripture but belongs to the Scripture from within.

Ratzinger opposed attempts to make the Magisterium of the Church a formal principle; he saw in the Magisterium of the Church an expression of the material bond with *Credo* and with the Scripture read in the light of this *Credo* of the whole Church. He recognised that only *Credo* establishes the Church as a distinct entity, of which the Magisterium of the Church is the authentic expression. The authority of the Magisterium flows from *Credo*, over which the Magisterium has no authority. The Magisterium, by the power of the same Holy Spirit, which enables the acceptance of *Credo*, expresses *Credo* and preserves it. One of the expressions of the authority of the “episcopal magisterium” is the opposition to interpretations of Scripture put forward by “academic magisterium” that are contrary to *Credo*.

For the Magisterium of the Church, Scripture is the measure and the limit. The Magisterium is a servant, not the master of the Word of God – this is one of the expressions that what is most essential, the Church received as a gift from God. On the other hand, the *viva vox* of the office of the successors of the Apostles remains at the service of securing the authority of Scripture and protecting its clarity (*perspicuitas*). The early Church, Ratzinger notes, understood the “rule of faith” as the regulative function of official witnesses in relation to Scripture and its expounding. The personal witness acting by virtue of apostolic succession was supposed to serve to secure the once-given word.

6. Ratzinger emphasised that the pre-existing unity of the Church’s faith constituted a condition for the establishment of the canon in its unity. It is the hermeneutics of the ancient Church that forms a single Bible out of the various books. The faith of the Church, by creating the unity of the Old and New Testaments, is an essential part of the New Testament. The biblical books are an expression of the Church’s faith and at the same time serve as a measure of that faith. In this sense, Holy Scripture, in its unity and plurality (which corresponds to canonical exegesis as one of the principles of interpreting Scripture), is the rule of faith.

As a young theologian, Ratzinger emphasised that Scripture, as an independent and immutable category, befits the title of *regula*. He pointed to the dominance and special character of Scripture as a result of inspiration. As Pope, he recommended taking into account the bond between the Holy Spirit and the word of God. The Word has consigned itself to the Church, and the Tradition begun by the Apostles develops under the guidance of the Paraclete. This means that a living Tradition makes it possible to understand Scripture as the word of God (another of the theological principles used in Catholic exegesis). From this perspective, the word of God in Scripture,



as the inspired testimony of revelation, is only to be regarded together with living Tradition as *supremam fidei regulam*.

If Tradition is, in Ratzinger's view, an expounding "according to Scripture," then this expounding takes place not on a merely exegetical path, but in the faith, life and worship of the Church. While Tradition embodies the "today" of faith, Scripture provides the link to the "yesterday" of Christ-event. Tradition remains bound by the "once for all" revelation of God and Scripture being the witness to that revelation. Ratzinger opts for a counterpoint of two official instances that allow the Church to abide in revelation: the Magisterium of the Church acting by virtue of the present of Christ and the presence of the Spirit in the Church, while the office of the testimony of Scripture deriving solemnity from *ephapax* of Christ's work of salvation. This has implications for the relationship between exegesis and the Magisterium, which should submit to the criterion of *littera scripturae*.

7. The assertions of *Verbum Domini* regarding the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, repeated from *Dei verbum*, should be clarified in light of earlier statements made by Ratzinger. According to the Bavarian theologian, Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium constitute "one living organism of the word of God," but within this organic structure, priority belongs to Scripture read from the perspective of the Creed. The special character of Scripture and the central Symbol is reflected in the liturgy of the Word. *Credo*, as the central statement of faith, holds a higher rank than later conciliar confessions of faith or dogmatic pronouncements.

Since the rule of faith played a role in the formation of the Christian canon, the Symbol remains the hermeneutical instance in the interpretation of Scripture. The faith of the Church already in the same basic decision to accept Scripture as Scripture also determined the axis of that Scripture in the formula of the Symbol. Although the rule of faith as "canon within the canon" was taken from Scripture itself, the authority of the Church established it as an expression of ecclesial faith. In this way, *regula fidei* relativises the principle of *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. However, reflections by Ratzinger suggest moving away from understanding *regula fidei* as a sufficient criterion for grasping the unambiguous nature of Scripture. The hermeneutical problem concerns both Scripture and the creeds.

Consequently, the Bavarian theologian believes that it is necessary to take into account the organic interpenetration of Scripture, the creeds, the living Magisterium of the Church and the faith of the community, and above all to grasp their "common denominator." This is the expression of the faith of the whole Church as the subject of *Credo*, and thus the expression of the one and whole Church, understood diachronically. The entire Church is expressed in the creed, and the Bible is the book of the *Ecclesia universalis*, constituting the exemplary self-expression of the Church's faith.

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# 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."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 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*.<sup>2</sup> 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)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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 500<sup>th</sup> 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)<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup>

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)<sup>6</sup>

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

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

<sup>6</sup> 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)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup>

In the introduction and commentary to the Dogmatic Constitution on Scripture *Dei Verbum*,<sup>10</sup> 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)<sup>11</sup> For Ratzinger, tradition is

<sup>8</sup> 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.

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

<sup>10</sup> “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.

<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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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).

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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; Uribarri 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.”<sup>14</sup> 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 gestaque* 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

<sup>14</sup> 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)<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup>

Christ will be the hermeneutical key to all Scripture, and to read the Bible will be above all to look at Christ.<sup>17</sup> 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*.”<sup>18</sup> 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)

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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; Verwey 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*.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> 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)<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> The text requires an interpretative context, hence – for example – the abundance of Old Testament references: Joseph Ratzinger only tried to start from the historicalcritical 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.<sup>21</sup> The horizon of the hermeneutical tradition scattered over the centuries and places also illuminates each

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

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

<sup>21</sup> 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 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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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<sup>22</sup> 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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# Introduction to Joseph Ratzinger's Opera Omnia

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**Abstract:** Joseph Ratzinger's famous work *Introduction to Christianity* (Ratzinger 1968a, 1968b) presented the essence and central teachings of the Christian religion. In the case of the "Introduction to Joseph Ratzinger's Opera Omnia," it is similarly a question of identifying the essence of the theology of this contemporary Church Father. Without a doubt, what constitutes this principle is the priority of God, not only as Creator but also as Redeemer and Saviour. From this arises the second main dimension of Ratzinger's theology, namely man as a gift and a person, who is properly realized through originating from God (*Urbild*) whose most perfect image (*Bild*) is Jesus Christ, and whose reflection (*Abbild*) is man. Thus, man can ultimately be fulfilled only in God, in eternal life with him. And therefore, man's origin, justification, and fulfillment is in God. He is God's unfolding *imago: naturae, gratiae et gloriae*. God's creation is saved and transformed by Christ's redemption. This fulfillment of God's plan for creation is expressed in the person of Mary. To better understand the central thought of Ratzinger's theology, the author of the text proposes eleven key issues in a certain confrontation with the Italian theologian Bruno Forte and the Polish journalist Krzysztof Tomasik.

**Keywords:** Joseph Ratzinger's Opera Omnia, God, liturgy, Church, priesthood, Christianity, reason and faith, Christian love, St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure, Vatican II, man, eternity

One year after Benedict XVI's apostolic journey to Bavaria (2006), where he delivered his famous lecture to the world of science at the University of Regensburg, entitled *Faith, Reason and the University. Memories and Reflections* (Benedict XVI 2006), the pope tasked the then Bishop of Regensburg Gerhard L. Müller with publishing all of his works. In 2008, the Bishop of Regensburg established the Pope Benedict XVI Institute to realize the planned 16-volume edition of his entire theological thought. In that year, the Institute published Volume 11, *Theology of the Liturgy* as the first of Joseph Ratzinger's collected works *Gesammelte Schriften*. It was an explicit request of Benedict XVI to begin publishing his writings with the central theme of the liturgy, pointing to the primacy of God in the entire world (Ratzinger 2008, 5; 2012c, 1; Bachanek 2010, 205–14). The original edition was followed by other language editions: Italian (from 2010), Spanish (from 2012), English (from 2014) and French (from 2021). A Polish edition was also published. In February 2011, an agreement was signed between the The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and the Libreria Editrice Vaticana publishing house, to which Benedict XVI entrusted the management of its copyright. In early 2012, the first volume of the Polish edition of Joseph Ratzinger's Opera Omnia was published. At present, the German and

Polish editions are at the same point of publication – with 14 volumes, of a total of 23 volumes. The Italian edition has so far published five volumes (6, 7, 8, 11, 12), the Spanish edition eight (1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12), the English edition one (11) and the French edition two (6, 11). Two new language editions have recently been added: Russian (2017) and Portuguese (2021).

This “Introduction to Joseph Ratzinger’s Opera Omnia” presents a thematic account of the great pope’s theological thought. The initial difference of four years between the original German version and the Polish edition made it possible to create a distinct path for the latter. It began with Volume 11, in accordance with the pope’s wishes, but subsequent volumes were published according to theological necessity: Liturgy (11), Priesthood (12), Church (8), Resurrection (10), Augustine (1), Bonaventure (2), Jesus of Nazareth (6), Vatican II (7), Christianity (4), In Conversation with Time (13), Faith (9), Sermons (14), God of Faith and God of the Philosophers (3), Origins and Destiny (2). This list, which expresses at the same time the order in which the individual volumes were published, simultaneously constitutes a thematic presentation of the entirety of Opera Omnia and, above all, indicates the eleven main “keys” for understanding the work as a whole.

## 1. *Status quaestionis*

Among the multitude of attempts to define the theology of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, three representative theologians should be chosen for clarity: from Poland – Jerzy Szymik, from Germany – Jan-Heiner Tück and from Spain – Pablo Blanco-Sarto. From their work, one can identify the main themes of Ratzinger’s monumental Opera Omnia published in the Polish edition at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, can be shown.

Polish theologian Jerzy Szymik from Katowice believes that the structure of Benedict XVI’s theological thinking can be put into the model of theologoumenon: “existential problem – response of Revelation – diagnosis and ambivalence of contemporary times – theological solutions – ecclesial context of the whole.” (Szymik 2010, 8) These five elements express atheology focused on its essence: the question about God, about salvation, hope, life, and ethos. It spans from Augustine to Bonaventure to Romano Guardini, supported by the Church Fathers, and also looks from the perspective of contemporary thinkers such as Josef Pieper, Jürgen Habermas, and Hans Urs von Balthasar. The guide to this theological thought is undoubtedly St. Benedict of Nursia himself, in honor of whom Ratzinger adopted as his papal name. *Theologia benedicta* is therefore “theology *par excellence*, or radical theology, the science about God.” (Szymik 2010, 10)

Although the German theologian Jan-Heiner Tück, working in Vienna, did not produce a comprehensive theology of Benedict XVI, he published the critical

work *Der Theologenpapst. Eine kritische Würdigung Benedikts XVI*. He summarizes the pope's theology as follows: "Without Jesus Christ, there is no access to God, and there is no access to Jesus Christ without the living memory of the Church." (Tück 2013, 12) At the same time, he believes that Ratzinger's Bible-based theology has been the compass for Catholic orthodoxy since his tenure as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – not always to the delight of academic theology. This implies a dissonance between the papal ecclesiastical Magisterium and academic theology (Tück 2013, 19). At the same time, however, the first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* shows that Ratzinger, hitherto described as "tank-Cardinal," as a pope speaks of love in precise terms. Benedict XVI writes about "eros" and "agape" as compared to the philosophies of Plato and Friedrich Nietzsche. Likewise, speaking about the essence of Christianity in the work *Jesus of Nazareth*, he heals the dramatic gap between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. In doing so, he also expresses the hope that the Messiah of Israel will ultimately also be recognized by Israel itself (Tück 2013, 25).

On the other hand, the Spanish theologian Pablo Blanco-Sarto, employed in Pamplona, considers Joseph Ratzinger to be the best-known and most discussed theologian of the 20th century. For him, the three main pillars are the most important: faith, reason, and beauty (Blanco Sarto 2011, 12). The synthesis of Ratzinger's theology is founded on three planes. First, the sources of his thinking are Scripture, the Liturgy, the Church, and art itself – especially music. Second, the main foundation and development of the principle of personhood in unity with faith and religion, truth and love. The third plane stems from his profound "experience of the Council" and its influence on the doctrines he applied to ecumenism, the theology of ministry, and even to preaching, eschatology and Mariology (Blanco Sarto 2011, 13–14). On the practical side, one can distinguish between Ratzinger's time as a bishop, when he focused on the theology of creation and the mystery of the Eucharist, as well as his time as prefect when his interest focused on catechesis, the relationship of Christ to various religions, and the roots of Christian Europe.

These three selected attempts from Szymik, Tück, and Blanco-Sarto to perceive the theology of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, present different approaches to the presentation and evaluation of his thinking, but ultimately, they all converge in a deep appreciation of his theological and humanistic genius and, at the same time, the humble simplicity of his presentation. This is undoubtedly illustrated by one of his earliest works, *Einführung in das Christentum: Vorlesungen über das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis*. As a Professor of Catholic Dogmatics at the University of Tübingen, he presented lectures to students of all faculties in the summer semester of 1967. The lectures discussed four fundamental themes: faith in today's world, God, Jesus Christ, the Spirit, and the Church (Ratzinger 2014a, 15–300; 2017, 27–282).

These themes are reflected in the remaining texts of Opera Omnia and can be derived by analogy with the Tübingen work as a contemporary *Introduction to*

*Christianity*. They can be seen precisely as “keys” to understanding the theological thought of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI (Gózd 2023b, 5–9; Ferdek and Trojnar 2019; Krasinski 2009). This shall be done with reference to Archbishop Bruno Forte’s assessment of eight such “keys” that he spoke of at the University of Santa Croce in Rome as early as 2006 (Forte 2006), as well as based on *Panorama myśli Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI* (The Panorama of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI Thought) presented by Catholic News Agency journalist Krzysztof Tomasik (2023). In the Polish edition of *Opera Omnia*, on the other hand, one can easily discover as many as eleven main keys that will help to understand more fully and comprehensively the great theological legacy of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, rightly described by many as the Mozart of Theology or even a modern Doctor of the Church.

## 2. The Main “Keys” to Understanding Opera Omnia

### 2.1. The God of Jesus Christ

In his lecture, Bruno Forte (2006) described the time after 1968 as an “age of utopia” and a vision of a “dispensable God.” Similarly, the young Ratzinger understood the “student revolt” of 1968 as the progressive secularization of the Western world, which not only seemed to be running away from God but was also attacking the foundations of Christianity. Therefore, in the aforementioned lectures in Tübingen, he wanted to convince the man of those times that it is precisely the Christian faith that makes it possible for man “to be truly human” (Ratzinger 2014a, 32; 2017, 28).

Ratzinger also remained faithful to this motto as pope. He tirelessly, yet with dignity, preached the truth, the personal Truth, Jesus Christ. He even wielded the mighty weapon of a personal, illuminating kerygma – the trilogy *Jesus of Nazareth* (Ratzinger 2013a, 2015). This work, although not a statement of the Magisterium but the result of a personal search for “the face of the Lord” (Ps 27:8) (Ratzinger 2013a, 25; 2015, 21), has been translated into many languages of the world and has become a true bestseller and a great testimony to the foundations of Christianity. Most people of our world associate Benedict XVI precisely with this personal meditation, which points to the figure of Jesus in the perspective of His communion with the Father (ὁμοούσιος – *homoousios*). He comes forth from the Father, by the Father he is sent into the world and, finally, he returns to the Father by offering himself on the Cross for the sins of the world.

This communion of the Father and the Son, not only expresses the person and work of Jesus but, also, our own understanding of him, our personal meditation, stems from it, and at the same time it constitutes the first very important key to understanding Ratzinger’s entire work. This is because it points to “the fact of the dethronement

of the Lord God in our epoch” (Tomasik 2023) and thus to the need for a new construction of the world precisely on the primacy of God.

## 2.2. The Spirit of the Liturgy

Benedict XVI saw the face of the Lord and His presence among us in the divine liturgy, above all in the sacrifice of the Mass. He believed that the future of faith and the Church is decided precisely in the celebration of the liturgy (Gózdź 2012, VIII). This is why it was the Holy Father's wish to begin his planned 16-volume Complete Works with Volume 11: *The Theology of the Liturgy* (Ratzinger 2008, 6; 2012c, 2; 2014d).

The subject of the Christian liturgy is Jesus Christ and His historical work, which, through the faith and prayer of the Church, continually makes its way to us in concrete time and space. In this way, the liturgy makes present the imperishable divine-human act of redemption. In this act, Jesus draws all creation to himself and incorporates it in His sacrifice of the cross in the service of the Father. It is not the service of a slave but of a free man, a man of love. And it is only here, in the act of Sacrifice, that the love of the Father and the Son is met in a new way. This sacrifice is union with God. Therefore, the greatness of the liturgy (Ratzinger 2008, 656; 2012c, 617) today lies not in what we make of it, such as singing beautifully or listening, but in the fact that in the mystery of the liturgy God comes to man. It is in this that the true Spirit of the liturgy is expressed. Therefore, it is necessary to join in this Spirit and thus to transform and purify oneself in order to become holy. At the same time, Benedict XVI highlighted another value in the liturgy: its beauty. For there is a specific “link between the mystery believed in and the mystery celebrated [ . . . ]. Because the liturgy, like Christian revelation itself, has an intrinsic connection with beauty: it is *veritatis splendor*.” (Tomasik 2023)

Bruno Forte also sees in Jesus Christ a kind of key to understanding liturgy, which centers around the personal God, the Father of Jesus Christ. Only such a “living” God can be loved and addressed. The guarantee of this relationship is provided by Jesus Christ himself, in whom “the divine and the human meet” (Forte 2006).

## 2.3. The Church of Christ

The priesthood in the Church of Christ is necessary for the existence of the communion of man with God. Isaiah's prophecy announces the coming of the Messiah, the righteous King, who will be a signal to the peoples (Isa 11:10).

Around this signal, the Lord will gather the exiles and the dispersed from all parts of the world. This signal is also referred to by the Second Vatican Council which describes the Church as “a sign among the nations.” The path marked out by

this sign is clear and defined in the words: development, holiness, and permanence. But the history of humanity is different, as if inverted: instead of development, we have the Church as a stagnant association; instead of holiness, we have the accumulation of all human depravity; instead of permanence, we have submission to all the currents of history (Ratzinger 2010a, 1175; 2013b, 1089). This is how today's Church becomes not so much a sign calling to faith, but rather a major obstacle to it. In order to change this, it is necessary that "the Church finally turns anew to Jesus Christ, the message of the Gospel, and lives it every day." (Tomasik 2023)

This is why Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI strongly emphasizes where the essence of Christ's Church lies. Following the example of the Church Fathers, he depicts it in the relationship of the moon to the sun (Ratzinger 2010a, 1177; 2013b, 1091). From Earth, we see the moon as a luminous sphere. However, we know that this light does not come from the moon itself, but from the sun. The same is true of the Church, which shines even though it is itself dark. It becomes bright not with its light but with the light it receives from Christ, the actual Helios. The Church therefore exists for Christ. The heart of the Church is Christ.

Similarly, Archbp. Forte sees the Church as an important key to understanding Ratzinger's entire theological thought. The Church is the place where God dwells. But at the same time, the Church must listen to the workings of the Holy Spirit and be ready to "admit the errors of the past" (Forte 2006).

## 2.4. Priesthood

The same is true of the sacramental priesthood. It belongs to the single mystery of Christ's priesthood (Szczurek 2021, 2023). Thus, there is no difference in priesthood between a bishop and a presbyter. There is one priesthood of Christ into whose service men are called by the Holy Spirit. The essence of priesthood, then, consists in "being in Christ," in forming ever more perfectly the person of the priest in the Person and mission of Christ the Priest. This new way of being a priest is a grace, a gift of the Lord. This is why Ratzinger rightly says that priesthood is not something of one's own, something learned or earned, something due to one's personal qualities, but is a gift (Ratzinger 2010b, 678; 2012b, 635), participation in the Person and work of Someone other – Jesus Christ sent by the Father in the Holy Spirit (Ratzinger 2010b, 39; 2012b, 38). Hence, the vision of priesthood according to Benedict XVI is based on two main pillars: the giving of oneself to someone other – Christ, and the personal relationship with Christ (Ratzinger 2010b, 127; 2012b, 119), which is expressed by the images: shepherd, mediator, preacher of the Word, servant and witness of Christ. This is why Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed a Year for Priests (2009–2010) under the motto "Fidelity of Christ, fidelity of the priest," whose model was St. Jean Marie Vianney (Tomasik 2023).



The Archbishop of Chieti-Vasto does not mention priesthood as a separate key but describes it theologically as “a diakonia (service of love) to the truth in the house of truth, that is, in the Church.” (Forte 2006)

## 2.5. Christian Life

Based on the knowledge of the main priorities in the theology of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, and the keys to understanding his theological thought: God, the Church, and the priesthood of Christ, one can also outline the foundations of Christianity itself. A seemingly trivial conversation with a foreign medical student who asked Ratzinger, as a professor at the University of Tübingen, about what the essence of Christianity is, contributed to the development of these keys. The conversation took place in the general context of the so-called cultural revolution in the West in the 1960s (Ratzinger 2014a, 38; 2017, 34). The work *Introduction to Christianity* was written in response to these events. The path of this introduction leads through separate stages. The first is “to believe like a Christian.” The content here is our Creed, the profession of faith. The second stage is to “live like a Christian.” This is about becoming a new person in Christ, understanding faith as imitating Christ, and through this striving for personal holiness. The third stage is to “act like a Christian” and the fourth is to “pray like a Christian.” The priority of faith in what is Christian shows that faith is not an idea (Ratzinger 2014a, 105; 2017, 93), but real life and moving towards its definitive form in eternity.

Bruno Forte similarly sees Christian life as another key, but more through the lens of the act of faith itself. Following Ratzinger, he defines faith as “the assent to that sense which is not created by ourselves, but which we can only receive as a gift, so that we need only accept it and surrender ourselves completely to it.” (Forte 2006) Tomasik, on the other hand, additionally emphasizes the contribution of the Christian heritage to the history of Europe and the world. And, although Europe now seems to be moving further and further away from Christianity, the role of the latter should be to “integrate faith and modern rationalism” and to seek dialogue through “a new humanism, which is a synthesis of the Gospel message and European culture.” The essence of this humanism is to work out the notion of “the human person and its transcendent vocation.” (Tomasik 2023)

## 2.6. The Relationship of Faith and Reason

Ratzinger, initially as a professor and later as pope, correctly positioned the relationship between faith and reason, as well as emphasized Christian love (FR; Ratzinger 2020a, 252–70; 2021a, 205–20). Faith needs reason with an ability to listen and not just provide ready-made “products.” Faith challenges reason, gives it grounding, and binds it to eternity, and so faith is a mission for reason to be itself. Faith

enlightens the mind, and reason accepts faith as its own, as personal, as its own structure, and the believer is fully rational. At the same time, faith is accepted by rational freedom and free reason. Such faith is rational for man because it is free, it gives man freedom and does not nullify him. Reason thus makes faith rational and real (Gózdź 2013, 43–52). Thus, the bond of faith and reason “helps to overcome the temptation to irrationalism so prevalent in our time.” Joseph Ratzinger emphasizes that “faith is always rational and human reason is always open to its crowning achievement, namely, personal knowledge of God and His love for man.” (Tomasik 2023)

The relationship between Greek thinking (reason) and biblical thinking (faith) is shown even more clearly in the link established by the Church Fathers between the God of faith and the God of the philosophers (Ratzinger 2021a, 2020a). This link is even necessary for Christian monotheism, which overcame polytheism in this way. Where polytheism speaks of God as the Absolute, which in itself is inaccessible to man, the essence of monotheism consists in turning to the Absolute – the God of the philosophers – and recognizing him as the God of men – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is how monotheism becomes the link between the God of the philosophers and the God of faith, between Neoplatonic ontology and the biblical revelation of God (Gózdź 2021, IX). According to Ratzinger, Augustine expressed this figuratively: “the silent and inaccessible God of the philosophers became in Jesus Christ a speaking and hearing God.” (Ratzinger 2020a, 204–5; 2021a, 163)

The relationship between faith and reason is not mentioned by Forte in his lecture of July 5, 2006. This is because he was not yet familiar with the so-called “Regensburg Lecture,” which Benedict XVI delivered on September 12, 2006. Nonetheless, faith is recognized by the Archbishop of Chieti-Vasto as a specific and important key to understanding Ratzinger’s theology.

## 2.7. The Priority of Love

The priority of love is another key that Benedict XVI made clear in his three encyclicals (*DCE*; *SpS*; *CiV*). He reversed the order of the cardinal virtues: faith, hope, and love, and in so doing showed a new image of God as Love (Gózdź 2018, 709; 2023a, 7–10). God’s love prevenes everything: it culminates in the cross of Christ (*DCE*), gives the hope that fulfills human life (*SpS*), and is ultimately the force that leads to God as Truth (*CiV*). Faith is to be aware of exactly this kind of love because it leads to the foundations of faith. Thus, the pope showed the astonishing relationship of the most important realities of Christianity: God – love, hope – salvation, love – truth. We can justifiably say, drawing on Tomasik’s observation that “the essence of Christianity is not an idea, a doctrine or a system. It is Jesus who is the center of our faith: Jesus Christ as true man and true God.” (Tomasik 2023)

Bruno Forte, on the other hand, linked this key to the years of the student protests of the 1960s, which were seen as times of disillusionment and the “death of God,” and Ratzinger was then revealing “horizons of meaning, joy, and hope.” (Forte 2006) But it is perhaps too early for Forte to express the idea that “it was during these years that the present pope developed the ‘concept of *Deus caritas*.’” (Forte 2006)

## 2.8. Augustine, Bonaventure, and the Second Vatican Council

One may ask, what are the grounds for Ratzinger’s theological logic and methodology which show the fundamental principles of Christianity in full light: God, truth, love, faith, and salvation? The answer is probably in the good guidance received by the young theologian from his teacher Gottlieb Söhngen, who proposed to his doctoral student to investigate the question of whether St. Augustine considered the concept of the “people of God” to be the most important in ecclesiology, as Trent seemed to suggest? (Ratzinger 2011, 6; 2014b, 2–3). This is how the doctoral dissertation, (1953) *The People and the House of God in St. Augustine’s Doctrine of the Church* (Ratzinger 2011, 2014b) was born, which did not confirm the thesis supervisor’s expectations. Augustine, according to Ratzinger, knew that “the people of God” was the New Testament term for Israel and showed that the pagan nations only become “the people of God” through communion with Christ, and thus can only become “the people of God” in the “Body of Christ” (Ratzinger 2011, 222–23; 2014b, 210–11; Gózdź 2023a, 46).

The deepening of theological thought, in turn, was brought about by Ratzinger’s subsequent university degree thesis *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure* (1957, 2009, 2014c), defining the relationship between Revelation and the history of salvation (Ratzinger 2009, 6; 2014c, 2; Renzikowski 2024). Both of these realities – God’s revelation and the Church – also formed the basis of theology during Vatican II. Therefore, it was an excellent move for Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne to choose the then 35-year-old professor from Bonn as his theologian and conciliar expert. The theme of Revelation resounded in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, and of the Church – in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (Ratzinger 2012d, 177–220; 2016c, 159–94). Thus, Ratzinger not only through his collaboration with Cardinal Frings (Ratzinger 2012d, 239–89; 2016c, 211–52) but also on his own in the various conciliar commissions, became a real witness to Vatican II.

Also, this typical theological key is not mentioned by Archbp. Forte. Likewise, Tomasik also misses this aspect of Ratzinger’s scientific influence. One could say that in its place he cites other issues, perhaps of more interest to the journalist, such as ecumenism, the issue of the Society of Saint Pius X, the secularization of the faith, secularism, relativism, and contributions to the social teaching of the Church, as well as the issue of sexual abuse in the Church (Tomasik 2023).

However, the key to Ratzinger's scholarly career is very important for understanding his entire theological thought, which grounded him in Augustine's excellent ecclesiology and Bonaventure's theology of history.

## 2.9. Church Renewal and the New Evangelization

There is still another key of Church renewal that was not mentioned by Bruno Forte. Although he mentioned the "errors of the past" when considering the Church, he stopped there. However, the very idea of Church renewal (Ratzinger 2010a, 1186–202; 2013b, 1099–113; 2019; 2020b) and the idea of new evangelization (Ratzinger 2010a, 1231–62; 2013b, 1140–69; Ratzinger 2016b; 2017–2018) were already slowly emerging at Vatican II. This renewal is not about satisfying the wishes of today's world, nor about escaping from it. Nor is it about the Church adopting democratic structures based on which man himself would create the kind of Church he wants, but on leaving free room for the light "from above." Christian renewal is much more about restoring the original splendor that the Lord gave it. It is accomplished by *ablatio* – by purification, removal. This is illustrated by an example taken by Ratzinger from Michelangelo (Ratzinger 2010a, 1221; 2013b, 1131), who saw an already pure image of a sculpture in a lying block of rock, waiting for the removal of what still covers it. The task of the artist, then, is to liberate the sculpture from that which covers the image, not to create the image. The sculptor does not create but removes the unnecessary elements to reveal the fine shape. So it is with the Church – it is necessary to remove that which prevents the face of the Bride (the Church), and with it the Bridegroom himself, the living Lord, from being seen.

Similarly, the new evangelization is to show the way, how to live, how to learn the art of living, when for a Christian this Way and Life is Jesus Christ. Seeking to live in this way means above all listening to the voice of the Father and passing on what one has heard from him. It is therefore not speaking in one's own name, but in the name of the Church. Therefore, the content of the new evangelization is converting; preaching that God is present in the world; following Christ; and proclaiming faith in eternal life. Thus, the Church of the new evangelization is not any organization, but a living WE with Christ (Ratzinger 2014a, 334–36; 2017, 293–95). It expresses the transmission of faith where it has been weakened. That is why Benedict XVI established a new dicastery in 2010: the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization (Tomasik 2023).

## 2.10. Man in the Embrace of God

Ratzinger's great anthropological thought links, in an interesting way, the beginnings of man to his finale, which is depicted in the person of the Mother of God (Ratzinger 2021b, 2022). The nexus of this beginning and end is, of course, God himself

as the Creator, Redeemer, and Saviour of man. This is because man comes from the eternal reason and love of God, is created as the image of God, and is expressed in Mary as the typological and personal anticipation of fulfillment in grace. Thus, man's origin and destiny are located unequivocally in God himself. It is in God that man has his origin, justification, and fulfillment. Thus, creation is transformed through Christ's redemption into the idea of salvation, which at the same time constitutes the fulfillment of God's plan for creation. Then, indeed, Ratzinger can say that man is "a being who can personally address God as 'You' for eternity." (Ratzinger 2021b, 123; 2022, 106)

Archbishop Forte is enthusiastic about Mary and sees the entirety of ecclesiology in her. According to him, Mary is "the synthesis of ecclesiology, a very concrete and personal icon in which the harmonious order of Christian thought is expressed." (Forte 2006) Tomasik, on the other hand, in his text does not see Mary's role in the history of salvation. He does, however, emphasize the important role of the family in its significance for the common good of nations, and at the same time firmly opts for an understanding of marriage as "the union of a man and a woman, while opposing once again the tendency to equate homosexual unions with marriage." As pope, Benedict XVI pointed out the elements that build the family. Among the most important are: "maintaining a constant relationship with God and participating in the life of the Church, caring for dialogue, respecting another person's point of view, being ready to serve, being patient with the other person's faults, forgiving and asking for forgiveness, overcoming possible conflicts with intelligence and humility" (Tomasik 2023).

### 2.11. Desire for Eternity

For both theologians, the last of the discussed keys to understanding the works of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, is eschatology. This aspect is missing from the Polish Catholic News Agency journalist, Tomasik. Forte believes that eschatology "defines the identity of a Christian, a 'prisoner of God's future' who makes decisions against the backdrop of an infinite God." (Forte 2006) Ratzinger, on the other hand, asks a question at an even deeper level: what is most human in us? What distinguishes us amid the vast world of living creatures? What element is our exclusive and imperishable asset? There can be very different answers to these important questions about the essence of the human being. But the most important answer lies in the fact that man has an immortal soul, that his body will be resurrected, and that as a whole (with soul and body) he will attain eternal life with God.

Ratzinger thus constructs his theory of the dialogical immortality of man into a very clear motto: "If all love desires eternity – God's love not only desires but also creates eternity and is eternity." (Ratzinger 2012a, 357; 2014e, 333) Yes, God's Love makes us immortal and guarantees us immortality! Eternity, then, is not a matter of

our action and is absolutely not in our power. It is solely the gift of the One who is Immortal and Eternal. Man can only accept this gift of a living relationship and dialogue with God, or – to his own misfortune – reject it.

## Conclusions

Recently, Cardinal Marc Ouellet stated that “the era of Christianity has come to an end. A new era has begun in which Christians must change their attitude toward the environment in which they live if they want to pass on the cultural and spiritual heritage of Christianity. Christianity is alien to this environment; it is met with indifference and even hostility, even in traditionally Catholic countries.” (Ouellet 2024) The Cardinal rightly notes the pervasive hostility towards Christianity, but I believe that this does not mean the end of its era in today’s world. Ratzinger himself spoke of the so-called Remnant, which will rebuild itself. But this is probably not about the ancient image of the Greek “rebirth from the ashes.” This is because Christianity has its *institutio* in Jesus Christ himself, the true God and true man (DH 301–302).

Similar hostility has been directed in various ways at the person and work of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI (Rodari and Tornielli 2010, 5–8; Guerriero 2018, 413–25, 493–518; Seewald 2020, 835–52, 912–48; 2021, 792–808, 863–97). Some people describing these events, however, ask how it is possible that the pope, who made concepts such as “love,” “joy” and “beauty” the keys of his preaching, is at the same time portrayed as an unyielding and divisive tank-Cardinal. Therefore, presenting the main keys to understanding the entire thought of one of the most learned minds in the Catholic world – which Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI undoubtedly is – is necessary to draw a true and personal picture based on his writings. His theology is very distinct. It rests on a thorough fidelity to the teachings of Christ, an absolute obedience to the word of God, a profound faith in Revelation and its interpretation, and on and making faith real and rational. This theological thought is deeply mystical, extremely real, and alive.

The keys to understanding the complete works of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI are presented, both from the Italian and Polish theological perspectives. The former is based on a few introductory volumes published up to 2006, while the latter operates on the entire edition of the Opera Omnia. Ratzinger expressed the essence of Christianity in the genius and truth of Opera Omnia. Locally as a professor and archbishop, then globally as a Vatican prefect and pope, Ratzinger devoted his life and ministry to sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That the Western world has often refused to understand him is another matter, namely that this world itself has entered a spiritual void, worships nihilism, has a distorted understanding of



rationalism, relativizes truth, etc. This makes today's world all the more in need of the light and spirit of what Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI – proposes in his *Opera Omnia*. He expressed it again at the Mass inaugurating his pontificate, on April 22, 2005, that his true program is “not to do [his] own will, not to pursue [his] own ideas, but to listen, together with the whole Church, to the word and the will of the Lord, to be guided by him, so that he himself will lead the Church at this hour of our history.” (Benedykt XVI and Seewald 2016, 221)

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# Normative and Performative: The Authority of Scripture for Catholic Theology and Worship in the Thought of Pope Benedict XVI

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**Abstract:** This essay addresses Pope Benedict XVI's apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, which explained authoritatively the three central principles of Catholic scriptural interpretation found in the Vatican II constitution *Dei Verbum*. In *Verbum Domini*, much of Benedict's prior work as a private theologian gained a magisterial voice. Hence, this essay will engage both with *Verbum Domini* and Benedict's previous writings. For Benedict, theology is more than information. When practiced as a "spiritual science," theology is a real contact with the living Word. The authors of scripture are, accordingly, "normative theologians." The real contact with the living Word contained in scripture is most profoundly mediated by the Church's liturgy. The biblical Word's liturgical setting is the source of its theological normativity. Thus, for Benedict, the *performativity* of the Word implies a unity between Scripture and liturgy, and the resultant *normativity* of the Word implies a unity between Scripture and theology. Without these unities, and the life of continuous conversion that flows from their recognition, there can be no theology in the true sense of the word. If these unities are recognized, however, the task of the theologian becomes letting God himself "speak"—to be the servant or handmaiden of revelation.

**Keywords:** Benedict XVI, Ratzinger, Scripture, exegesis, faith and reason, authority, theology, liturgy

## 1. Introduction: Benedict, *Dei Verbum*, and *Verbum Domini*

If the first half of the twentieth century was marked by the *emergence* of three renewal movements—the biblical, the patristic, and the liturgical—we see the *convergence* of these movements in Vatican II's dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*.<sup>1</sup> In his *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy, Benedict is attempting to put into practice the criteria of DV 12. In his own words, Benedict is "finally putting into practice the methodological principles formulated for exegesis by the Second Vatican Council (in DV 12), a task that unfortunately has scarcely been attempted thus far." (Ratzinger 2011, xiv–xv; emphasis added)

<sup>1</sup> With regard to biblical renewal, DV 12 cites as authority First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, and Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Benedict discussed *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in particular depth in *Verbum Domini*, immediately before his discussion of DV 12, positing that DV 12 was to be read "against this background," namely the documents of his predecessors and particularly Pius XII (VD 33).

While this article does not explore the trilogy,<sup>2</sup> it will explore the exhortation *Verbum Domini*, where Benedict explained what the *Dei Verbum* criteria fundamentally required. In a word, in Benedict's corpus, where *Verbum Domini* is an explanation of how to do theology according to *Dei Verbum*, *Jesus of Nazareth* is a demonstration.

While he himself was not a trained exegete, one of the dominant themes of Pope Benedict XVI's entire corpus as a theologian is the proper interpretation of Scripture (see Ratzinger 1997b, 66). As I concluded in an earlier essay,

In his biography of Benedict's predecessor, George Weigel suggested that Pope John Paul II's "theology of the body" would be his greatest legacy to the Church. That is a bold claim, and one that may prove accurate. In any case, I believe a similar claim can be made for the biblical theology of Pope Benedict, which may prove to be the legacy he bequeaths to future generations. It is a theology in which the essential unity and continuity can be seen between faith and reason, the Old and New Testaments, Scripture and liturgy, Church and kingdom, and dogma and devotion, theology and history. It is a theology of great power and beauty. (Hahn 2010, 458, citing Weigel 1999, 342)<sup>3</sup>

This essay will take up where the previous one left off by exploring how Benedict's post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* forms a privileged expression of Benedict's lasting contribution to biblical theology.

Indeed, Benedict put the three principles from *Dei Verbum* front and center in *Verbum Domini*:

Since Scripture must be interpreted in the same Spirit in which it was written, the Dogmatic Constitution indicates three fundamental criteria for an appreciation of the divine dimension of the Bible: 1) the text must be interpreted with attention to *the unity of the whole of Scripture*; nowadays this is called canonical exegesis; 2) account is to be taken of the *living Tradition of the whole Church*; and, finally, 3) respect must be shown for *the analogy of faith*. "Only where both methodological levels, the historical-critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book." (VD 34, citing Benedict XVI 2008b, 493)

In exploring *Verbum Domini* in light of Benedict's prior theological work, we will see his previous thought on the unity of scripture and theology emerging in *Verbum Domini* as no longer the private opinions of Joseph Ratzinger; rather, in *Verbum*

<sup>2</sup> For two such explorations, see Wright 2019, 83–162, and de Gaál 2018, 137–46. Benedict himself had a hand in drafting *Dei Verbum* as a young theologian. For a historical perspective, see Prior 1999 and Wicks 2008; see also Ratzinger 1998, 120–31; Benedict XVI and Seewald 2016, 101–66.

<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth treatment of Benedict's biblical theology, see Hahn 2009, which went to press before the promulgation of *Verbum Domini*, and from which elements of this essay are drawn. See also Twomey 2007 and Rowland 2008.



*Domini* they obtain a magisterial voice. Two themes in particular will occupy us in this article: The “performative” nature of the Word of God in the liturgy of the Church, and the resultant “normative” character of the same Word for theology. As we shall see, the two concepts are inseparably related: The Word of God is only “normative” for theology because it is “performative” in the liturgy.

## 2. Benedict’s *opus* as *ressourcement* of Normative Criteria for Exegesis

Benedict’s theological project involves the faithful search for understanding of the God who has revealed himself to the world in Jesus Christ. This search drives Benedict’s efforts to purify the historical-critical methods and his efforts to recover the ancient form of the Church. In “his critique of criticism,” he wants to define the legitimate limits of the historical method. In this he is reacting against the tendency in the last century to exalt historical-criticism as the “sole scientific way” of reading the Bible (see Ratzinger 2005a, 91–126; Ratzinger 2007).<sup>4</sup>

In identifying the historical method’s procedural prejudices and blind spots, Benedict’s aim is not to discredit the method, but to open it to new possibilities of fruitful inquiry and understanding. Benedict undertakes his critique with full respect for the goals of science, which seeks to produce theories that have the greatest explanatory power:

From a purely scientific point of view, the legitimacy of an interpretation depends on its power to explain things. In other words, the less it needs to interfere with the sources, the more it respects the corpus as given and is able to show it to be intelligible from within, by its own logic, the more apposite such an interpretation is. Conversely, the more it interferes with the sources, the more it feels obliged to excise and throw doubt on things found there, the more alien to the subject it is. To that extent, its explanatory power is also its ability to maintain the inner unity of the corpus in question. It involves the ability to unify, to achieve a synthesis, which is the reverse of superficial harmonization. Indeed, only faith’s hermeneutic is sufficient to measure up to these criteria. (Ratzinger 1986, 44–45)

As a scholar, Benedict also attempted to discover the normative criteria for theology and biblical interpretation in the Church from the history of early Christianity (see Hahn 2009, 63–90, 137–96). But we should not look upon this effort as a kind of “primitivist” turn or “back-to-the-basics” movement. Benedict’s return to the sources

<sup>4</sup> See also Hahn 2009, 25–62, 187–96; Gadenz 2015, 41–62; and Pitre 2015, 26–40.

is, on the one hand, an act of solidarity with the founding figures of early Christianity and a search for the living Spirit and true form of the faith, but also has a clear scientific intention and character (see Hahn 2010, 427–33; Hahn 2009, 43–62; Ratzinger 2005d, 41–67).

Benedict believes that if we want to come up with theological, hermeneutical, and exegetical methods that truly have the power to explain things, we need to know where Scripture came from, how it was formed, and what were its original intention and function. Critical scholarship had itself shown that the origin of the Scriptures was the pilgrim community of God's people, and most especially their liturgy (Ratzinger 2005a, 114–26). Benedict's theological and exegetical work, then, is rooted in a kind of *ressourcement*, his historical retrieval of the original structure of God's revelation in the Church.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Benedict's Conception of "Normative Theology"

For Benedict, theology is far from a private affair. Theology is "ecclesial" by nature because this was the original structure of God's revelation (Benedict XVI 2005b; Ratzinger 1995, 105). Theology is a reflection upon the Word heard in the Church and in the depths of one's own soul. And it is always *for* the Church—that is, the work of theology is always in the service of the Church's mission. As an expression of the Church's faith, theology carries a "missionary dynamism" that naturally orients it to preaching and catechesis—to leading others to the encounter with the Word, to communion in the family of God (Ratzinger 1995, 27).

But Benedict's vision for theology does not reduce it to apologetics or catechetics. Rather, he sees theology's missionary impulse issuing from the heart of the Christian faith experience. The innate character of faith, which is a summons to the love of God and neighbor, impels every believer to seek deeper understanding and love of God—not only for himself, but also for his neighbor. If we believe the testimony of the Word, that in Jesus is the truth about human history and happiness, then our love of our neighbor will lead us to testify to that Word. Theology is ordered to this testimony, which is part of the proclamation and teaching of the Church—"to tell man who he is and . . . to disclose to him the truth about himself, that is, what he can base his life on and what he can die for." (Ratzinger 1995, 63–64)

Theology, then, is a part of the Church's "living transmission" of the faith, bound up integrally with the Tradition founded on the apostles' teaching and prayer, "which interprets the Word which is handed down and gives it an unequivocal clarity of meaning." (Ratzinger 1995, 60) Benedict's thoughts on the nature and mission

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<sup>5</sup> For Benedict's appreciation of the *ressourcement* movement in theology, see Ratzinger 1987, 133–34.

of theology are not his own, but grow naturally out of his reflections on the historical nature and mission of the Church.

As a result, he rejects the modern presumption that there is a necessary tension between the work of theology and the teaching mission of the Church. Present-day controversies are rooted in the problems he identified in his critique of criticism—namely, an unwarranted hermeneutic of suspicion that presumes a dialectical opposition between the “institutional Church” and the Gospel, and an overreaching application of “scientific” and rational methods.

As critical scholarship had itself established, to presume a conflict between theology and the Church is to seriously misunderstand the historical relationship between theology and the Church. The Church is “the ground of theology’s existence and the condition which makes it possible.” (Ratzinger 1995, 61) Always and fundamentally, Benedict insists, “theology is interpretation” (Ratzinger 1995, 93). That is, the theologian does not properly begin with his own ideas. “Theology is pondering what God has said and thought before us.” (Ratzinger 1995, 103–4; see Ratzinger 1987, 325–27)

Nor is theology an isolated task of the individual. Theology is always corporate, ecclesial. It begins in the Church and flows from the act of faith in the Word that has been given. The task of a truly Christian theology cannot be conceived apart from the Church’s faith in the Word that is given by God and preserved and proclaimed in the Church in history. We do not come to the faith without the Church. We believe only because we have heard the Word that speaks to us from the heart of the Church and have accepted that Word as the norm for our lives in the sacramental waters of baptism. The Word that speaks with such authority as to compel us to believe is the same Word that theology seeks to understand, reflect upon, and interpret.

The Church that proclaims that Word with authority likewise is entrusted to care for this Word, to protect it from manipulation and misinterpretation. As he says:

The path of theology is indicated by the saying, “*Credo ut intelligam*” [“I believe so I may understand”]: I accept what is given in advance, in order to find, starting from this and in this, the path to the right way of living, to the right way of understanding myself. Yet that means that theology, of its nature, presupposes *auctoritas*. . . . This authority is a Word. . . . The Word comes from understanding and is intended to lead to understanding. (Ratzinger 2005c, 31, 37; see also Ratzinger 1995, 45)

From these reflections, it is clear that the Church’s teaching authority, its magisterium, cannot be regarded as an extraneous or “foreign” element that constricts the freedom of the theologian. The normative authority of the Church over the Word is part of the essential historical structure of God’s revelation in the Church. For Benedict, Scripture, Tradition, and the Church’s apostolic teaching authority are

inseparable facets of the same historical reality—the revelation of the Word to the Church (Ratzinger 2005c, 36; see Hahn 2009, 41–90). The authority of the Church as “the primary interpreter of the Word” is the *auctoritas apostolica*—the authority of the living Word communicated as *viva vox*, as the living voice of the apostolic preaching (Ratzinger 2005c, 35–36). The Church’s preaching, its proclamation of the faith is quite naturally “the normative criterion of theology” because this proclamation, the Gospel the Church proclaims, is the very “object of theological reflection” (Ratzinger 2005c, 35–36; see Ratzinger 1995, 61, 63).

#### 4. “Normative Theology” as a “Spiritual Science”

In Benedict’s discussion of the nature and mission of theology we see the further implications of the historical “interwovenness” of Church and Word. Theology, as reconstructed by Benedict according to its original place in the primitive Church, is an ecclesial work that always seeks to help the Church to understand the divine Word and to articulate the truths of the faith in terms of the questions and challenges of its own time and culture (see Benedict XVI 2007a).

We are now in the position to consider what I take to be Benedict’s most daring and fertile assertion of methodological principle in theology: “theology is a spiritual science. The normative theologians are the authors of Holy Scripture. This statement is valid not only with reference to the objective written document they left behind but also with reference to their manner of speaking, in which it is God himself who speaks. I think this fact has great significance for our present situation.” (Ratzinger 1987, 321–22)

This important programmatic statement needs to be parsed closely in order for us to understand first what Benedict means by theology and later what he is up to in his own theology. He says: Theology is a *spiritual science*. Theology is the scientific study of things of the Spirit—it is ultimately about God who is Spirit (John 4:24). So the first point to be clarified is that theology is about God. God is the ultimate subject of theology. Theology seeks to understand the God who reveals himself in his Word to the Church. As such, theology is “rational reflection upon God’s revelation” (Ratzinger 1995, 16).

Of course, God has done more than deliver a collection of texts to the Church. The Word has been made flesh in Jesus Christ. Following the normative theologians of the New Testament, Benedict posits that the “content” of theology is always reflection on the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The New Testament, after all, is “about” Jesus Christ—who he is, the full meaning of the salvation-historical event of his resurrection, and how his presence remains in the world in his Church (Ratzinger 2005b, 76–77).

Theology for Benedict is essentially Christology. It begins from the Christ-event, most decisively from the event of the resurrection. Hence, Benedict writes: “All Christian theology, if it is to be true to its origin, must be first and foremost a theology of resurrection.” (Ratzinger 1987, 184–85) The primary data for theology remains the words and deeds of Jesus as remembered and interpreted in the New Testament.<sup>6</sup>

Benedict bases this principle on a prior assumption—namely, the reliability of Scripture as the authentically divine Word (see Hahn 2009, 72–75; Nichols 2005, 188–99). This assumption goes well beyond what can be “proven” by scientific means. But theology is not philosophy, which inquires into metaphysical or spiritual realities solely by rational methods. Theology is a *spiritual science*. Theology proceeds according to rational *and* spiritual means—according to a hermeneutic of faith that guides our inquiry, which we conduct by the rational principles and methods of the human sciences. Just as one cannot learn how to swim without being in water, one cannot do theology without “the spiritual praxis” of the life of faith (Ratzinger 1987, 322). To say that theology is a spiritual science is to say that both “faith and rational reflection are integral to theology. The absence of either principle would bring about theology’s demise.” (Ratzinger 1995, 57) In order to be authentically Christian, the work of theology must proceed according to the harmonious effort of faith and reason.<sup>7</sup>

Because faith is a necessary element for theology, it must also be an expression of conversion and discipleship. Theology is faith seeking understanding of the “contents” of the faith, that is, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ to the people of God, the Church. It follows that theology must begin with a faith commitment, a conversion to Jesus Christ. Taking the New Testament authors as “normative” means, in the first place, that the theologian must be a person who has heard and believed the Word, professed his faith in the Church, and dedicated himself to abide according to the moral and sacramental life of the Church. As Benedict says: “The New Testament authors were believers in Jesus. And their writings stem from the act of faith and the experience of following Jesus in faith. The theologians of the New Testament presume that knowledge of Christ and his Gospel comes only to those who follow him as disciples.” (Ratzinger 1995, 57)

And again:

Because there is no theology without faith, there can be no theology without conversion. Conversion can take many forms . . . [I]n one form or another, however, the convert must consciously pronounce in his own name a Yes to this new beginning and really turn from the “I” to the “no-longer-I.” It is thus immediately obvious that the opportunity for creative theology increases the more that faith becomes real, personal experience; the more

<sup>6</sup> “[T]he remembrance and retention of the words of Jesus and of the course of his life, especially his passion, were from the beginning an essential factor in the formation of Christian tradition and in the norms applied to it.” (Ratzinger 1985, 4).

<sup>7</sup> For a penetrating study on faith in Ratzinger’s theology, see Cardó 2020.

that conversion acquires interior certainty thanks to a painful process of transformation; the more that it is recognized as the indispensable means of penetrating into the truth of one's own being. This is why in every age the path to faith can take its bearings by converts; it explains why they in particular can help us to recognize the reason for the hope that is in us (compare 1 Pet 3:15) and to bear witness to it. The connection between faith and theology is not, therefore, some sort of sentimental or pietistic twaddle but is a direct consequence of the logic of the thing and is corroborated by the whole of history. (Ratzinger 1995, 57)

As he puts it here in no uncertain terms, Benedict does not envision the hermeneutic of faith as an excuse for lazy or unscientific theology. Faith for Benedict is far more than mere acceptance of specific assertions and events. Faith, like reason, is "*a way of knowing*" (Ratzinger 2003; emphasis added).

The act of faith gives the theologian the power to accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and the Church as the people of God in which the Scriptures remain a living Word (Benedict XVI 2007f, 145; see Ratzinger 2011, xx–xxi). This acceptance of the Church as the living subject of Scripture is vital for Benedict's approach to theology. Again, he has expressed this with almost axiom-like clarity:

For the Catholic Christian, two lines of essential hermeneutic orientation assert themselves . . . The first: we trust Scripture and we base ourselves on Scripture, not on hypothetical reconstructions that go behind it and, according to their own taste, reconstruct a history in which the presumptuous idea of our knowing what can or cannot be attributed to Jesus plays a key role; which, of course, means attributing to him only what a modern scholar is happy to attribute to a man belonging to a time that the scholar himself has reconstructed. The second is that we read Scripture in the living community of the Church, and therefore on the basis of the fundamental decisions thanks to which it has become historically efficacious, namely, those that laid the foundations of the Church. One must not separate the text from this living context. In this sense, Scripture and Tradition form an inseparable whole, and it is this that Luther, at the dawn of the awakening of historical awareness, could not see. (Benedict XVI 2007f, 145)

Theology, as a spiritual science, a science conducted by the Christian believer, is an *ecclesial* science. The normative theologians were believers joined in one body by baptism in the Church. The purpose of their theologizing was to understand the content of their faith and to fulfill the command of Christ—that they make disciples of all nations (see Hahn 2009, 73–82).

Theology begins in a kind of faithful listening to the Word that speaks to the Church. It is, ultimately, the attempt "to perceive the meaning in this Word, to understand this Word." As such, "theology presupposes faith" in the Word that is given (Ratzinger 2005c, 32; see Ratzinger 1995, 55). Theology flows from the natural desire to better know the One we have come to believe in, the God who has shown his face to us in Jesus Christ.

Thus, Benedict can say, “the revelation of Christ is . . . the fundamental normative starting point for theology.” (Benedict XVI 2005a) Belief in that revelation, conversion to the Word that reveals, is likewise prerequisite to that theological task. The theologian must first pronounce his own word of faith in the sacrament of baptism, entering into the faith of the Church that always precedes his own faith, accepting the Word and pledging to order his life according to it.

As theology flows from the act of faith, by its nature, it also shares in the Church’s mission of proclamation and witness to the Word. Benedict makes his own what he describes as St. Bonaventure’s two-fold justification of theology. In the first place, theology is a response to the command of 1 Pet 3:15: “Always be prepared to make a defense (*apologian*) to anyone who calls you to account (*logon*) for the hope that is in you.” This passage opens up the nature of faith as something that is not a private decision but which rather “wishes to make itself understandable to others.” But before the faith can be communicated, it must be interiorized. It must become the inner Word (*logos*) that guides the innermost being of the believer. “The *logos* must be so intimately their own that it can become *apo-logia*; through the mediation of Christians, the Word [*Wort*] becomes response [*Antwort*] to man’s questions.” (Ratzinger 1995, 26)

Faith in Christ, by this view, possesses an inner dynamism that orients believers toward the desire to know the truth about this God in whom we believe, and to understand as fully as possible his Word to us. But, again following Bonaventure, Benedict sees faith also partaking of “the dynamism of love”—which impels the believer to seek to know the God he loves with ever greater intimacy (Ratzinger 1995, 104).

This reciprocity of divine Word and the human word of response constitutes the whole Tradition of the Church. The data that theology interprets is never simply the written texts. For Benedict, the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* is neither sufficient for theology nor is it consistent with the “inner structure” of the Word as it has been given to us historically in the foundations of the Church. Simply stated, the Word of God did not begin as a “book.”<sup>8</sup>

But the Word that theology seeks to understand is always more than the written Word of sacred Scripture. To refer back to Benedict’s programmatic statement about normative theology, we see that the “written document . . . left behind” by the normative theologians of the New Testament testifies to this. This normative document, for Benedict, testifies that “the Bible is the condensation of a process of Revelation which

<sup>8</sup> “It is not at all difficult to acknowledge in theory that theology is ecclesial by its very nature; that the Church does not merely provide theology with an organizational framework but is its inner foundation and its immediate wellspring; that, in consequence, the Church cannot be incompetent in matters of content or theologically mute but must have a living voice, that is, the faculty to speak bindingly even for the theologian. . . . The essence of the magisterium consists precisely in the fact that the proclamation of the faith is also the normative criterion of theology: indeed, this very proclamation is the object of theological reflection. . . . [P]roclamation is the measure of theology, and not vice versa.” (Ratzinger 1995, 61, 63)



is much greater and inexhaustible. . . . It is then part of a living organism which, through the vicissitudes of history, nonetheless conserves its identity and which, as a result, can, so to speak, claim its ‘rights of authorship’ from the Bible as a resource which is its own.” (Ratzinger 1983, 28)

The “book” always points us back to the people entrusted to bear God’s words and thoughts in human history (Ratzinger 2011, xx; see Ratzinger 1995, 329). As Benedict says: “It is consequently important to read Sacred Scripture and experience sacred Scripture in the communion of the Church, that is, with all the great witnesses of this Word, beginning with the first Fathers and ending with today’s saints, with today’s magisterium. Above all, it is a Word that becomes vital and alive in the liturgy.” (Ratzinger 2007; see also Hahn 2010, 452–58; Hahn 2009, 137–85)

## 5. The Word as Normative for Theology, Because Performative in Liturgy

For Benedict, theology is more than information. When practiced as a spiritual science, theology is a real contact with the living Word. For Benedict, therefore, there is an intimate link between liturgy and the practice of theology, which ultimately undergirds his concept of “normative theology.”

For Benedict, God’s Word is “performative” and transformative. This again is the testimony of the normative theologians, the authors of sacred Scripture. Just as on the first page of Scripture we read of God speaking the world into existence, throughout the Old Testament, God’s Word is both speech and act.<sup>9</sup> This is most of all true in the Eucharist, where the Word of the cross becomes the Word of salvation for all who believe. This belief flows from the nature of the divine speech-act: “Christianity was not only ‘good news’—the communication of a hitherto unknown content. In our language we would say: *the Christian message was not only ‘informative’ but ‘performative.’* That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing.” (SpS 2; emphasis added)

Jesus’ speech, too, was always sacramental—bringing into being the realities that his words signified. As God’s Word created the heavens and the earth, so Jesus’ was able to heal the sick and raise the dead: “Jesus’ proclamation was never mere preaching, mere words; it was ‘sacramental,’ in the sense that his words were and are inseparable from his ‘I’—from his ‘flesh.’ His word opens up only in the context of the signs he performed, of his life and of his death.” (Ratzinger 1997a, 50; Benedict XVI 2007f, 309)

<sup>9</sup> “God reveals himself in history. He speaks to humankind, and the word he speaks has creative power. The Hebrew concept ‘*dabar*,’ usually translated as ‘word,’ really conveys both the meaning of *word* and *act*. God says what he does and does what he says.” (Benedict XVI 2006, 3)

The staggering reality of Jesus's presence in the Eucharist is, therefore, entirely consistent with his life as revealed in the Gospels (see Hahn 2010, 454–56; Hahn 2009, 151–57).

Jesus' Word in Scripture remains inseparable from his "I" in the liturgy. Through the structures of apostolic succession, priests are to stand *in persona Christi*, and to speak with the authority and power of God (Ratzinger 2005c, 165–66, 184).<sup>10</sup> This understanding of the priest's representation of Christ in the liturgy is related to another concept that is important in Benedict's writings, what he refers to as "a structural law of biblical faith . . . [that] God comes to men only through men." (Ratzinger 1971, 34)

In the liturgy, God comes to us through the priest who becomes the voice of the divine Word. For Benedict, the priestly word is the word of faith and the sacramental word of Christ: "As Christians we believe in the Word that has become flesh. . . . What has become visible in the Word has been transformed into the sacrament, as St. Leo the Great once said. The words of faith are essentially sacramental words." (Ratzinger 1996a, 174)

Scripture is central to the Eucharistic celebration because the liturgy is an "actualization" and continuation of the story of salvation that begins in the pages of the Bible (Ratzinger 1996b, 76–77).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Benedict is always aware that the Scriptures themselves have emerged from the context of the Church's liturgical worship. As he notes, cultic worship is "the intimate, vital atmosphere of the Bible, in both the Old and New Testament." (Ratzinger 1996b, 15) The biblical Word is normative because it is liturgically performative. The authority of the Bible proceeds directly from its liturgical setting.

To summarize, we can say that for Benedict the *performativity* of the Word implies a unity between Scripture and liturgy, and the resultant *normativity* of the Word implies a unity between Scripture and theology. Without these unities, and the spiritual life that flows from their recognition, there can be no theology in the true sense of the word (Ratzinger 1995, 57). There can be no true theology without these two unities precisely because they are not extrinsic to the reality of the Word, but derive from its identity with the risen Christ: "All Christian theology, if it is to be true to its origin, must be first and foremost a theology of resurrection" (Ratzinger 1987, 184–85). Thus, for Benedict, the biblical Word's liturgical setting is the source of its theological normativity.<sup>12</sup> This is not just a matter of history; it is also a matter of recognizing that the Word spoken at creation is the same Word spoken in the liturgy and in the Scriptures.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, we do not have the space here to develop Benedict's rich biblical, ecclesial, and christological understanding of the priesthood. See Benedict XVI 2017; Ratzinger 2017; Benedict XVI and Sarah 2020.

<sup>11</sup> See also Ratzinger 1996a, 129: "In the celebration of the liturgy, the Church moves toward the Lord; liturgy is virtually this act of approaching his coming. In the liturgy the Lord is already anticipating his promised coming. Liturgy is anticipated *parousia*." See also Hahn 2009, 181–85.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this theme, see Hahn 2009, 137–85.

## 6. *Verbum Domini* and the Task of Normative Theology

As I stated above, I take Benedict's articulation of the task of normative theology to be his most significant contribution to the practice of biblical theology, amidst many contributions that may render his biblical theology his most enduring legacy. The remaining task of this essay is to show how this legacy gained a magisterial voice in the exhortation *Verbum Domini*.

In *Verbum Domini*, Benedict began by developing what he called a "Christology of the Word," where Christ is himself the principle of unity between the Old and New Testaments.<sup>13</sup> This revelation of Christ, however, "spoken in time, is bestowed and 'consigned' to the Church in a definitive way, so that the proclamation of salvation can be communicated effectively in every time and place" (VD 17). This bestowal and consignment is intrinsic to the Church's identity as the Body of Christ: "Christ Jesus remains present today in history, in his body which is the Church; for this reason our act of faith is at once both personal and ecclesial" (VD 25).

Christ is a living principle of unity, a living Word whose performative character is experienced above all in the liturgy of the Church:

The relationship between word and sacramental gesture is the liturgical expression of God's activity in the history of salvation through the *performative character* of the word itself. In salvation history there is no separation between what God *says* and what he *does*. His word appears as alive and active (cf. *Heb* 4:12) . . . . In the liturgical action too, we encounter his word which accomplishes what it says. By educating the People of God to discover the performative character of God's word in the liturgy, we will help them to recognize his activity in salvation history and in their individual lives. (VD 53)<sup>14</sup>

The liturgical action is, therefore, the "privileged place" for encountering the Word (VD 72). We might therefore call *Verbum Domini*'s "Christology of the Word" both ecclesial and liturgical.

In *Verbum Domini*, this ecclesial Christology of the Word ultimately provides the basis for the Church's unique authority with regard to Sacred Scripture:

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<sup>13</sup> See VD 11–13: "Here, at the heart, as it were, of the 'Christology of the word,' it is important to stress the unity of the divine plan in the incarnate Word: the New Testament thus presents the paschal mystery as being in accordance with the sacred Scriptures and as their deepest fulfillment. Saint Paul, in the *First Letter to the Corinthians*, states that Jesus Christ died for our sins 'in accordance with the Scriptures' (15:3) and that he rose on the third day 'in accordance with the Scriptures' (15:4). The Apostle thus relates the event of the Lord's death and resurrection to the history of the Old Covenant of God with his people. Indeed, he shows us that from that event history receives its inner logic and its true meaning."

<sup>14</sup> See also VD 56: "Reflection on the performative character of the word of God in the sacramental action and a growing appreciation of the relationship between word and Eucharist lead to yet another significant theme which emerged during the synodal assembly, that of the *sacramentality* of the word."

Here we can point to a fundamental criterion of biblical hermeneutics: *the primary setting for scriptural interpretation is the life of the Church*. This is not to uphold the ecclesial context as an extrinsic rule to which exegetes must submit, but rather is something demanded by the very nature of the Scriptures and the way they gradually came into being. . . . The Holy Spirit, who gives life to the Church, enables us to interpret the Scriptures authoritatively. The Bible is the Church's book, and its essential place in the Church's life gives rise to its genuine interpretation. (VD 29)<sup>15</sup>

This is so not on the basis of an arbitrary imposition, but because of what the Word itself is: “[W]hile in the Church we greatly venerate the sacred Scriptures, *the Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book’; Christianity is the ‘religion of the word of God,’ not of ‘a written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word.’*” (VD 7)<sup>16</sup>

Hence, the Word received in Scripture is not a dead letter, but very much alive: “Here it might be helpful to recall the analogy drawn by the Fathers of the Church between the word of God which became ‘flesh’ and the word which became a ‘book.’ The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* takes up this ancient tradition which holds, as Saint Ambrose says, that ‘*the body of the Son is the Scripture which we have received*’ . . .” (VD 18)<sup>17</sup>

The living Word in the Scripture is also living in the Eucharist; Benedict recognizes a close analogy between these two forms of Christ's presence to the Church.

Hence, as in his prior work, for Benedict in *Verbum Domini* the Word's ecclesial setting is fundamentally liturgical:

<sup>15</sup> See also VD 30: “The Bible was written by the People of God for the People of God, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Only in this communion with the People of God can we truly enter as a ‘we’ into the heart of the truth that God himself wishes to convey to us. Jerome, for whom ‘ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ,’ states that the ecclesial dimension of biblical interpretation is not a requirement imposed from without: the Book is the very voice of the pilgrim People of God, and only within the faith of this People are we, so to speak, attuned to understand sacred Scripture. An authentic interpretation of the Bible must always be in harmony with the faith of the Catholic Church.” (citing Benedict XVI 2007e; Hieronymus, *Commentarium in Isaiam libri, Prol.* [PL 24, 17]) See also Ratzinger 2005d, 41–89, 53–54; Ratzinger 2005b, 120: “God's action thus appears as a principle by which history becomes comprehensible. The unifying principle of the whole of past and present ‘history, however, the only thing that gives meaning to it, is the historical Christ-event. This also gives the future its unity.” (citing Arias Reyero 1971, 106) See also Reno 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Citing Saint Bernardus Claravellensis, *Homilia super missus est*, IV, 11 (PL 183, 86B). Emphasis added. See also Ratzinger 2005b, 117: “[P]reparation must be required to open up the inner dynamics of the word, and that can only be carried on through a sympathetic understanding, a readiness to experience something new, to be taken on a new path. . . . [The exegete] must be ready to let himself be taught by the phenomenon itself”

<sup>17</sup> Citing Ambrosius, *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, 6, 33 (PL 15, 1677); DV 13. Emphasis added. See Ratzinger 2005d, 54. See also Ratzinger 1986, 23–24: “Scripture became flesh in him, became the actual passion of this Righteous One . . . he thus inserted his death into the Word of God, in which he lived and which lived in him, declaring itself in him.”

In considering the Church as “*the home of the word*,” attention must first be given to the sacred liturgy, for the liturgy is the privileged setting in which God speaks to us in the midst of our lives; he speaks today to his people, who hear and respond. . . . To understand the word of God, then, we need to appreciate and experience the essential meaning and value of the liturgical action. *A faith-filled understanding of sacred Scripture must always refer back to the liturgy*, in which the word of God is celebrated as a timely and living word. (VD 52; citing synodal Final Message, III, 6)

There is, consequently, a Eucharistic hermeneutic within which true understanding of the Scriptures may be found:

Scripture itself points us towards an appreciation of its own unbreakable bond with the Eucharist. “It can never be forgotten that the divine word, read and proclaimed by the Church, has as its one purpose the sacrifice of the new covenant and the banquet of grace, that is, the Eucharist.” Word and Eucharist are so deeply bound together that we cannot understand one without the other: the word of God sacramentally takes flesh in the event of the Eucharist. The Eucharist opens us to an understanding of Scripture, just as Scripture for its part illumines and explains the mystery of the Eucharist. Unless we acknowledge the Lord’s real presence in the Eucharist, our understanding of Scripture remains imperfect. (VD 55; citing *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, 10)

In these passages from *Verbum Domini*, we see Benedict’s prior concept of the “performative” Word gaining a magisterial voice. The liturgy is not only the home of the Word; the liturgy is also the guide to understanding the Word.

While he does speak of a “performative” Word, Benedict does not use the term “normative theology” in *Verbum Domini*. Acknowledging the logical connection of the two concepts, however, allows us to recognize his conception of “normative theology” in the exhortation. We have just seen the connection made with Benedict’s typical precision: He says quite clearly that without the Eucharist, true understanding of Scripture becomes impossible. There is therefore a living link between liturgy and Scripture, and between Scripture and theology, rooted in the liturgical experience of the Word. In his prior work, Benedict referred to this constellation of ideas as “normative theology”: Reading Scripture as the Church’s book, which is about the living Word. While the term “normative theology” is absent from the exhortation, the concept is very much present.

In *Verbum Domini*, Benedict accordingly repeats his earlier teaching that because the Word is a living Subject, conversion is required in order to enter into fruitful conversation with it—that is to say, with him. The Word is not “something” that one studies but “someone” to whom one listens. There is a necessary, interpersonal “drama” involved:

Indeed, the goal to which we are necessarily progressing is the one Word. There is an inner drama in this process, since the passage that takes place in the power of the Spirit inevitably engages each person's freedom. Saint Paul lived this passage to the full in his own life. In his words: "*the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*" (2 Cor 3:6), he expressed in radical terms the significance of this process of transcending the letter and coming to understand it only in terms of the whole. Paul discovered that "the Spirit of freedom has a name, and hence that freedom has an inner criterion: 'The Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor 3:17). *The Spirit of freedom is not simply the exegete's own idea, the exegete's own vision. The Spirit is Christ, and Christ is the Lord who shows us the way*" (VD 38; Citing Benedicto XVI 2008, 726; emphasis added)<sup>18</sup>

For Benedict, the living Word interprets itself—himself—to the heart of the believer who listens with faith. For this reason, Benedict depicts the Church as "the great teacher of the art of listening":

The Church draws life not from herself but from the Gospel, and from the Gospel she discovers ever anew the direction for her journey. This is an approach that every Christian must understand and apply to himself or herself . . . *In the word of God proclaimed and heard, and in the sacraments*, Jesus says today, here and now, to each person: "I am yours, I give myself to you"; so that we can receive and respond, saying in return: "I am yours." (VD 51; citing Benedicto XVI 2005, 956)<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See also VD 51: "The relationship between Christ, the Word of the Father, and the Church cannot be fully understood in terms of a mere past event; rather, it is a living relationship which each member of the faithful is personally called to enter into. We are speaking of the presence of God's word to us today: 'Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Mt 28:20)." See also Ratzinger 1995, 51: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20). . . . [T]his one phrase, like a sudden bolt of lightning, reveals in its light the inner event which took place in those outer events [in Acts 9] and which lies at their very foundation. This inner event is at one and the same time wholly personal and wholly objective. It is an individual experience in the highest degree, yet it declares what the essence of Christianity is for everyone. . . . [C]onversion in the Pauline sense is something much more radical than, say, the revision of a few opinions and attitudes. It is a death-event. In other words, it is an exchange of the old subject for another. The 'I' ceases to be an autonomous subject standing in itself. It is snatched away from itself and fitted into a new subject. The 'I' is not simply submerged, but it must really release its grip on itself in order then to receive itself another in and together with a greater 'I.' This "no longer I" is not merely personal, but ecclesial (Ratzinger 1995, 52–23).

<sup>19</sup> See also VD 50: "To receive the Word means to let oneself be shaped by him, and thus to be conformed by the power of the Holy Spirit to Christ, the 'only Son from the Father' (Jn 1:14). It is the beginning of a new creation; a new creature is born, a new people comes to birth. Those who believe, that is to say, those who live the obedience of faith, are 'born of God' (Jn 1:13) and made sharers in the divine life: *sons in the Son* (cf. Gal 4:5–6; Rom 8:14–17)." See also Ratzinger 1997, 29–31: "To be handed over into the doctrine is to be handed over into Christ. We cannot receive his Word as a theory in the same way that we learn, say, mathematical formulas or philosophical opinions. We can learn it only in accepting a share in Christ's destiny."



The listening whereby the Word discloses his mysteries is not, therefore, primarily individual, but ecclesial and liturgical (cf. *VD* 54, 86).<sup>20</sup>

The collective, liturgical listening of the Church through the ages simply is Tradition, through which Christ continues to speak (cf. *VD* 18; Ratzinger 1987, 321–22). This liturgical listening and subsequent missionary proclamation, furthermore, simply is “normative theology.” As we have seen, while Benedict does not use the term “normative theology” in *Verbum Domini*, the concept is readily recognizable when one is able to see *Verbum Domini* within the context of Benedict’s previous work. It is the “performativity” of the liturgical Word that makes the same Word normative for theology, because both worship and theology involves an encounter with the same living Christ. Accordingly, the theologian’s task, according to Benedict, is to enter into, be transformed by, and then transmit this normative theology in his own time and place.

## Conclusions

In *Verbum Domini* and Benedict’s earlier work, theology is more than the study of God’s Word. For Benedict, God is always more than an “object” of study for theology. The theologian, following the lead of the normative theologians, the human authors of sacred Scripture, endeavors through his work to make God the living *subject* of his theology—to let God himself “speak” through his theological work.

Benedict therefore presents the theologian, in a way, as the servant or handmaiden of revelation.<sup>21</sup> This is a lofty duty, one requiring deep commitment of heart and mind, deep faith as well as rational and methodological rigor. As Benedict states it: “Christian theology . . . is never a purely human discourse about God, but always, and inseparably, the *logos* and ‘logic’ of God’s self-revelation. For this reason scientific rationality and lived devotion are two necessarily complementary and interdependent aspects of study” (Benedict XVI 2007c).

For the theologian who reads them in faith, the Scriptures are far more than ancient texts to be studied; they are the divine speech of God in human language through which we encounter the living God. The theologian, then, must approach Scripture almost in an attitude of worship: “We have to enter into a relationship of

<sup>20</sup> See also *VD* 30: “The intensity of an authentic ecclesial experience can only lead to the growth of genuine understanding in faith where the Scriptures are concerned; conversely, reading the Scriptures in faith leads to growth in ecclesial life itself. Here we can see once again the truth of the celebrated dictum of Saint Gregory the Great: ‘*The divine words grow together with the one who reads them.*’” (Emphasis added; citing Gregorius Magnus, *Homiliae in Ezechielem* I, VII, 8 [PL 76, 843D]) See Ratzinger 1995, 51–53; Ratzinger 1986, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. the rich Marian typology of fruitful listening in *VD* 28–29.



awe and obedience toward the Bible which nowadays is frequently in danger of being lost . . . .” (Ratzinger 1996a, 50) As Benedict himself says in *Verbum Domini*, “In a word, ‘where exegesis is not theology, Scripture cannot be the soul of theology, and conversely, where theology is not essentially the interpretation of the Church’s Scripture, such a theology no longer has a foundation.’” (VD 35; citing Benedict XVI 2008b, 493–94) In other words, “normative theology” is simply the interpretation of Scripture as “the Church’s book” about the living Word (cf. VD 29).

This statement, in turn, brings us back to the liturgy, where the Word’s “performativity” establishes its “normativity” for theology (see VD 55). The authority of the Scripture as “the soul of theology” is ultimately grounded in its performative and transformative character as experienced above all in the liturgy. We might say, then, that for Benedict, for theology to have a true foundation requires a recognition of the Word’s privileged setting in the Church’s liturgy.<sup>22</sup>

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# Joseph Ratzinger's Christological-Pneumatological Exegesis of the Old Testament

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**Abstract:** In his posthumously published collection of essays, Pope Benedict calls on the new generation of biblical scholars to develop methodological criteria for a “pneumatological exegesis” of the Old Testament. As a first step in this direction, the present article seeks to summarize Joseph Ratzinger's/Benedict XVI's own theological reflection on the matter as we find it amply expounded both in his scholarly work and in his magisterium. First, Ratzinger's understanding of revelation and of the place of both the Church and Scripture therein will be explained. Secondly, Ratzinger's criteria for an interpretation of Scripture suited to revelation will be presented, with special emphasis on the way in which he both incorporates and goes beyond DV 12 with the help of systematic theology. In closing, Ratzinger's own practice of Christological-pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament is exemplified with an outline of his biblical Mariology.

**Keywords:** Christological-Pneumatological exegesis, Old Testament exegesis, unity of Scripture, theological methodology, biblical Mariology, Scripture, Revelation, Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, Scripture hermeneutic, immaculate conception, wisdom

In his posthumously published collection of essays, *What is Christianity?*,<sup>1</sup> written after his resignation from the Petrine office, Pope Benedict charged the Church's exegetes with the following task: It will be, he wrote, the task of the new generation to create the conditions—including the methodological conditions—for “a ‘Pneumatological’ exegesis that understands the Old Testament as a way toward Jesus Christ.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 117)

Taking the contemporary difficulty of understanding the New Covenant priesthood in relation to its Old Testament precursor as an example, he points to the deeper underlying problem affecting exegesis today. According to Benedict, then, biblical exegesis in general is influenced by a Lutheran hermeneutic, “based on the contrast between Law and Gospel, between justification by works and by faith,” (Benedict XVI 2023, 115)<sup>2</sup> that pits the Law and the Prophets against the New Testament. The Church, on the other hand, has never adopted such a hermeneutic. As her

<sup>1</sup> The original was published in Italian (Benedetto XVI 2023). I will be citing from the English translation (Benedict XVI 2023).

<sup>2</sup> See also Benedict XVI 2023, 114: “The relation between the two Testaments is described as a dialectic of Law and Gospel, a dialectic attenuated, however, by the fact that in the Old Testament itself, besides the Law, there is the *promissio* (promise) that refers to the future Gospel.”

rejection of Marcion proves, she has always regarded such a position as heretical. “The idea of the law, the Torah, as God’s action *ex contrario*,” Ratzinger explains, “is totally foreign to the early Church and directly opposed to its fundamental relation with the Old Testament. For this reason, the *sola fide*, as understood by Luther, was never taught in the early Church. Instead, the relation between the Testaments was thought of as a passage from a material to a Pneumatological understanding (see 2 Cor 3).” (Benedict XVI 2023, 116) Today, however, “the spirit of modernity, and the historical-critical method derived from it, finds itself more at ease with Luther’s solution than the Catholic one, because a ‘Pneumatological’ exegesis which understands the Old Testament as a way towards Jesus Christ, is almost inaccessible to it.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 117) The New Testament, by contrast, is clear “that Jesus thought, not along the lines of a radical *sola fide*, but rather along the lines of a fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets in his own journey and in his being.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 117) “It will be the task of the new generation,” Ratzinger concludes, as if entrusting us with his last will and testament, “to create the conditions—methodological as well—for a renewed understanding of what was just said.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 117) According to Pope Benedict it is imperative to recuperate what he calls “a *Christological-Pneumatological exegesis*” (see Benedict XVI 2023, 118): a hermeneutic capable of articulating the passage from a material to a pneumatological understanding of the Old Testament.

As Pope Benedict often did when he apologized for not being able to offer a full-fledged solution within the limited space of an article, he offered a sketch of the solution. Like a skilled master-builder, Joseph Ratzinger laid a foundation solid enough for us to build on. Or rather, he reminded us of the foundation that Jesus Christ himself has laid. If Jesus himself exercised a Christological-Pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament, as was so evidently the case on the road to Emmaus (cf. Luke 24), then we do well in following suit.

For those acquainted with Ratzinger’s thought and writings, it is obvious that he did not wait to write his testament to make this point. The recuperation of a hermeneutic worthy of the sacred text is a topic that had accompanied him since the earliest days of his theological studies. As he acknowledges, it was the work of Henri de Lubac that first opened his mind to a Pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> His subsequent study of Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* during his doctoral work was also decisive in helping him understand the relationship between the Old and New Testament upon which the entire theology of the Church Fathers rests. He realized that

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<sup>3</sup> “Der entscheidende Schritt [...] war für mich, den Zusammenhang von Altem und Neuem Testament verstehen zu lernen, auf dem die ganze Vätertheologie beruht. Diese Theologie hängt an der Auslegung der Schrift: der Kern der Väterexegese ist die von Christus im Heiligen Geist vermittelte *Concordia testamentorum*. Auf dem Weg zu dieser Erkenntnis hatte mir entscheidend Lubac’s Werk, ‘*Corpus mysticum*’ geholfen.” (Ratzinger 2011, 52)

the core of patristic exegesis is the unity between the two Testaments as mediated by Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Another decisive step in the development of Ratzinger's exegetical hermeneutic was the study of the concept of revelation in St. Bonaventure that he undertook in writing his habilitation (see Ratzinger 2009b, 53–659). This work led him to a rediscovery of the distinction between revelation and scripture and of the participation of the Church as the receiving subject in the act of revelation. Ratzinger famously drew on this rediscovery during the Second Vatican Council, where he argued for the rejection of *De fontibus*, the preparatory schema on divine revelation, and helped craft *Dei Verbum* in its place.<sup>4</sup> From then on, divine revelation and the role of Sacred Scripture in it remained at the centre both of his theological work and of his magisterium as a pope. One is hard-pressed to find a modern Catholic systematic theologian whose thinking and mode of expression are more biblically informed than that of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.

In what follows, I will (1) first provide a sketch of Joseph Ratzinger's understanding of revelation, which deeply informs the way he approaches the Scriptures. In a (2) second step, I will summarize the axioms he deduces from that understanding for an exegesis adequate to revelation. (3) Third, I will close by highlighting the importance of recuperating a Christological-Pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament using the example of Ratzinger's approach to Mariology.

## 1. Revelation and Scripture

Ratzinger's exegetical hermeneutic is deeply shaped by his conviction that revelation and Scripture are not synonymous. The distinction between revelation and Scripture raises the question of the role of Scripture in the transmission of revelation, which in turn leads to that of the Church's role in relation to the Scriptures and their proper interpretation. These three topics will be treated here in that order.

### 1.1. The Distinction Between Revelation and Scripture

The Council's recuperation of the ancient axiom that Jesus Christ alone is the fullness of revelation, whereas both Scripture and tradition are not themselves sources of revelation per se, but only its mediators, owes a great deal to Ratzinger's defense of the older tradition during the conciliar debates.<sup>5</sup> While modern parlance uses

<sup>4</sup> See the fascinating account in Seewald 2020, 508–28, 559–79, and Ratzinger 1998, 120.

<sup>5</sup> While Ratzinger's work on Bonaventure had certainly prepared him to make this contribution, the decisive insight was gained through his research on the Council of Trent in response to Geiselmann's theory



the term “revelation” to refer “to all the revealed contents of faith,” to the point that “it has even become a part of linguistic usage to refer to Sacred Scripture simply as ‘revelation,’” such an identification, as he reminded the Council Fathers, “would have been unthinkable in the language of the High Middle Ages.” (see Ratzinger 1998, 108) For the medieval theologians, the term revelation “refers to the act in which God shows himself, not the objectified result of this act.” (Ratzinger 1998, 108) In other words,

revelation signifies all God’s acts and utterances directed to man; it signifies a *reality* of which Scripture gives us *information* but that is not simply Scripture itself. Revelation goes beyond Scripture, then, to the same extent as reality goes beyond information about it. We could also say that Scripture is the material principle of revelation ... but is not that revelation itself. (Ratzinger 2008b, 51)

Revelation properly speaking thus designates the process of God’s self-communication to man, which has its beginning in God’s self-disclosure to the people of Israel and culminates in the paschal mystery of the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ. The Council fully adopted this view, declaring in *DV 2* that Christ is “both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation.” For this reason, it is easy to understand that the reality to which the Scriptures bear witness, namely the person of Jesus Christ, far surpasses the written testimony thereof.<sup>6</sup> This needn’t mean, of course, that Scripture itself isn’t a communicative act, only that it is not so apart from Christ revealing himself through it (while remaining greater than it).<sup>7</sup>

In order to explain how revelation comes about, Ratzinger adds a second point that is very much a fruit of his engagement with the medieval theologians, St. Bonaventure in particular, and that has important consequences for his approach to exegesis. Self-communication, even among human beings, is not complete until it is received by a subject to whom it is directed. “And because this is so,” Ratzinger explains, “the receiving subject is always also part of the concept of ‘revelation.’ Where

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of the material sufficiency of Scripture. See “On the Interpretation of the Tridentine Decree on Tradition,” in Rahner and Ratzinger 1966, 50–78. See also Ratzinger 1998, 124–31.

<sup>6</sup> See also Ratzinger 2005a, 82: “For revelation is not a collection of statements—revelation is Christ himself. *He* is the Logos, the all-embracing Word in which God declares himself and that we therefore call the Son of God. This one Logos, of course, has communicated himself in normative words, in which he presents to us what is distinctively his. Yet *the Word* is always greater than *the words* and is never exhausted by the words.”

<sup>7</sup> See Ratzinger 2005a, 82, n. 12: “This statement is not intended to mean that Scripture is merely an account, without any substance, of facts that remain entirely outside of it. Rather ..., the view that the reality of revelation is a reality of the word—that in the word, the proclamation of the reality of revelation comes to me—should remain fully valid. It nonetheless remains true that the mere word before us, available to us, is not yet itself the reality of revelation, which is never just ‘available’ to us. What is said here is simply intended to point to the difference between the word and the reality that occurs within it, a difference not abolished by the nature of revelation as word.”

there is no one to perceive 'revelation,' no *re-vel-ation* has occurred, because no *veil* has been removed. By definition, revelation requires a someone who apprehends it." (Ratzinger 1998; see also Ratzinger 2008b, 108) The mode of perception of divine revelation, however, is faith. Thus,

you can have Scripture without having revelation. For revelation always and only becomes a reality where there is faith. The nonbeliever remains under the veil of which Paul speaks in the third chapter of his Second Letter to the Corinthians. He can read Scripture and know what is in it, can even understand at a purely intellectual level, what is meant and how what is said hangs together—and yet he has not shared in the revelation. Rather, revelation has only arrived where, in addition to the material assertions witnessing to it, its inner reality has itself become effective after the manner of faith. (Ratzinger 2008b, 51)

From this premise, Ratzinger argues that "the person who receives it also is a part of the revelation to a certain degree, for without him it does not exist. You cannot put revelation in your pocket like a book you carry around with you. It is a living reality that requires a living person as the locus of its presence" (Ratzinger 2008b, 51).

Reflecting on the ground just covered, Ratzinger then identifies two directions in which "revelation goes beyond the fact of Scripture ... : a. As a reality that has its basis in God, it always extends upward into God's action. b. As a reality that happens to man in faith, it extends, as it were, beyond the mediating fact of Scripture, too" (Ratzinger 2008b, 53; see also Ratzinger 1998, 53). For this reason,

revelation precedes Scripture and becomes deposited in Scripture but is not simply identical with it. This in turn means that revelation is always something greater than what is merely written down. And this again means that there can be no such thing as pure *sola scriptura* ... because an essential element of Scripture is the Church as understanding subject, and with this the fundamental sense of tradition is already given. (Ratzinger 1998, 108)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to define tradition. For a short explanation of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, see Ratzinger 2012, 476–77: "Es ist einerseits sichtbar geworden, dass es Überlieferung im Sinn eines von Anfang an vorliegenden Bündels von selbstständigen Einzelwahrheiten nicht gibt; es ist aber gleichzeitig sichtbar geworden, dass es auch Schrift ohne Überlieferung nicht gibt. Das gilt in mehrfacher Hinsicht. Zunächst bedeutet dies, dass die Schrift den Niederschlag des vorher mündlich in der ältesten Christenheit tradierten darstellt. Sodann ist aber zu bedenken, dass dieser immer schon bekannte Sachverhalt durch die neuere exegetische Erforschung eine überraschend erweiterte Bedeutung gewonnen hat. Es hat sich nämlich gezeigt, dass die älteste Gemeinde Worte und Taten des Herren nicht wie archivarisches abgeschlossene Größen weitergegeben hat. Vielmehr hat sie aus der Überzeugung heraus, dass der Herr kein Toter, keine den Archiven der Vergangenheit Angehörige Größe, sondern durch den Heiligen Geist als der Auferstandene in der Kirche lebendig ist, dass überkommene Gut zugleich neu auslegt und auf die jeweilige Situation der Kirche hin entfaltet. Überlieferung erscheint hier nicht als mechanische Weitergabe, sondern als dynamischer Prozess oder anders gesagt: in der Heiligen Schrift selbst ist das überliefernde Entfalten aufgrund der der Kirche übertragenen Auslegungsvollmacht vorhanden; Überlieferung ist nicht nur äußere Voraussetzungen, sondern inneres Bauprinzip der Schrift."

## 1.2. The Role of Scripture in Revelation

How, then, should we define the role of Scripture within this complex process of divine self-communication to the living and perceiving subject of God's covenant people? Ratzinger sheds light on this specifically Christian problem by drawing our attention to the different roles that Scripture plays within the Old and New Covenant, respectively. He observes: "Just as the two covenants differ in their nature, as covenant, so also the fact of Scripture is not given in the same way each time." (Ratzinger 2008b, 53) For the New Testament, the term "Scripture" refers exclusively to the Old Testament, which has lost nothing of its authoritative status. Rather, its meaning has only now become apparent in the Christ-event (Ratzinger 2008b, 53, with reference to Schrenk 1933, 767–69). Thus, the authors of the New Testament "do not set a new Scripture over against or alongside the old Scripture; rather, they set the Christ-event, as the Spirit that interprets Scripture, over against the *one* Scripture, that is, the Old Testament." (Ratzinger 2008b, 53–54) That is, the entire New Testament is a single re-reading and reinterpretation of the Old Testament in light of the Christ-event. This fundamental concept, Ratzinger observes,

also determines the form of the oldest creedal statements and without [it] they cannot be understood: The formula that "Jesus" is the "Christ" signifies quite simply that the Christ-message of the Old Testament has come to fulfillment in the historical Jesus; that you can understand who Jesus is on the basis of the Old Testament and see what the Old Testament means in the light of the Christ-event. (Ratzinger 2008b, 53–54)

One can easily trace this understanding of the Christ-event as the fulfilment of the Scriptures, along with the resulting mutual illumination of old and new, throughout the entire New Testament. It is, however, nowhere so clearly expressed as in the already quoted passage from Second Corinthians about the veil covering the law until one turns to Christ (2 Cor 3:4–18). It is here that the methodological foundation for a *christological-pneumatological* exegesis is being laid. In it the Apostle Paul "contrasts the Old and the New Covenants as *gramma* and *pneuma*—that is, as Scripture and Spirit (2 Cor 3:6–18)—and calls the Lord the *Pneuma* who makes Scripture comprehensible and who is its meaning, its true, living (not merely literary) content (2 Cor 3:14–18)." (Ratzinger 2008b, 54)

Paul's intention in this passage is precisely not to abrogate the value of Israel's Scripture. On the contrary, Ratzinger explains, Paul sees in the Christ-event the fulfillment of a theological development that can already be observed within the Old Testament; this development is expressed in the promise of a new covenant as envisioned in Jer 31:31–34. Now that the risen Lord has returned through the gift of his Spirit,

no Scripture is needed any more, because the law is written in the heart; no one needs teaching from the outside any more, because God himself teaches men. John is expressing the same idea, starting from Deutero-Isaiah (54:13), when he depicts the age that has begun with Christ as the age in which everyone is taught by God himself [1 John 2:20–21]; and Peter's speech at Pentecost, handed down to us in Acts (2:14–36), develops the same idea on the basis of Joel (3:1–5). In every case, the age that dawned with the Christ-event appears as the answer to a series of hopes that expected the coming age to render Scripture, in an ultimate sense, quite superfluous through the immediate presence of the divine teacher in man himself. (Ratzinger 2008b, 54)

For Paul, as for the early Church, Christ is the fulfillment of Israel's hopes for a definitive interpretation of the law that would be accompanied by its spiritualization. That is, Christ is the meaning of what we call the Old Testament, he is—as Ratzinger puts it—“its true, living (not merely literary) content.” (Ratzinger 2008b, 54)

From this Ratzinger concludes that “in the new order of salvation that begins with Christ, ‘Scripture’ holds a different place from what it had in the Old Covenant.” (Ratzinger 2008b, 55) Leaving aside the question of whether or not the New Testament gives an accurate account of the Old Testament's self-understanding, the New Testament view is that “the Old Testament appears as ‘Scripture’ in the proper sense, which has attained its true significance through the Christ-event by being drawn into the living sphere of the reality of Christ.” (Ratzinger 2008b, 55) For this reason, even though the New Testament itself was eventually counted as Scripture, the term “Scripture”—according to Ratzinger—can “no longer have that conclusive and exclusive sense that, in Paul's view, was attributed to it in the Old Testament.” Rather, the New Testament, taken as Scripture, has become “the instrument for opening up the old dispensation into the spacious sphere of the Christ-event.” (Ratzinger 2008b) The New Testament then, as Ratzinger sees it, is

as it were, the arrested process of the new interpretation of Scripture on the basis of Christ. In any case, it carries with it no intention of becoming independent, of closing itself into literal exegesis, but can only have a continuing existence *within the spiritual reality of Jesus Christ*, who remains with his own every day until the end of the world (Mt 28:20), who through his going away in and through the Cross has come again in the Holy Spirit (as John explains it) and, through the Spirit, reveals to the disciples what they would once have been unable to bear when the Lord was still visibly dwelling among them (Jn 16:12f.). (Ratzinger 2008b, 55–56)

Can Ratzinger's designation of the NT as “the arrested process of new interpretation of Scripture on the basis of Christ” do full justice to the difference between the divinely inspired words of the New Testament and even the most venerable interpretation of it? Even assuming this to be the case, it remains that his central point

is crucial for understanding the role of Scripture in the life of the Church: The New Testament has become the instrument for the opening up of the Old Testament “into the spacious sphere of the Christ-event.” While Scripture might have signified the fullness of revelation for the Old Covenant, in the new dispensation the focus shifts: The fullness of revelation is Christ, who remains present in his Church and through the Spirit guides the Church into an ever-deeper understanding of both Testaments in the light of his paschal mystery.<sup>9</sup>

### 1.3. The Role of the Church

Having asserted the distinction between Revelation and Scripture, we now turn to the role of the receiving subject, which is the Church. As seen above, Christ is the fullness of revelation who has definitively handed himself over to the Church on the day of Pentecost. This constitutes the Church as the custodian, interpreter and *tradent* of the revelation she has herself received from the one whose living body she now is.<sup>10</sup>

The New Testament describes the act of receiving revelation, that is: the act by which “the reality of Christ is appropriated to us,” using the term “faith” (Ratzinger 2008b, 57). By the act of faith, “the individual meets Christ and, in him, enters into the sphere of his saving power.” (Ratzinger 2008b, 57) By thus entering into the sphere of Christ, however, the individual believer also becomes part of the body of Christ, which is the Pauline expression for “the community of believers—the Church—who

<sup>9</sup> As already suggested above, my own view is that revelation understood as a communicative act is inseparable from revelation understood as content that can be clearly formulated (whether in Scripture or by the Church). Both aspects, God’s self-communication and the objective content of that communication, coincide in the incarnate Logos, the unfolding of whom is the mission of the Holy Spirit.

This suggests the following complement: Although the letter—especially that of the New Testament as the hermeneutical key to the Old Testament—refers beyond itself to the living Christ encountered in the Spirit, it does so in virtue of its own inner dynamism as a kind of verbal icon; hence the letter’s abiding significance as a (living) foundation of all spiritual reading. To be sure, the Spirit enjoys a certain free transcendence of the historically delimited flesh of Christ. Even so, as John 16 suggests, this free transcendence serves the Spirit’s own desire to unfold with creative fidelity the treasures of wisdom already contained *ab initio* in that same historically delimited flesh.

A final point: One of the great merits of modern exegesis is to have discovered that the verbal icon represented by the biblical text is itself the fruit of a genesis (as well as of an inspiration from above). As such, the letter of the Old Testament is bound up with the gradual incarnation of the divine word out of the womb of God’s people, while the New Testament letter recapitulates this process by letting the Word made flesh be re-born, as it were, in verbal-iconic form out of the heart of the Church.

<sup>10</sup> Ratzinger 2007, xxi: “The connection with the subject we call ‘People of God’ is vital for Scripture. On the one hand, this book—Scripture—is the measure that comes from God, the power directing the people. On the other hand, though, Scripture lives precisely within this people, even as this people transcends itself in Scripture. Through their self-transcendence (a fruit, at the deepest level, of the incarnate Word) they become the people of God. The People of God—the Church—is the living subject of Scripture; it is in the Church that the words of the Bible are always in the present. This also means, of course, that the People has to receive its very self from God, ultimately from the incarnate Christ; it has to let itself be ordered, guided, and led by him.”

represents the presence of Christ in this world,” a presence into which he is gathering mankind and through which he enables them to share in his mighty presence (Ratzinger 2008b, 57). From this Ratzinger concludes

that believing is entering into the abode of Christ, into the abiding reality of Christ, to which Scripture bears witness but which Scripture itself by all means *is not*. What may further be concluded from that is that the presence of revelation essentially has to do with the realities of “faith” and “Church”, which for their part—as now becomes clear—are closely connected with each other. (Ratzinger 2008b, 57–58)

Ratzinger continually returns to this distinction between revelation and Scripture to help us understand that the latter can give access to the revelation it communicatively mediates when read and interpreted in faith by one who is a part of the body of Christ. Only thus is the reader properly located within the intended receiver of God’s inexhaustible self-revelation and self-gift.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Ratzinger’s affirmation of the identity of the Church as the primary receiver and the tabernacle of God’s self-revelation implies, in turn, the Church’s involvement as an author of Scripture who, therefore, has a word to say concerning its proper interpretation. This latter point follows, on the one hand, because the individual authors can write under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit only insofar as they are members of Christ’s risen body.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, “only the subject from whom this literature is born – the pilgrim people of God – makes this literary collection, with all of its variety and apparent contrasts, *one single book*.” (Ratzinger 2002)

The Church, then, is both the tabernacle of revelation (understood as the self-gift of the Risen-Lord in the Holy Spirit) and as an author of Scripture.<sup>13</sup> As we will

<sup>11</sup> See also Ratzinger [Benedict XVI] 2011, 22: “For by its very nature, ... faith is a process of gathering. To accept it means to allow oneself to be gathered in. It means becoming Church, for the word *ecclesia*, both etymologically and historically, means precisely this: assembly. We could demonstrate the same things in terms of the other fundamental New Testament designation for the Church: the Body of Christ. Faith means emerging from the isolation of one’s own existence and becoming “one body” with Christ, that is, an existential unity with him. And this always means: existential unity of all who have become ‘one body’. This ‘Body’ alone is the abode of his ‘Spirit’. The Body is the acting subject of the Word.”

<sup>12</sup> See Wicks 2008, 278–79: “[The biblical writer] is certainly God’s ‘organ,’ but he is this at quite a definite place in history, that is, only by being at the same time ‘organ’ of the Body of Christ and of the people of God in their covenant with God.”

<sup>13</sup> “Neither the individual books of Holy Scripture nor the Scripture as a whole are simply a piece of literature. The Scripture emerged from within the heart of a living subject—the pilgrim People of God—and lives within this same subject. One could say that the books of Scripture involve three interacting subjects. First of all, there is the individual author or group of authors to whom we owe a particular scriptural text. But these authors are not autonomous writers in the modern sense; they form part of a collective subject, the “People of God,” from within whose heart and to whom they speak. Hence, this subject is actually the deeper “author” of the Scriptures. And yet likewise, this people does not exist alone; rather, it knows that it is led, and spoken to, by God himself, who—through men and their humanity—is at the deepest level the one speaking.” (Ratzinger 2007, xxi)

see in the next section, this double role and identity has important implications for the shape of an exegesis suited to revelation.

## 2. An Exegesis Suited to Revelation

Insofar as Scripture and revelation are distinct, Ratzinger explains, “Scripture, *in order to be revelation* is in need of an interpretation suited to revelation.”<sup>14</sup> From his doctoral dissertation on the People of God in St. Augustine until his last scholarly contributions written as Pope Emeritus, Ratzinger sought to explicate the methodological requirements for such an exegesis. Anyone acquainted with his methodology will easily recognize a fine summary of it in the *post-synodal* apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (nos. 29–49), where we thus find it invested with magisterial authority. It is, however, helpful to go back to his work as a theologian to illuminate his papal teaching on the matter.

How does Ratzinger/Benedict XVI envisage an exegesis that receives Scripture as it is meant to be received, namely, as the divinely inspired witness to God’s self-revelation? He does not re-invent the wheel. Rather, he takes up the Council’s short methodological instructions in *DV* 12 and fleshes them out in a more systematic fashion. Accordingly, in his own contribution to the Synod on the Word of God, later taken up into *Verbum Domini*, he proposes two main levels of interpretation (see Benedict XVI 2008). This proposal corresponds to the classical teaching on the two senses of Scripture, the literal and the spiritual. Pope Benedict, however, prefers to refer to two different methodological levels, the historical-critical and the theological.<sup>15</sup>

### 2.1. Historical-Critical

First, given that revelation involves a historical process of divine-self communication, an exegesis suitable to revelation must be historical. This, in fact, is a requirement of

<sup>14</sup> “Schrift ist das Materialprinzip der Offenbarung, die als solche hinter der Schrift bleibt und sich nicht in der Schrift restlos objektiviert, weswegen Schrift, um Offenbarung zu sein, der offenbarungsgemäßen Interpretation bedarf” (Ratzinger 2009a, 711) (*emphasis added*). This does not mean that Scripture becomes revelation only after it is interpreted. The point is rather that, already in its objective constitution as a vehicle of revelation, Scripture is ordered to a recipient interpreter, namely, the Church.

<sup>15</sup> See *VD* 34: “Only where both methodological levels, the historical critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book.” In the same document, however, Pope Benedict also fully endorses the classical terminology. He writes: “[T]he Pontifical Biblical Commission’s definition of the spiritual sense, as understood by Christian faith, remains fully valid: it is ‘the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it. This context truly exists. In it the New Testament recognizes the fulfillment of the Scriptures. It is therefore quite acceptable to re-read the Scriptures in the light of this new context, which is that of life in the Spirit.’”



Scripture's own character as an historical witness to an historical revelation. Ratzinger has always insisted on the necessity of the historical-critical approach, despite his sometimes strident critique of the philosophical presuppositions adopted by many of its practitioners and his strictures against its reductive imprisonment in a purely immanent worldview.<sup>16</sup> In his inaugural lecture at the University of Münster in the year 1963, he even speaks of the need for something like "an office of watchman for exegesis [*Wächteramt der Exegese*], which investigates the literal sense and thus preserves the connection with the *sarx* of the Logos against every kind of Gnosis."<sup>17</sup> Ratzinger himself makes this point abundantly clear, and there is no need to elaborate it further. Suffice it to quote his most recent statement on the matter. When delineating the Magisterium's guidelines for biblical studies, he writes in VD 32:

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" (Benedict XVI 2008). The study of the Bible requires a knowledge of these methods of enquiry and their suitable application.

While vehemently affirming the desirability and necessity of historical-critical exegesis, Ratzinger/Benedict, repeatedly reminds us that an *exegesis suitable to revelation* can never be limited to the application of the methods of historical and literary analysis.<sup>18</sup> Rather, because revelation always transcends the text, and so cannot be extracted from the text alone, it needs to be interpreted from within its *Sitz im Leben*, which is the living body of Christ, the Church (see Benedict XVI 2006). Using

<sup>16</sup> See extensively Ratzinger 2008a; moreover VD 35.b and Ratzinger 2002.

<sup>17</sup> "From this perspective, it is essential that, just as there is an office of watchman for the Church and for her inspired witness, so also there be an office of watchman for exegesis, which investigates the literal sense and thus preserves the connection with the *sarx* of the Logos against every kind of Gnosis. In that sense there is then something like an independence of Scripture, as a self-sufficient and in many respects unambiguous criterion vis-à-vis the teaching office of the Church. There is no doubt that Luther's insight was correct and that not enough space was accorded it in the Catholic Church because of the claims of the teaching office, whose inner limitations were not always perceived clearly enough." (Ratzinger 2008b, 66)

<sup>18</sup> In this Ratzinger is of one mind with the Biblical Commission, which in its 1993 document on *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, states: "In their work of interpretation, Catholic exegetes must never forget that what they are interpreting is the *word of God*. Their common task is not finished when they have simply determined sources, defined forms or explained literary procedures. They arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God's word for today." (Pontifical Biblical Commission 1993, III, C, 1)

a metaphor dear to him, Ratzinger explains why historical critical exegesis is not sufficient to reach the level of revelation when interpreting the biblical text:

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 a laboratory analysis. Revelation has instruments; but it is not separable from the living person to whom it is communicated. Its goal is always to gather and unite men, and this is why the Church is a necessary aspect of revelation. If however, revelation is more than Scripture, if it transcends Scripture, then 'rock analysis'—which is to say, the historical-critical method—cannot be the last word concerning revelation; rather the living organism of the faith of all ages is then an intrinsic part of revelation. (Ratzinger 1998, 127; see also Ratzinger 2005b, 33)

This living organism of the faith of all ages to which revelation was communicated and which has passed it on to us is called the Church. She is born from the Word and gives us the Word.<sup>19</sup> In Ratzinger's understanding of revelation, therefore, the Church is "an intrinsic part of revelation," because she is the one who first received it and who first put it into writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit poured out on her. From this he concludes unambiguously that an "authentic biblical hermeneutics can only be had within the faith of the Church." (VD 29)<sup>20</sup>

## 2.2. Theological

This brings us to the second and central point of the present paper: Ratzinger/Pope Benedict's call to transcend the material letter and to read it in the *pneuma* who inspired it. In accord with DV 12, Pope Benedict insists on three additional "fundamental criteria for an appreciation of the divine dimension of the Bible, which

<sup>19</sup> See Ratzinger [Benedict XVI] 2011, 19: "*Ecclesia* does not simply exist already, but, rather, it is created by the Word in the first place. The Word is constantly there in order to call people together to himself and thereby to make them into the *Ecclesia*. The New Testament *Ecclesia* is not something preexisting; it is an open-ended entity that comes into being through the word of proclamation."

<sup>20</sup> See also Ratzinger [Benedict XVI] 2011, 22–23: "The Bible, too, being the basic form and basic norm of all preaching, is an ecclesial word and hence can be understood as Bible only within the context of Church. To construe Bible merely as something opposed to Church is ultimately a fiction: after all, the Bible comes into existence only as the expression of a common faith. It is becoming increasingly clear to us that inspiration is not an individual charismatic process but, rather, an essentially ecclesial and historical process embedded in the whole process of tradition, genre history, and redaction. Only in the shared process of believing one after the other, of entering by faith into the faith history of Israel and into the turning point therein that occurs with Jesus does that tradition which is recorded in the Bible come about. And again, only through shared listening, critical views, and disputes do the most diverse pieces of literature become a canon, an ecclesial happening. The human subject of the Bible is the Church; she is at the same time the place of the transition from human spirit to *Pneuma*, to the Spirit of the common Body of Jesus Christ and, thus, generally the place in which inspiration is possible. Hence, although academic study of individual bits of Scripture can arrive at very important insights even apart from the Church, as Bible it can only be understood ecclesially and only in terms of its acting subject, without which it would not be Bible at all..."

he enumerates in VD 34: “1) the text must be interpreted with attention to *the unity of the whole Scripture*; nowadays this is called canonical exegesis; 2) account is to be taken of the *living Tradition of the whole Church*; and, finally, 3) respect must be shown for *the analogy of faith*.”

These three criteria are not three levels of meaning after the manner of the classical threefold spiritual sense. Rather, by the very fact that Scripture can appear and function as such only within the living Tradition of the Church, which shares in unifying Scriptures’ diverse constituents out of one common creed, all three criteria are necessarily operative at once.

It is on this methodological level that Benedict’s call for a Christological-pneumatological interpretation of the Old Testament comes into play. As Benedict rightly says, attention to the unity of Scripture is seen to be a feature of what is nowadays called canonical exegesis. Canonical exegesis, however, is an umbrella term for any hermeneutic that approaches the Bible as a unified whole—even without regard for the faith or the Church as its unifying subject. By contrast, Christological-pneumatological exegesis refers specifically to the re-reading of the Old Testament in light of the Christ-Event. We could thus call it a sub-category of canonical exegesis in the descriptive sense. But we could also call it the ideal of canonical exegesis in the normative sense.

The following points need to be addressed: a) What allows us to read a certain biblical text, written by a concrete historical author at a specific time in history, in the light of a text that might be much older or much younger, and to do this without imposing an artificial connection extrinsic to the original author’s attention? And b), what justifies re-reading an Old Testament text in the light of an historical event which the NT testifies to? How do we avoid distorting its literal sense in the process?

#### *a. The Unity of Scripture*

“The basic and primary presupposition of theological exegesis is therefore the conviction that Scripture—the multiplicity of its authors and its long historical genesis notwithstanding—is *one* book having a real, intrinsic unity in the midst of its various tensions.” (Ratzinger and Balthasar 2005, 39) The presupposition of this unity is not arbitrary; it is not imposed from the outside on a set of otherwise unconnected texts. Rather, it rests

upon the firm belief that Scripture is ultimately the work of a single author, who has both a human and a divine aspect. That is, it comes out of one historical subject, the people of God, which, despite all the changes of its history, always retained its inner self-identity. When this people speaks, not casually and superficially, but from the center of its identity, it speaks in the stages of its own history, yet always as one and the same subject. (Ratzinger and Balthasar 2005, 39)

When Ratzinger speaks of “the one historical subject, the people of God,” he is, of course, referring to the unity of the Old and New Covenant people, who are essentially one because—in the Christian understanding—Christ is the fulfillment of all the hopes of Israel. In the saving events of his Passover and the founding of the Church, Christ did not create a new people but renewed Israel according to the flesh through an eschatological transformation in the Spirit. The result is a “new Israel” that, far from replacing the old, sacramentally anticipates its destiny—while remaining rooted in the old thanks to the enduring presence of the Twelve, upon which the Church is founded.

Although the Christ-Event introduces an absolute novelty into history, then, it does not cause a discontinuity in the people of God (cf. Rom 11:16–24; Acts 3:23; Gal 6:16). For this reason, the Fathers would speak about the *ecclesia ab Abel*. The unity of the two people of God, Old and New, is to be found in Christ, who thereby also constitutes the unity of the two Testaments. Ratzinger can therefore refer to the Old and New Covenant people as the “continuity of a subject which organically traverses the whole of history and which remains one with itself throughout its own transformations.” (Ratzinger 1995b, 95)

This leads to the second, properly divine aspect. “The inner identity of the people of God” that expresses itself in the Scriptures “is based upon the guidance of the one Holy Spirit.” (Ratzinger and Balthasar 2005, 39) Thus, “[w]hen the core of this identity makes itself heard, it is not simply a man or a people that is speaking—it is God speaking in human words; it is the one Spirit speaking, the one Spirit who abides as the inner power guiding the people through its history.” (Ratzinger and Balthasar 2005, 39) Therefore, Benedict concludes, “these writings form one Scripture which can only be properly understood if they are read in the *analogia fidei* as a oneness in which there is progress towards Christ, and inversely, in which Christ draws all history to himself; and if, moreover, all this is brought to life in the Church’s faith.” (Benedict XVI 2006)

The movement of the Spirit towards the fulfillment of the Scriptures in Christ can already be observed within the Old Testament itself. It is particularly evident in the ongoing process of *Fortschreibung*, along with the constant *Relecture* of earlier books in later writings throughout the Second Temple Period. In this process, which is also referred to as inner-biblical exegesis (see Fishbane 1985), it is evident that

the texts develop in a process of reflection, of cultivation, of new understanding, a process that goes beyond every individual author. Yet precisely in this process of advancing, which relativizes all the individual authors, a profound transcendence is at work: in this process of advancing, of purification, of development, the inspiring Spirit is active, who guides actions and events in the Word and, in the events and actions, propels back to the Word. (Ratzinger 2005a, 147–49)

Ultimately, “the whole Old Testament is a journeying with the Word of God. Only in the process of this journeying was the Bible’s real way of declaring itself formed, step by step. Consequently we ourselves can only discover where this way is leading if we follow it to the end. In this respect—as a way—the Old and New Testaments belong together.” (Ratzinger 1995b, 9–10)

Of course, it is only in hindsight that the direction in which the Spirit was leading becomes fully evident. That is why the New Testament (cf., e.g., 2 Cor 3) insists that ultimately the Old Testament is fully comprehensible only when read in light of the Christ-event. Ratzinger is unmistakably clear on this point:

For the Christian the Old Testament represents, in its totality, an advance toward Christ; only when it attains to him does its real meaning, which was gradually hinted at, become clear. Thus every individual part derives its meaning from the whole, and the whole derives its meaning from its end—from Christ. Hence we only interpret an individual text theologically correctly (as the fathers of the church recognized and as the faith of the church in every age has recognized) when we see it as a way that is leading us ever forward, when we see in the text where this way is tending and what its inner direction is. (Ratzinger 1995b, 9–10)

In order to recognize the way in which the Old Testament is on its way towards a future fulfilment, the exegete must make the passage from letter to spirit which was effected by the Christ-Event and towards which the entire Old Testament tended of its own inner dynamism.

*b. From the Letter to the Spirit*

Throughout his work, Ratzinger returns again and again to this basic Christian principle: The fundamental axiom of an exegesis suited to revelation requires “reading it [Scripture] in its entirety and in view of its overall trajectory.” (Ratzinger [Benedict XVI] 2022, 33) That is, and he is quite clear on this point, “we do not read the Old Testament by itself and for its own sake, but always with the New Testament and through the New Testament.” (Ratzinger [Benedict XVI] 2022, 33) Or, as he observes on a different occasion, we no longer read the Old Testament as if it were complete in itself, “but always with Christ and through Christ ... We read it with him in whom all things have been fulfilled and in whom all of its validity and truth are revealed.” (Ratzinger 1995b, 15–17)

This way of reading the Old Testament is, of course, first attested in the New Testament, the whole purpose of which, according to Ratzinger, is “to show the authentic explanation of the Old Testament writings in the events relating to Jesus Christ.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 59) In the Christian understanding, the New Testament “authentically elucidates the way to explain the Old in terms of Jesus.” (Benedict XVI 2023) It not only delivers the methodology, but also defines for us the reason why this approach to the Old Testament is at once *Christological and pneumatological*. Three key passages merit mention in this respect.

First, Jesus himself announced the transition from the Old Covenant worship, with its temple and cult, to a new spiritual worship in a New Covenant. As Ratzinger explains,

[i]n his saying about the Temple being destroyed and rebuilt in three days [cf. John 2:19–21], Jesus had foreseen the event of the destruction of the Temple and announced a new form of divine worship, which was to be centered on the offering of his Body. In this way and at the same time, the Sinai covenant was brought to its definitive form and became the New Covenant. In this same way, however, the worship was extended to all believers, thus giving to the promise of land its definitive meaning. It was therefore evident to Christians that the preaching of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, signified the God-given turning point of time, and consequently the interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures in light of Jesus Christ was, so to speak, legitimized by God himself. (Benedict XVI 2023, 59)

Significantly, the fourth Evangelist reports that it was only after the Resurrection that the disciples understood the saying about the reconstruction of the Temple; only then did they believe in the Scriptures and in the word Jesus had spoken. It was the Spirit of the risen Lord who now reminded them of this word and taught them the spiritual understanding of the Old Testament (cf. John 14:26).

Secondly, we must recall the famous passage in Luke 24, which is a paradigm of all Christological exegesis. On their journey to Emmaus, Jesus guides the disciples on an interior journey on which he rereads the Old Testament with them.

In this way, they learn to understand in an entirely new way the promises and hopes of Israel and the figure of the Messiah. Thus they discover that the destiny of the Crucified and Risen One, who is mysteriously traveling with the disciples, is foreshadowed in these books. They learn a new reading of the Old Testament. This text describes the formation of the Christian faith in the first and second centuries and thus describes a path that should always be sought out and traveled. (Benedict XVI 2023, 71)

The point Ratzinger emphasizes in this passage is that Luke 24 is not merely an account of what happened once on the day of the resurrection, but also and primarily the pattern of a path that must “always be sought and traveled” by any disciple truly desirous of understanding the Scriptures.

Finally, 2 Cor 3:4–18, though already cited above, merits another mention in the present context. Here Paul coins the terminology about the passage from the letter to the spirit, that is, from the *gramma* of the Old Covenant to the *pneuma* of the New Covenant (cf. vv. 6–8); here, too, he identifies the opening up of the Scripture’s Christological meaning as a work of the Spirit. Indeed, he describes the Lord as being *himself* the Pneuma—the personal pneumatic or spiritual Meaning—who not only makes Scripture legible, but also reveals himself to be its true and living content

(Ratzinger 2008b, 54). “Christology and Pneumatology,” Rudolph Voderholzer explains, “are closely related in this passage, but they do not coincide. Whosoever turns towards Christ, turns towards the power of the Spirit of the resurrected Lord. And it is the Spirit that gives life, who eventually effects a spiritual, that is, Christological understanding of the Scriptures [i.e. the Old Testament].” (Voderholzer 2013, 137; my own translation)

Basing himself on this New Testament passage, Pope Benedict designates the re-reading of the Old Testament in light of the Christ-event as a “Christological-Pneumatological” interpretation. On the one hand, “it could also be called ‘allegorical’ from a historical perspective,” as the Fathers used this term to describe the Christological meaning of the Old Testament (Benedict XVI 2023, 125). The term “allegory,” however, lends itself to a profound misunderstanding in a modern context, where it is mostly used to designate a literary expedient for making an ancient text applicable to a new purpose. For the transition from the literal to the spiritual reading of the Old Testament in light of Jesus Christ is precisely *not* just a literary device, but a reality brought about by “a historical transition that corresponds to the internal logic of the text.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 125) Hence Ratzinger’s option for a terminology meant to highlight unambiguously “the profound novelty and the clear motivation of the new Christian interpretation.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 125) At the same time, Ratzinger’s terminology serves to identify the primary agents of this interpretation. It is the risen Lord himself, the fullness of revelation, who remains present in his Church; it is also he who through his Spirit guides the community of believers into an ever deeper understanding of everything written in the law and the prophets in relation to God’s ultimate self-revelation in his Passion, death, and Resurrection.

### 3. Mariology Ties the Knot Joining Old and New<sup>21</sup>

In closing, let us consider a concrete example of how Ratzinger himself applies a *christological-pneumatological* exegesis in developing a theological argument. The Marian dogmas are no doubt among the most contentious in the ecumenical debate, and they are seemingly the hardest to argue from Scripture. Yet, by adopting a christological-pneumatological reading of the Old Testament, Ratzinger is able to show how these dogmas are deeply rooted in the biblical theology of Israel. Even more, he is able to show how Mary’s role in the divine economy reveals an astounding analogy to the Church’s participation in revelation. Not only is Mary the Church in person and as a person, she is also the indissoluble hinge between the Old and New Covenant People and the two Testaments they respectively represent. While Christ

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<sup>21</sup> Ratzinger 1983, 31.



is the fulfillment of the Old Testament's hopes, Mary is the perfect conception and reception of its words thanks to her act of conceiving and bearing the one Word that was expressed in them all. As the true Ark of the Covenant, she carries in her person both Old and New Testament in perfect unity.

### 3.1. Mary, the Personification of Israel

It is a lesson in methodology to watch Ratzinger at work. Faced with the modern objection that Mary plays only a marginal and seemingly ambiguous role in Jesus's public life, and that the New Testament creed has no place for her, he argues that a Mariology emerges from Scripture when the New and Old Testaments are read in light of each other.<sup>22</sup> He proceeds by first pointing out that the New Testament's main Marian passages, foremost her *Magnificat*, are entirely woven of Old Testament citations. Among these, he identifies three strands of Old Testament tradition: 1) the formerly sterile mothers of Israel (e.g. Hannah, Sarah), 2) the Daughter Zion theology, and possibly 3) the figure of Eve (Ratzinger 1983, 13, with reference to Braun 1953, and Wennemer 1954). Taking these traditions as a "guide into the Old Testament," he uncovers there a theology of woman which he considers indispensable to its entire structure (see Ratzinger 1983, 13). Contrarily to a widely held prejudice that the Old Testament's chief concern was "to exclude woman from theology, from the language of God," Ratzinger shows that the opposite is the case (Ratzinger 1983, 14). In the manifold types of women, be they mothers, virgins, wives, widows or savior figures, the people of Israel is embodied as a woman (see Ratzinger 1983, 21): "The great women of Israel represent what this people itself is. The history of these women becomes the theology of God's people and, at the same time, the theology of the covenant." (Ratzinger 1983, 21) This has important consequences for revelation. Since the prophets began to interpret the covenant in terms of a marriage between God and Israel, it became clear that "to God is joined, not a goddess, but, as in his historical revelation, the chosen creature, Israel, the daughter Zion, the woman." (Ratzinger 1983, 23) Ratzinger concludes that

[t]o leave woman out of the whole of theology would be to deny creation and election (salvation history) and thereby to nullify revelation. In the women of Israel ... is expressed most purely and most profoundly *what creation is* and what election is, what "Israel" is as God's people. And because election and revelation are one, what ultimately becomes apparent in this for the first time is who and what God is. (Ratzinger 1983, 23–24)

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<sup>22</sup> "Methodologically, one can approach this question in one of two ways, backwards or forwards, so to speak: either one can read back from the New Testament into the Old or, conversely, feel one's way slowly from the Old Testament into the New. Ideally both ways should coincide, permeating one another, in order to produce the most exact image possible." (Ratzinger 1983, 11–12)

Who God truly is, is revealed not in an abstract void, but only in and through the actual history of God's merciful dealings with his unfaithful but beloved spouse, Israel. This Old Testament development of a theology of woman, however, remains incomplete until "[i]t acquires its definitive meaning for the first time in the New Testament: in the woman who is herself described as the true holy remnant, as the authentic daughter Zion, and who is thereby the mother of the savior, yes, the mother of God." (Ratzinger 1983, 24)

### 3.2. Mary, Man's Yes to God

So far, Ratzinger has proceeded by identifying the Old Testament allusions in the New Testament portrait of Mary and fleshing out the inner-biblical development of a theology of woman/Israel within the Old Testament. But he also takes a step beyond a strictly canonical reading, thus proving himself the true master of the methodology proposed in *DV* 12. By reflecting theologically on the liturgy's traditional association of Mary with the Old Testament figure of Wisdom, he takes seriously the Church's confession of faith in the ongoing presence of Christ in her worship. In the liturgy, the ultimate *Sitz im Leben* of Scripture, it is the Risen Lord himself who continues to open the mind of the Church "to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Ratzinger accordingly engages in a *christological-pneumatological* exegesis of Old Testament Wisdom as it appears within the tradition of the Church's liturgical celebrations. This enables him to follow out the *analogia fidei* into the heart of God's revelation concerning Mary.

The New Testament's identification of Wisdom with Christ, he points out, cannot exhaust the prefiguration contained therein. There is a remainder that "resists total integration into Christology." (Ratzinger 1983, 26–27) Wisdom, as presented in the Bible, "appears as God's first creature in whom both the pure, primordial form of his creative will and the pure *answer*, which he discovers, find their expression ... Creation answers, and the answer is as close to God as a playmate, as a lover." (Ratzinger 1983, 25) It is no coincidence, "no empty grammatical phenomenon in antiquity's vivid awareness of language," that Wisdom is personified as feminine. Rather, Wisdom "stands on that side of reality which is represented by the woman, by what is purely and simply feminine. It signifies the answer which emerges from the divine call of creation and election. It expresses precisely this: that there is a pure answer and that God's love finds its irrevocable dwelling place within it." (Ratzinger 1983, 26–27)

Viewed from the standpoint of the New Testament, the Old Testament figure of Wisdom "refers, on one side, to the Son as the Word, in whom God creates," as the Prologue of John's Gospel powerfully affirms. On the other hand, however, it also refers "to the creature, to the true Israel, who is personified in the humble maid whose whole existence is marked by the attitude of *Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*. Sophia refers to the Logos, the Word who establishes wisdom, and also

to the womanly answer which receives wisdom and brings it to fruition.” (Ratzinger 1983, 27) In Mary’s perfectly pure and unconditional *yes* to God’s election, she has brought to fruition God’s covenant with Israel. Finally, God’s love has found an “irrevocable dwelling place” in creation. It is by the very same “*yes*” that the New Covenant itself has already been irrevocably accepted and received.

### 3.3. Mary, the Real-Typological Unity of Scripture

Mary embodies the unity of the Two Testaments in her own person. This unbroken unity of Old and New Covenant, which reflects a logic of perfect fulfillment, is powerfully demonstrated in Ratzinger’s biblical explanation of the immaculate conception.

One major objection to the doctrine of the immaculate conception is based on the Protestant insistence on the universal need for grace, understood solely as justification of the sinner. If, unlike any other human being, Mary were able to offer a whole-hearted, unconditional *yes* in answer to God’s call, “pure grace, the unmerited justification of the sinner,” would be called into question (Ratzinger 1983, 63). Here too, Luther’s stark opposition between Law and Gospel comes into play. The question thus imposes itself: Is there room for a correspondence between God’s and man’s action in the history of salvation? Behind this question ultimately stands another one: Is there room for grace to be effective, to be fruitful of the answer to grace? The question can be resolved only if the unity of the two Testaments is taken into consideration.

Building on the work of the Franciscan theologian Bernhard Langemeyer, Ratzinger draws attention to the fact that the Old Testament prophets, along with their proclamation of judgement, always promised that a “holy remnant” would be saved. Saint Paul even takes up this promise and sees it fulfilled in that part of Israel which has come to accept Jesus as the Christ/Messiah (cf. Rom 11:5). “Holy remnant,” Ratzinger explains, “means that continuity does not rest in God’s will alone while destruction and contradiction occupy the field of history,” as Luther would have it, “but that there is continuity *in* history too: God’s word is not spoken in vain.” (Ratzinger 1983, 64) Rather, the grace operative in God’s word comes to fruition in Mary. In her “the corporeal offspring of the chosen people coincides perfectly with the faith in the promise given to this people.” (Langemeyer 1967, 314; cited in Ratzinger 1983, 64) As a result, “God is not the only actor in history, as if history were only his monologue.” Rather, in Mary’s *fiat* God “finds a response that is *truly* a response.

As the holy remnant Mary signifies that in herself Old and New Covenants are really one. She is entirely a Jewess, a child of Israel, of the Old Covenant, and as such a child of the full covenant, entirely a Christian: Mother of the Word. She is the New Covenant in the Old Covenant; she is the New Covenant *as* the Old Covenant, *as* Israel: thus no one

can comprehend her mission or her person if the unity of the Old and New Testaments collapses. (Ratzinger 1983, 65)

Ratzinger's allusion to the early Church's axiom that the New Testament is hidden in the Old and the Old is revealed in the New is thus no empty word-play. Rather, it conveys the astounding observation that the Church's firm belief in the unity of Scripture is embodied in the one in whom the Church herself is perfectly personified.

## Conclusion

Taking up Pope Benedict's urgent plea to develop the methodological conditions for a Christological-pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament, this article has attempted to extract from Ratzinger's own work the fundamental principles necessary for the task. In order to do so, we needed to clarify his understanding of the role of Scripture in the process and transmission of divine revelation. It is precisely the distinction between revelation and Scripture that necessitates an exegesis going beyond merely historical-critical investigation to attain God's ever-living communicative act that is mediated through the Scriptures. Ultimately, the New Testament presents Christ as the exegete who through his Spirit opens up the mind of the Church to understand the Scriptures. The Church, thereby, assumes a double role. She is the locus of the Risen Lord, the bearer of the fullness of revelation, so that whoever accepts his revelation by faith is drawn into the realm of his presence. Secondly, as the receiving subject of revelation, she is also the human author of the Scriptures, and for this reason she is an authoritative voice in its proper interpretation. Moreover, as human author, the Church lends unity to the otherwise diverse and distinct books.

All these factors must be taken into consideration when developing an exegesis suited to its object. The basic principles have already been given in *DV 12*, but as Pope Benedict's laments, they have rarely been put into practise. He therefore reminds us that an exegesis worthy of the Sacred Page must go beyond the merely historical-critical. It must read the Scriptures from within the Church's faith, as a unity, in continuity with the Tradition, and in accord with the analogy of faith. Particularly with regard to the Old Testament, we must acknowledge that it carries within itself a movement towards its fulfillment in Christ. Consequently, it needs to be re-read constantly through its appropriate hermeneutical lens, which is the Christ-Event as recorded in the New Testament. For a Christian, Christ is the key to the Old Testament, and the New Testament read from within the living faith of the Church is the instrument for opening up its "seal."

Lastly, as an example of Ratzinger's own Christological-pneumatological exegesis, we recalled some basic elements of his Mariology. This example demonstrates

the vitality of, and provides a model for, the recovery of such an exegesis for the Church's development of dogma. Always taking his cue from the New Testament, Ratzinger goes back into the Old Testament, follows its movement towards its fulfillment and re-reads it in light of the fullness of revelation. In particular, he shows how the Church's belief in the unity of Scripture is perfectly embodied in Mary, who is the living bond between the Old and the New Covenant. Ratzinger reminds us that none of the recent Marian dogmas can be derived from the New Testament alone; it is only by reading the New and Old Testament in unity that we can see the coherence of the Church's confession of the Marian mystery. Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict thus shows that it is not only possible to recuperate a Christological-pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament, but that in doing so we also recover the interpretation of Scripture as the soul of theology. In this way, we allow the Holy Spirit to lead the Church yet deeper into understanding that fullness of revelation which is none other than her head and spouse, Jesus Christ.

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# Hermeneutical and Exegetical Assumptions in the Work *Jesus of Nazareth* by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. Some Examples

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**Abstract:** This article examines Joseph Ratzinger's trilogy on Jesus of Nazareth, focusing especially on the first volume, shedding light on three of his hermeneutical assumptions. Firstly, there is a consideration of the understanding of the historical reliability of the Gospels. Secondly, there is a focus on the double hermeneutic of the parables, namely, the hermeneutic of history and that of faith. A critical review of Ratzinger's analysis of three Lucan parables (Luke 10:25–37; 15:11–32; 16:19–31) leads to the proposal of a different reading which avoids the allegorical trap and values the argumentative mechanism of the fictitious stories, understood as frontier of the Gospel. Finally, holiness is touched on as an authentic interpretation of Sacred Scripture.

**Keywords:** Joseph Ratzinger, historical Jesus, parable, Luke 10:25–37, Luke 15:11–32, Luke 16:19–31, hermeneutic of history, hermeneutic of faith

In 2007, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, Joseph Ratzinger (then in office as pope) published a book that had been in the air for some time (Ratzinger 2007), point of arrival of a long personal meditation and first part of a work whose other two volumes appeared in 2011 (Ratzinger 2011) and 2012 (Ratzinger 2012). As can easily be imagined, the volumes, *Jesus of Nazareth*, were a publishing sensation which aroused vast coverage in the media but also a reserved reaction on the part of the academic world.<sup>1</sup> The first volume has generated much more debate than the second or third, but this is not surprising given that it is Ratzinger's "unorthodox" methodological decisions, set out most fully in this volume, that constitute the central issue in the response provoked within New Testament studies.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A (not exhaustive) bibliographical survey of the academic reactions to the three volumes can be found in Deines 2013a, 351–53. He has compiled a long list of reactions, published in theological journals by important scholars belonging to various Christian denominations.

<sup>2</sup> The opinions of scholars have varied. For example, Brumley writes: "The aim of this book is to help the average reader who approaches Jesus of Nazareth without the benefit of extensive theological or biblical training to get as much out of the work as possible." (Brumley et al. 2008, 5) Vermes highlights a dichotomy: on the one hand, blind faith in the divine Christ without a modern critical methodology, which relegates its adherents to a pre-eighteenth-century, unenlightened perspective; on the other hand, he offers the authentic Jesus who is at last liberated from the mystery enveloping the church's Christ (Vermes 2007). Söding states: "Since a friendship between faith and reason is possible the invitation to friendship Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI offers in his Jesus book is not the end of debate but the starting point of new research." (Söding 2013, 327)

What are the hermeneutical and exegetical assumptions of this mature work of the great German theologian who had risen to the chair of Peter? A complete survey would require a long analysis, impossible in the brief space of an article. I shall limit myself to highlighting three assumptions, developing in the analysis specially the second, with particular attention to the exegesis of Luke's parables. It follows that I will mainly focus on the first volume of the trilogy.

## 1. Ratzingers' "Foreword" as Status Quaestionis Reserches on Jesus Live

Our starting point is the "Foreword" to the first volume in which Ratzinger offers his own survey of twentieth-century research on the life of Jesus. He identifies the central problem as the rift between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith," a rift that is increasingly deep. In this connection, he quotes a great master of German catholic exegesis, Rudolf Schnackenburg, who, almost at the end of his life, wrote a book on the life of Jesus: *Die Person Jesu Christi im Spiegel der vier Evangelien* (1993). After a rigorous use of the historical-critical methods, Schnackenburg arrived at the sad conclusion that "a reliable view of the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth through scientific effort with historical-critical methods can be only inadequately achieved." (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword) In the face of this situation, Ratzinger proposes three considerations; rather, he sets out three methodological options. The first is the choice to employ the historical-critical method. He declares:

The historical-critical method—specifically because of the intrinsic nature of theology and faith—is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work. [...] The *factum historicum* is not an interchangeable symbolic cipher for biblical faith, but the foundation on which it stands: *Et incarnatus est*—when we say these words, we acknowledge God's actual entry into real history. (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword)

The second consideration is to recognise the limitations of the historical-critical method.

The method's first limitation is that by its very nature it has to leave the biblical word in the past. It is a *historical* method, and that means that it investigates the then-current context of events in which the texts originated. [...] To the extent that it remains true to itself, the historical method not only has to investigate the biblical word as a thing of the past, but also has to let it remain in the past. (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword)

The third consideration is, more, a consequence: we have to read the Bible as Sacred Scripture, as a whole, according to the principle of canonical exegesis. He states: “Canonical exegesis’—reading the individual texts of the Bible in the context of the whole—is an essential dimension of exegesis. It does not contradict historical-critical interpretation, but carries it forward in an organic way toward becoming theology in the proper sense.” (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword) At the conclusion of this *Foreword* Ratzinger ends up saying: “The main implication of this for my portrayal of Jesus is that I trust the Gospels” (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword); and he adds: “I have tried, to the best of my ability, to incorporate all of this, and yet I wanted to try to portray the Jesus of the Gospels as the real, ‘historical’ Jesus in the strict sense of the word. I am convinced [...] that this figure is much more logical and, historically speaking, much more intelligible than the reconstructions we have been presented with in the last decades.” (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword) This idea is repeated in the second and third volumes. In the introduction to his treatment of the Last Supper in the second volume, he writes: “The New Testament message is not simply an idea; essential to it is the fact that these events actually occurred in the history of this world: biblical faith does not recount stories as symbols of meta-historical truths; rather, it bases itself upon history that unfolded upon this earth.” (Ratzinger 2011, ch. 5) And at the beginning of the third volume, he declares: “What Matthew and Luke set out to do, each in his own way, was not to tell ‘stories’ but to write history, real history that had actually happened, admittedly interpreted and understood in the context of the word of God. [...] The infancy narratives are interpreted history, condensed and written down in accordance with the interpretation.” (Ratzinger 2012, ch. 2)

## 2. Historical Reliability of the Gospels

It is unnecessary to say that these considerations aroused a considerable series of reflections, some of them critical. What we intend to discover are the assumptions behind them.

Firstly, it is clear that, in the groove of the whole of the western tradition, Ratzinger distinguishes between history and historiography (Gilbert 2008). The critical view is an essential part of the historical project because whoever is seeking to recount history does not want to be taken for a liar or confused with a simple teller of tales. Right from its beginnings, identified in Herodotus and especially in Thucydides, history has been established in its principles and its foundations with the stamp of criticism. In other words, it goes without saying that the problems presented by texts like the Gospels demand to be understood and explained critically from the historical point of view, that is, by means of an appropriate application of a critical method. What lies at the heart of the debate evoked by Ratzinger is nothing

other than history, history as a reality of theology and the Christian faith in the name of the principle of the incarnation. In fact, if history is set aside, the Christian faith is diminished and another form of religion is created. If history is so important, therefore, and the only way to approach it critically is the historical-critical method why does the latter appear to be insufficient? The problem which is strongly denounced by Ratzinger in the *Foreword* to the first volume, concerns precisely the Jesus of history and the Gospels as historical works and so written by historians. How, then, are we to escape this *impasse*? To take up the words of Schnackenburg, why can we achieve only inadequately a reliable view of the historical figure of Jesus? We believe that the problem does not lie so much in the historical-critical method and its application. The problem lies further back, namely, in the fact that we are dealing with works from antiquity. The historians at the service of the biblical faith are men of their time, like their concepts and historical practice, with all the limitations that we recognise as such today. In other words, the historical project of the evangelists does not coincide with the historical truth as we can reconstruct it today in our time with methods and techniques unknown to the ancients. In this way, the history of Jesus available to us reveals not a few limits: there are areas of shadows and of half-light. Thus, we can hope for further discoveries, we can certainly make progress in our methods of research, and we can refine our epistemological rigour, but it is part of our very condition to be limited also by difficulties in reaching, if not the fullness of historical knowledge, then, at least, a sufficient or satisfactory knowledge. In this way, the exegetes and all the historians of the Bible have simply carried out their work in a rigorous and honourable way obtaining secure results about Jesus, even if these are necessarily minimalist.

In fact, the composition of the Gospels was not inspired by archival interests since they devote no attention to biographical elements (age, physical aspect, anecdotes). That does not mean to say that the evangelists were not interested in the Jesus of history nor that they were unaware of the distance between Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of faith. The single fact that there are different accounts signals the evangelists' awareness of the unique character of those events. In any case, the specific nature of the Gospels is to offer a theological reading of what Jesus did: this is their hermeneutical dimension without which the texts are being interpreted in an irrelevant perspective. However, the identity of the Christ of faith cannot be grasped outside the accounts which bring back to us the life of the man from Nazareth. Christological discourse is established precisely from the starting point of those accounts (the four-fold evangelical attestation). In other words, the knowledge of the living Lord is measured against that very singular past story which is absolutely hard-core. This conforms with the incarnation. However, it is also true that the figure of Jesus escapes historical research in a certain way in the sense that honest historical research, with a critical basis and a rigorous methodology, ends up by saying little about him. Paradoxically, this does not represent a limitation but, rather, an advantage because it prevents any

possible capture by an ideology. Antiquity is full of such captures (one thinks of Gnosticism) but even the present day is not immune to them (Marguerat 2008).

One understands why Ratzinger does not abandon the historical-critical method, on the one hand, and, on the other, integrates it with different approaches: he wishes to write a work that is not so much on the historical Jesus (it would be reduced to a small thing), but on the Jesus of the Gospels. In this connection, it is useless to hide that the great theologian who became pope is well aware of and discusses with great shrewdness the literature (especially the German) up to the nineteen-eighties while he is less informed on the so-called “Third Quest.” As is well known, one of the most significant works in this area, namely, John Paul Meier’s *A Marginal Jew*, opens with a volume completely given over to methodology. Here, precisely in the first pages, he clarifies the distinction between the *real* Jesus (inaccessible, like all the figures in antiquity) and the *historical Jesus* (product of a critical reconstruction) (Meier 1991, 21–40). Ratzinger’s language is markedly different but also less precise to the point of laying himself open to criticism (Deines 2013b, 353–406).

### 3. Ratzinger’s Hermeneutic of History and Hermeneutic of Faith (Luke 10:25–37; 15:11–32; 16:19–31)

A second hermeneutical assumption operating in the three volumes comes from *Dei Verbum*. The Second Vatican Council had emphasised the need to interpret a text taking account of the literary genre and the historical context, but it also declared: “But, since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith.” (DV 12).

In other words, we must combine two kinds of hermeneutic: the historical and that of faith (Gadenz 2019, in particular 83–90). Ratzinger maintains: “this combination of two quite different types of hermeneutic is an art that needs to be constantly remastered. But it can be achieved, and as a result the great insights of patristic exegesis will be able to yield their fruit.” (Ratzinger 2011, Foreword) Thus, the choice is to combine the results of historical-critical exegesis and the great patristic and medieval tradition, so uniting the historical hermeneutic and that of faith.

A relevant example is his analysis of the parables (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7). Presenting three fictitious stories by Jesus in Luke’s Gospel (the parables of the Good Samaritan, of the Merciful Father, of Dives and Lazarus), Ratzinger recalls the great interpretative turning point which took place at the end of the nineteenth century at the hands of Adolf Jülicher who, in his work in two volumes (*Die Gleichnisreden*

*Jesu*, 2 ed., 1910), distinguished clearly between parable and allegory but, above all, defined the parable as an “argumentative mechanism.” Undoubtedly, the great German exegete, whose insights remain fundamental to this day, was a man of his time, a debtor to liberal theology and its presuppositions which today are recognised to be inadequate. Ratzinger also records the teaching of Joachim Jeremias and Charles Harold Dodd, followed by an attempt at a reading according to the assumptions of canonical exegesis. He writes: “Jesus’ disturbing explanation of the point of his parables, then, is the very thing that leads us to their deepest meaning, provided—true to the nature of God’s written word—we read the Bible, and especially the Gospels, as an overall unity expressing an intrinsically coherent message.” (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7) Proceeding with the argument, he ends up saying: “In this sense, the parables manifest the essence of Jesus’ message. In this sense, the mystery of the Cross is inscribed right at the heart of the parables.” (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

### 3.1. Parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Luke 10:25–37)

The example of the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Luke 10:25–37) is a clear application of this double hermeneutic. As is well known, there have been two great readings of this parable (Crimella 2009, in particular 59–133). The first interpretation is that of the patristic tradition: starting from Origen, it reads this fictitious story in an allegorical sense. The great Alexandrine writes: “The priest is the Law, the Levite is the prophetic word, the Samaritan is Christ who took flesh from Mary; the beast is the body of Christ; the wine is his word which instructs and corrects; the oil is the word of philanthropy and mercy or piety; the inn is the Church.”<sup>3</sup> In the school of Origen, Augustine and then many others have repeated, developed and amplified these thoughts, always in the groove of allegory, sometimes even touching on allegoresis.<sup>4</sup> The parable’s second interpretation is the contextual one developed by historical-critical exegesis (Zimmermann 2015, in particular 543–46). The exegete recalls the verisimilitude of the geographical location of the parable (Jerusalem stands at 800 metres while Jericho is in the Great Rift Valley) and the dangerous nature of that road (of which Josephus informs us<sup>5</sup>). Often, the problem of the ritual purity of the priest and Levite in the face of the blood and/or death of the victim is called to mind (Jeremias 1977, in particular 202; Meier 2016, in particular 199–209). Above all, emphasis is placed on the off-putting choice of the hero of the story: a Samaritan, belonging to a schismatic group who were certainly not loved

<sup>3</sup> Origen, *Fragmentum 168 in Lucam* 10–14 (Origenes 1959, 296).

<sup>4</sup> *Allegory* is a rhetorical and poetic technique; *allegoresis* is an exegetical method (Klauck 1978, in particular 354–61; Erlemann 2017, in particular 38–44). Historically there has been no clear distinction between allegory and allegoresis (Fusco 1983, in particular 85–89).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 4,474 (LCL 487, 297): “The country from Jericho to Jerusalem is desert and rocky.”

by the Jews. His attitude, his interior feelings, his choices show a profound concern for the wounded man. Ratzinger comments: "Struck in his soul by the lightning flash of mercy, he himself now becomes a neighbour, heedless of any question or danger. The burden of the question thus shifts here. The issue is no longer which other person is a neighbour to me or not. The question is about me. I have to become the neighbour, and when I do, the other person counts for me 'as myself'" (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7).

Uniting the historical reading and the patristic interpretation produces a hermeneutic which holds together the Christological and the anthropological dimensions. Ratzinger claims: "We can safely ignore the individual details of the allegory, which change from Church Father to Church Father." (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7) However, he then adds: "But the great vision that sees man lying alienated and helpless by the roadside of history and God himself becoming man's neighbour in Jesus Christ is one that we can happily retain, as a deeper dimension of the parable that is of concern to us." (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

It is superfluous to say that the biblical scholar has more than one reservation about this interpretation. In fact, in wishing to combine the two hermeneutics (the historical and the one of faith), it takes the path of allegory. How do we escape from this dilemma? Firstly, I believe that we must take seriously Jülicher's fundamental insight, namely that the parable is an argumentative mechanism (Erlemann 1999, 11–19). In other words, precisely because it is a narrative, the parable provides clues, plays on ambiguities and so sharpens the interest of the readers, inviting them to the intellectually gratifying activity of searching for clues, for the solution to the riddles. Vittorio Fusco, one of the greatest Italian scholars of the parables offers this fitting definition: "The parable is a fictitious story employed as an argumentative-dialogic strategy which operates in two stages: first, on the basis of the internal logic of the story, stimulating a certain valuation and then, by virtue of the analogy of structure, transferring it to the reality intended by the parabolist." (Fusco 1991, 1085) The parables, that is, do not contain the *kerygma*, but refer to it. Through the parables, Jesus really enters into dialogue with people. He does not repeat the call to faith to them but proposes to their intelligence something on which to reflect. They represent only a stretch of the road which can lead as far as the threshold of the announcement which remains intact in its fragility, almost in its nudity. In this sense, the parables are the "frontier" of the gospel, the place where the gospel enters into dialogue with people. The parable is not the salvific event but refers to it (Fusco 1983, 165).

In particular, with regard to the parable of the Good Samaritan, I believe that it is possible to escape from the *impasse* between the two hermeneutics by taking seriously the fact that the fictitious story is an argumentative mechanism. Moreover, by applying the criteria of narrative analysis, it is possible to ask: from what point of view did Jesus tell this parable? Perhaps from that of the Samaritan? Certainly not.



His point of view is that of the wounded man (Marguerat 2012, in particular 206–9). In other words: everything happens through the eyes of the victim. That is, the parable is not pointing to the exemplary nature of the Samaritan but is seeking to bring the hearer (and the reader) into the skin of the victim, not the traumatic but splendid experience of this man without a face and without a name. Some clues indicate that this is precisely the strategy. First clue: the man attacked by the brigands has no identity; he is without a name and without a description. That is, he is a member of the human race. Such an open identity can only facilitate his identification with the reader. Second clue: the priest and the Levite pass by without stopping. Why? The narrator does not give a single reason. Why this silence? Because the point of view adopted by the narrator is that of the wounded man, and the story reveals only what he can know. The victim observes only that the priest and the Levite (recognisable by their dress) are not concerned about him. The wounded man makes only this bitter observation without being able to explain it because he is a victim! Third clue: the parable abounds in details only when they are available to the traveller; and that man knows well what the Samaritan has done for him. The details are precise: oil and wine on the wounds, beasts, inn, money. In short: the reader sees through the eyes of the victim. Fourth clue: the final question that Jesus puts to the doctor of the Law: “Which of these three seems to you to have been the neighbour of the one who fell among the thieves”? (Luke 10:36), is the key to understanding from what point of view the parable is being told. In fact, it is enquiring about the identity of the neighbour no longer from the point of the donor (that was the perspective of the doctor of the Law) but from that of the beneficiary. The status of the neighbour is decided from the point of view of the wretched situation of a victim, not from a theoretical definition. To enable the reader to grasp the reversal of the question about the neighbour a story was needed which made the reader enter into the skin of a human being in that desperate condition. It is the point of view adopted by the parabolist which provokes in the reader the reversal of perspective. In the end, like the doctor of the Law, he can only respond with what is evident: when I am put in a state of need, whatever my identity, I expect that another will recognise himself as my neighbour.

In the face of this reading, which completely avoids allegory and values the point of view from which the parable is told, the consequences are enormous whether in the anthropological or the Christological and theological perspectives. The reasoning which the parable has led the hearers-readers to carry out brings them to draw a conclusion which certainly recovers the whole of the history of salvation and is open to that salvific announcement which the same Gospel of Luke is preserving and proclaiming.

### 3.2. Parable of the Prodigal Son (cf. Luke 15:11–32)

The comment on the parable of the Prodigal Son (cf. Luke 15:11–32) has a strongly actualising, almost homiletic character. In connection with the sudden brutalisation of the younger son who is reduced to being a swineherd, Ratzinger claims:

Those who understand freedom as the radically arbitrary license to do just what they want and to have their own way are living in a lie, for by his very nature man is part of a shared existence and his freedom is shared freedom. His very nature contains direction and norm, and becoming inwardly one with this direction and norm is what freedom is all about. A false autonomy thus leads to slavery: In the meantime history has taught us this all too clearly. (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

Also, with regard to the great turning point in the narrative, the moment when the younger son becomes aware of the difference between his own condition and that of his father's hired servants, Ratzinger comments:

His change of heart, his “conversion,” consists in his recognition of this, his realization that he has become alienated and wandered into truly “alien lands,” and his return to himself. What he finds in himself, though, is the compass pointing toward the father, toward the true freedom of a “son.” The speech he prepares for his homecoming reveals to us the full extent of the inner pilgrimage he is now making. (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

Hints at the Fathers and their exegesis are not lacking. For example, in connection with the father's embrace and the orders he gives to the servants on behalf of the prodigal, Ratzinger writes:

The lost son they take as an image of man as such, of “Adam,” who all of us are—of Adam whom God has gone out to meet and whom he has received anew into his house. In the parable, the father orders the servants to bring quickly “the first robe.” For the Fathers, this ‘first robe’ is a reference to the lost robe of grace with which man had been originally clothed, but which he forfeited by sin. But now this “first robe” is given back to him—the robe of the son. The feast that is now made ready they read as an image of the feast of faith, the festive Eucharist, in which the eternal festal banquet is anticipated. (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

So, in order to resolve the dialectical tension between the historical hermeneutic and the hermeneutic of faith, Ratzinger takes the road of allegory. Here, the biblical scholar entertains more than one doubt. I do not intend to explain here all the details of this rich Lucan parable but simply to restate a fundamental hermeneutical principle, namely, the argumentative character of the parable

(Ostmeyer 2015). It is possible to read in a way that prescind from all kinds of allegory but values the mechanism of the story, that is, the linear nature of the reading process, and so the gradual and layered hermeneutic of the reader who gathers one element after the other. Following this pattern strictly, that is, valuing the fictitious account, the father of the parable is not the Father of Jesus just as the younger son is not the sinner, and so on.

A rigorous narrative reading indicates at least two fundamental aspects (Fusco 2003). First, the expression with which the narrator introduces the young man's dialogue with himself (cf. Luke 15:17) does not represent a conversion. A careful analysis shows that this signifies only "looking at himself within, becoming aware of something," without reference to an axiological or religious change (Wolter 2008, in particular 533–34). Also, on close examination, the words that the words he speaks to himself (cf. Luke 15:18) do not represent a conversion (Aletti 2022, in particular 458); on the contrary, they are the sign of a crafty and base calculation. Through a statement that is manifestly manipulative, while the younger son declares the loss of his own filial dignity, in reality, he is aiming to convince his parent to make the choice which appears to him as the most advantageous solution. In other words, his admission of fault is simply made to serve his subsequent request. In fact, he evokes his particular condition with the aim of establishing a new relationship with his father, no longer characterised by the relation of sonship but rather by the purely economic criteria of hired service (Aletti 1998, in particular 236). The conclusion of his statement even has the form of a formal notice: he will no longer be a son but a hired workman. Undoubtedly, the leap here is profound, but – and it is good to recall it – from the youth's point of view, it is a gain. In fact, if as son he can no longer assert his rights, the status of hired worker will at least be able to assure him of his daily bread. The psychological aspect of the relationship is ignored. The father is reduced to the role of potential employer, exactly like the owner of the pigs, with the unique difference that he is able to offer conditions that are economically advantageous. In other words, the younger son would like to transform his relationship with his father into a relationship of subjection by desiring that his parent take on the role of his employer.

Secondly, the reaction and the words of the elder son are to be assessed carefully (cf. Luke 15:29b–30) (Crimella 2009, in particular 304–14). The strength of his protest is entirely played out on the double parallelism between what he has done for his father (by contrast with the younger one) and what the father has done for the younger son (and not for him). The first contrast is played out on the temporal dimension: the older son has worked for numerous years whereas the younger one has simply reappeared like that after a prolonged absence. Then, there is a second contrast of an axiological type; the older son has served his father faithfully and with devotion without disobeying a single order; the prodigal, on the other hand, has wasted the family fortune, even destroying the very life of his father. A third

contrast is bound up with the relationships: one son hangs out with friends with whom he would like to have organised a party; the other consorts with prostitutes. The fourth contrast is economic and emerges from a comparison of the animals: the kid is a small beast, quite common and cheap; the fatted calf, on the other hand, is a valuable animal, kept for great occasions. The fifth contrast sheds light on the father's actions whose symbolic value is undoubted: on the one hand, he has never given even a small gift to the elder boy; on the other hand, he has had the fatted calf slaughtered to celebrate the return of the younger one. The extremely severe judgement on the father is tacit and not at all explicit. The older son limits himself to citing incontrovertible facts (Aletti 2022, in particular 461–64): no one can contest his devotion, and the parent (accused so directly) can certainly not deny the claims of the older son. Moreover, the picture of the younger one is not far from reality although harsh and, in a certain sense, a caricature. Then, the slaughter of the calf is a fact under the eyes of all. However, it is the links between the different facts which oblige the hearers/readers to draw precise consequences, and these all concern none other than the father. The speech of the elder son has shown what he has in mind. Everything is built on a relationship with the father in terms of giving-having, service-reward: he has given so much to his father and has the right to receive; the other has not given anything, therefore he ought to receive nothing. That is, the elder will reprove his parent's behaviour for subverting the principle of retributive justice according to which the just must be rewarded and the wicked punished. Such an accusation shows that the older brother has lived his relationship with his father precisely according to this principle, and now, in the face of the manifestation of a radically different logic, it seems to him that the world is crumbling. It follows that, although his existence is different from that of the younger brother (he stays at home, works and is dutiful), he nevertheless lives the relationship with his parent in terms that are purely retributive. All those years at home have not enabled him to escape from the interpretative pattern of a servile relationship, bound up, that is, with service and reward. However, between this view, entirely focused on the relationship of exchange, and the economic one of the younger son, there is not a great difference.

In other words, Luke's subtle narrative skill intends to present the two brothers as two drops of water: if the younger loses himself outside by leaving the home (like the sheep of the first parable [cf. Luke 15:4–7]), the older loses himself inside (like the coin in the second parable [cf. Luke 15:8–10]); that is, both lose themselves but, above all, both have a relationship with their father that is only of a "commercial" type, bound up with giving and having, with the best return possible, without any affective bond with the parent.

If this is the argumentative mechanism of the parable, what consequence does the reader draw from it?

To justify his reading, which combines the historical hermeneutic with that of faith, Ratzinger asks: "For the Christian, the question now arises: Where does Jesus

Christ fit into all this? Only the Father figures in the parable. Is there no Christology in it?” (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7) He resolves the question with a reference to Augustine who declares: “The arm of the Father is the Son” (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7), and he concludes: “Attention to the historical context of the parable thus yields by itself an ‘implicit Christology.’” (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

Once again, the biblical scholar finds himself in difficulty inasmuch as the Christological reading of the parable is the result of an allegorical procedure which is inappropriate from the methodological point of view. On closer examination, however, the text itself contains an expression which combines the parable and the macro-account, providing the interpretative key to the fictitious narrative. It is the father’s final response to the elder son: “But it is necessary to celebrate and rejoice for this your brother was dead and has returned to life, was lost and has been found!” (Luke 15:32). The key word is *dei* (“it is necessary”) (Crimella 2009, in particular 319–21). This is a word which, in Luke, indicates the necessity of the passion of Jesus (as can be inferred from Luke 9:22; 13:33). Thus, the reference to necessity does not pass unobserved, above all in the final *sententia* of the fictitious story. If, that is, Jesus’ itinerary, passing through the necessity of the passion, has no other explanation than his love that is faithful to the very end, so too the case of the passionate love of the father of the parable. In the one as in the other, there is unquestionably something of the “extravagant,” something, namely, that escapes human logic: but both the parable and the gospel story intend to reveal exactly the logic of God in Jesus. In this sense, the way of Jesus illuminates the parable and is illuminated by it.

### 3.3. Parable of the Rich Reveller and Poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31)

The third parable considered by Benedict XVI is that of the rich reveller and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) (Leonhardt-Balzer 2015; Szredka 2019). Again, Ratzinger’s theological reading arrives at the Christological nucleus. He writes:

Do we not recognize in the figure of Lazarus—lying at the rich man’s door covered in sores – the mystery of Jesus, who “suffered outside the city walls” (Heb 13:12) and, stretched naked on the Cross, was delivered over to the mockery and contempt of the mob, his body “full of blood and wounds”? [...] He, the true Lazarus, *has* risen from the dead – and he has come to tell us so. If we see in the story of Lazarus Jesus’ answer to his generation’s demand for a sign, we find ourselves in harmony with the principal answer that Jesus gave to that demand. (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

We find a profound irony in this parable (Bock 1997). In fact, what Abraham refuses to permit the rich man’s brothers, the parable provides for its readers. What is not permitted in the story is actually procured by the story: hence the irony. The brothers are not allowed to know what happens in the afterlife. However, the audience and

the reader are offered knowledge of the world after death precisely through this parable. They hear the cry from beyond the grave and the information of the patriarch as a warning which calls on them to take a logical and consistent decision in the here and now.

The patriarch Abraham reveals to the rich man and the reader the point of view of God, and it is precisely this revelation that appears to be the surprise of the parable (Lehtipuu 1999, in particular 97–100). Against every request for extraordinary signs from the afterlife, the patriarch refers to the only sign available in the here and now, namely, the Law and the prophets. In obedient listening to the revelation of God attested in the Scriptures that were given to the people of Israel is found the truth to be sons of Abraham, a truth which wealth had hidden from the eyes of the rich man who was blind before poor Lazarus. In brief, the Law and the prophets teach how to relate to wealth and the poor, thus enabling the heart to open to the newness of Jesus' revelation.

However, there is also an even more subtle effect (Erlemann 1999, in particular 240–50; Crimella 2009, in particular 423–24). If the resurrection from the dead assumes a clear Easter significance, there is a second ironical swerve: what Abraham refuses to do, God has done in Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is much more than a return from the dead to offer a warning to the living; it cannot even be compared with those resuscitations attested in the Old Testament and performed by Jesus himself as signs. That is, the readers, therefore, come to find themselves in a situation exactly opposite to that of the brothers. They reject Moses and the prophets and would not let themselves be persuaded even by the revivification of someone from the dead. The readers, on the other hand, are moulded by the very same evangelical account to obey the Scripture of Israel and grasp its central fulcrum in the mystery of Jesus' resurrection. In other words, if the brothers (and the audience) had the Scriptures of Israel, the reader has much more baggage, enlarged by what the gospel account is transmitting to him. That is why the patriarch's appeal resonates with still greater urgency in their ears, namely, as an urgent call to conversion.

So then, Ratzinger's interpretation of the Lucan parables opens up the way to a wide discussion which enables us to grasp the infinite riches of the fictitious stories of Jesus, riches which do not cease to amaze every reader of the Gospel. The examples we have considered show that the historical-critical method, which is absolutely necessary, has not managed to elaborate a satisfactory interpretation of Jesus' parables. One thus understands Ratzinger's embarrassment and his recovery of the patristic categories. In our opinion, the philosophical studies of Paul Ricoeur on symbolic and parabolic language, the lucid contributions of Jacques Dupont (1977) and the fundamental output of Vittorio Fusco (1983) have brought about a notable step in the interpretation of the parables, a step which combines the two hermeneutics evoked by Ratzinger, that of history and that of faith, with an insistence on the argumentative mechanism.

#### 4. Third Ratzinger's Hermeneutical Presupposition

Finally, we shall offer a simple mention of a third hermeneutical presupposition. Ratzinger claims: "The saints are the true interpreters of Holy Scripture. The meaning of a given passage of the Bible becomes most intelligible in those human beings who have been totally transfixed by it and have lived it out. Interpretation of Scripture can never be a purely academic affair, and it cannot be relegated to the purely historical." (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 4) This is an idea very dear to the theologian who became pope. As Pontiff, he took it up again in *Verbum Domini* where he affirms: "The interpretation of sacred Scripture would remain incomplete were it not to include listening to *those who have truly lived the word of God: namely, the saints.*" (VD 48) In the first volume of the trilogy, Ratzinger interprets the first beatitude by means of the example of St Francis of Assisi, while, in *Verbum Domini*, he comments on the call of the rich young man by referring to the desert Father, Anthony of Egypt, whose life is told by St Athanasius.

The principle is well known and widespread in the life of the Church. The saints are those who have lived a personal and intense following of the Lord, thus carrying out an exemplary listening to the Word of God, and, precisely for this reason are held out a model for believers. On second thoughts, this third principle is a development of the previous one, namely, the combination of the hermeneutic of faith with that of history with reference to the holy people of God.

#### Conclusions

In conclusion, we must recognise that Ratzinger's undertaking was a cultural and ecclesial event which had the merit of focusing the attention strongly on Jesus. The absolutely singular nature of the author (certainly the famous and revered theologian, Joseph Ratzinger, but also the then-reigning Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church, Benedict XVI) led to a maelstrom of debates, thus allowing a concentration on the figure of Jesus albeit to differing degrees and with opposing results.

Writing in *La Civiltà Cattolica* a review of the first volume, the then Archbishop Emeritus of Milan, Carlo Maria Martini, put it like this: "This book is, therefore, a passionate testimony of a great scholar — who today also has a place at the highest level of the Catholic Church — to Jesus of Nazareth and his significance for the history of humanity and for the perception of the true figure of God." (Martini 2007, in particular 536)



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# “La parola di Dio è il fondamento di tutto”<sup>1</sup>. Esegesi storico-critica ed ermeneutica teologica secondo Joseph Ratzinger – Benedetto XVI

“The word of God is the foundation of everything.” Historical-Critical Exegesis  
and Theological Hermeneutics of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI

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**Riassunto:** La riflessione ratzingeriana sull'ermeneutica biblica può essere affrontata con diversi approcci; se ne richiamano tre: un approccio ironico, uno di taglio biografico e un altro di tipo contenutistico. L'approccio qui privilegiato è il terzo e l'attenzione si concentra sul confronto, più volte ripreso e svolto da Ratzinger, fra il metodo storico-critico e l'esigenza di una sua integrazione con la dimensione più specificamente teologica dell'esegesi. In diverse occasioni, Ratzinger traccia una “storia degli effetti” del metodo storico attenta anche ai suoi aspetti problematici. Alla luce di tale storia, il metodo storico-critico, che rimane comunque imprescindibile, risulta anche insufficiente. Un'attenta considerazione dei suoi limiti spinge verso una “autocritica del metodo”, una “critica della critica”, che evidenzia il tipo di rapporto fede-ragione implicato e i presupposti filosofici (la svolta filosofica compiuta da Kant). Il ripensamento dell'ermeneutica biblica nell'integralità delle sue dimensioni (sul filo di quanto proposto nel n. 12 della *Dei Verbum*) chiede un'adeguata considerazione dello spessore specificamente teologico della stessa. Tale considerazione comporta, tra l'altro, attenzione al legame della Scrittura con la Tradizione e al suo rapporto con la Chiesa. In conclusione, vengono indicate tre direzioni di ricerca, all'interno della teologia di Ratzinger e al di là dei suoi confini, per riprendere, prolungare e approfondire qualche spunto emerso dalla riflessione ratzingeriana sulla problematica in questione.

**Parole chiave:** Benedetto XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, esegesi e ermeneutica, metodo storico-critico, esegesi canonica, esegesi teologica

**Abstract:** Ratzinger's reflections on biblical hermeneutics can be studied using different approaches. Three are the main ones: the ironical approach, a biographical one and, finally, a content-based one. Here, we will focus on the third approach, examining Ratzinger's frequent comparison of the historical-critical method with the need to integrate it with a more specifically theological dimension of exegesis. Ratzinger has on several occasions traced a “history of the effects” of the historical method, also paying attention to its problematic aspects. In light of this history, the historical-critical method, while still indispensable, also proves to be insufficient. A careful consideration of its limits pushes towards a “self-critique of the method,” a “criticism of criticism,” that highlights the faith-reason relationship implied and its philosophical presuppositions (the philosophical shift introduced by Kant). Rethinking biblical hermeneutics in the entirety of its dimensions (along the lines of what is proposed in *Dei Verbum*,

<sup>1</sup> “La Parola di Dio è il fondamento di tutto, è la vera realtà. E per essere realisti, dobbiamo proprio contare su questa realtà. Dobbiamo cambiare la nostra idea che la materia, le cose solide, da toccare, sarebbero la realtà più solida, più sicura. [...] Quindi dobbiamo cambiare il nostro concetto di realismo. Realista è chi riconosce nella Parola di Dio, in questa realtà apparentemente così debole, il fondamento di tutto. Realista è chi costruisce la sua vita su questo fondamento che rimane in permanenza” (Benedetto XVI 2008b).

no. 12) requires an adequate consideration of the properly theological depth of Scripture itself. This consideration involves, among other things, attention to the link between Scripture and Tradition and its relationship to the Church. In conclusion, three directions of research are indicated within Ratzinger's theology and beyond its borders, in order to resume, extend and deepen some ideas that emerged from Ratzinger's reflection on the problem in question.

**Keywords:** Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, exegesis and hermeneutics, historical-critical method, canonical exegesis, theological exegesis

Prima che oggetto specifico di studio, la lettura della Scrittura, come leggere la Scrittura, risulta essere, per quanto riguarda Joseph Ratzinger, un elemento centrale della propria esperienza di fede (“Naturalmente, come è giusto, sono uno zelante lettore delle Sacre Scritture”: Ratzinger and Seewald 2001, 237) e per l'insieme della sua riflessione teologica (“Per me l'esegesi è sempre rimasta il centro del mio lavoro teologico”: Ratzinger 1997, 53). Un aspetto, insomma, che non ha nulla di settoriale e periferico.

All'interno di questo largo orizzonte, il nostro intervento fa riferimento alla specifica riflessione ratzingeriana su esegesi ed ermeneutica, concentrandosi, con intento anzitutto ricostruttivo prima che di approfondimento critico, su un tema più puntuale benché ampio. Il filo conduttore è infatti offerto dalla questione del rapporto fra metodo storico-critico ed ermeneutica teologica, una questione ripresa dal Nostro in diverse occasioni. Da un lato, la ricerca storico-critica è necessaria perché è il realismo stesso dell'avvenimento a esigerla; bisogna però riconoscerne i limiti e deve essere indagata – con un processo di profonda “autocritica” – nei suoi presupposti filosofici e nel modello del rapporto fede-ragione che sottende. Dall'altro, la dimensione teologica dell'ermeneutica vuole essere compresa in connessione con l'insostituibile compito della Tradizione e della Chiesa in ordine alla comprensione delle Scritture e, più in generale, con l'esperienza della fede<sup>2</sup>.

## 1. Quale approccio?

Gli inizi possibili sono sempre molti. Non infiniti, ma molti. Per affrontare l'insegnamento e l'eredità di Joseph Ratzinger quanto alla lettura della Scrittura, è possibile suggerirne almeno tre, è possibile cioè indicare almeno un triplice approccio.

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<sup>2</sup> Detto lo scopo e indicati i limiti del nostro intervento, segnaliamo, come primo riferimento, solo alcuni brevi testi della letteratura secondaria su Ratzinger in lingua italiana, testi che possono introdurre ai temi trattati: Ghiberti 2007; Grech 2007; Bellandi 2009; Sgubbi 2015; Carrai 2023; Gagliardi 2023.

### 1.1. La Scrittura come trappola

Un approccio ironico, che vorrebbe mettere in guardia da un ingenuo (o meno ingenuo) "biblicismo", può far riferimento a quei passi in cui Ratzinger ricorda che anche il diavolo è un fine esegeta, come del resto – con riferimento al famoso racconto di Soloviev (*Il racconto dell'Anticristo*) – lo è l'Anticristo: "L'Anticristo, celebre esegeta! Con questo paradosso, Soloviev – circa cent'anni fa – ha messo in luce l'ambivalenza che caratterizza la metodologia dell'esegesi biblica moderna" (Ratzinger 1991, 93).

Ci si può riferire, in specie, al commento alle tentazioni di Gesù, in particolare alla seconda, nell'ordine di Matteo (Mt 4,1–11, in particolare vv. 5–7: "Se sei Figlio di Dio, gettati giù") (cfr. GN I, 47–68 e anche Ratzinger 2004b). Il colloquio della seconda tentazione appare infatti come un dibattito tra teologi esperti della Scrittura: "per attirare Gesù nella sua trappola il diavolo cita la Sacra Scrittura" (GN I, 57), in particolare il Salmo 91,11–12, rivelandosi quale valente conoscitore della Scrittura stessa. Da ciò non si può trarre, ovviamente, una squalifica *in toto* della Scrittura, si può però ricavare un serio monito in ordine a un'autentica lettura della stessa: "Non si tratta di un no all'interpretazione scientifica della Bibbia in quanto tale, bensì di un avvertimento massimamente salutare e necessario di fronte alle strade sbagliate che essa può prendere. L'interpretazione della Bibbia può effettivamente diventare uno strumento dell'Anticristo. [...] I peggiori libri distruttori della fede sono intessuti di presunti risultati dell'esegesi" (GN I, 57).

La questione è decisiva, è in gioco l'essenziale: "La disputa teologica tra Gesù e il diavolo è una disputa che riguarda ogni epoca e ha come oggetto la corretta interpretazione biblica, la cui domanda ermeneutica fondamentale è la domanda circa l'immagine di Dio. La disputa sull'interpretazione è in ultima istanza una discussione su chi è Dio" (GN I, 58–59).

### 1.2. Il sogno di una star

Il secondo possibile approccio è di taglio biografico. Aprendo il suo intervento sul rapporto fra Magistero ed esegesi, nella Giornata Celebrativa per il 100° anniversario della Pontificia Commissione Biblica, Ratzinger afferma: "Non ho scelto il tema della mia relazione solo perché fa parte delle questioni che di diritto appartengono a una retrospettiva sui 100 anni della Pontificia Commissione Biblica, ma perché rientra, per così dire, anche nei problemi della mia biografia: da più di mezzo secolo il mio percorso teologico personale si muove entro l'ambito determinato da questo tema" (Ratzinger 2003, 50).

Proseguendo l'intervento, Ratzinger apre una finestra sulla formazione teologica ricevuta, soffermandosi in particolare su Friedrich Wilhelm Maier, professore di esegesi del Nuovo Testamento, suo insegnante presso la facoltà di Monaco: "indiscutibilmente, la *star* della facoltà" (Ratzinger 1997, 51; cfr. Ratzinger 2003, 51–58).

e anche Ratzinger 1997, 51–53). Il percorso di Maier risulta abbastanza inusuale. Era stato infatti sospeso da Roma dall'insegnamento (*"Recedat a cathedra"*), nel 1912, per aver sostenuto, in un commento ai Sinottici, la cosiddetta teoria delle due fonti, considerata oggi ancora la più convincente per quanto riguarda la formazione dei Sinottici. Questa vicenda generò in lui una ferita mai del tutto guarita con una conseguente amarezza. Ciò che egli auspicava era una completa libertà dell'esegesi, con l'assolutizzazione del metodo storico, metodo attendibile e inequivocabile: una libertà, che, ormai alla fine del suo insegnamento, non riteneva ancora raggiunta. Come Mosè sul Monte Nebo, Maier poteva però almeno gettare uno sguardo sulla Terra Promessa.

Riprendendo questa immagine, Ratzinger si chiede: "Che cosa potrebbe percepire uno sguardo storico gettato dal Nebo sulla terra dell'esegesi degli ultimi cinquant'anni?" (Ratzinger 2003, 53); "Il sogno dunque si è avverato?" (Ratzinger 2003, 55). Il sogno è stato tradotto in realtà, ma è stato anche corretto. Il Magistero, nei primi cinquant'anni della Commissione Biblica, ha probabilmente allargato troppo l'ambito delle certezze che la fede può garantire in merito all'interpretazione della Scrittura, ma rimane il fatto che la fede, e dunque i pastori, ha da dire al riguardo una sua parola. "La mera oggettività del metodo storico non esiste" (Ratzinger 2003, 55). La perorazione di Maier per un'esegesi puramente storica, irricevibile nella sua radicalità, suona ancora come una provocazione su cui lavorare. Rimane da comprendere fin dove si estenda la dimensione puramente storica della Bibbia e dove cominci la sua specificità, che sfugge alla mera razionalità storica. E, per fare questo, è necessario rimettere a fuoco il rapporto tra ragione e fede e capire meglio il legame fra fede e storia.

Nel suo sguardo retrospettivo sull'insegnamento di Maier, Ratzinger coglie anche il limite complessivo di una posizione che, in estrema sintesi, cercava un equilibrio tra liberalismo e dogma. Ciò non impedisce però la sottolineatura di aspetti positivi e dunque una riconoscente gratitudine:

Per me l'esegesi è sempre rimasta il centro del mio lavoro teologico. È merito di Maier se da noi la Sacra Scrittura era diventata «l'anima del nostro studio teologico», come esige il Concilio Vaticano II. Anche se, personalmente, col passar del tempo percepivo sempre più i limiti dell'impostazione di Maier, che non era in grado di cogliere tutta la profondità della figura di Cristo, tuttavia quel che io udii e appresi sistematicamente da lui resta per me fondamentale (Ratzinger 1997, 53).

Seguendo l'approccio biografico al nostro tema, il confronto con Maier risulta essere probabilmente un passaggio fondamentale nella maturazione della questione della lettura della Scrittura in Ratzinger. All'interno di tale confronto, emerge infatti il nodo chiave del rapporto fra metodo storico ed esegesi credente, punto chiave per lo sviluppo della riflessione ratzingeriana. Come scrive Giuseppe Ghiberti:

In diverse occasioni Ratzinger ritornerà sulla vicenda personale di Maier, che rappresenta per lui un caso paradigmatico e un fatto emblematico. Si intravedono, anche se non ancora esplicitati, i termini di una problematica che entra subito nell'orizzonte del giovane studioso e non lo abbandonerà più: la convivenza e la cooperazione tra la ricerca storica e il cammino del credente nella Chiesa. Più ampiamente ancora, il travaglio per una adeguata penetrazione del testo biblico, corrispondente alla natura del destinatario e del Rivellatore (Ghiberti 2007, 47).

### **1.3. Una nuova era e un profondo fossato: il metodo storico-critico**

Il terzo approccio che possiamo suggerire, e che privilegeremo, è di tipo contenutistico e chiama in causa quello che è – probabilmente – l'oggetto primo della riflessione ratzingeriana sulla lettura della Scrittura: il confronto con il metodo storico-critico e l'esigenza di una sua integrazione/composizione con la dimensione propriamente teologica dell'esegesi.

## **2. Il metodo storico-critico: storia degli effetti**

Il confronto con il metodo storico-critico offre un robusto filo d'Arianna per inoltrarsi nella ricerca di Ratzinger sulla questione dell'ermeneutica biblica nel suo insieme. Egli si sofferma, in diverse occasioni, sulla storia del metodo, mettendone a fuoco conseguenze e presupposti. È una "storia degli effetti", almeno quella schizzata da Ratzinger, che non ignora ombre e aspetti problematici: egli non teme infatti di sostare anche sulla crisi del metodo storico-critico, che pure si era inizialmente affermato in un clima di grande ottimismo. Questo metodo prometteva infatti la liberazione dal dogma e il conseguimento di una piena obiettività. Gli sviluppi successivi hanno però portato a esiti diversi: "a poco, a poco, il quadro veniva facendosi sempre più intricato: le teorie si moltiplicavano; si susseguivano le une alle altre e formavano una barriera che impediva ai non iniziati di accedere alla Bibbia. E d'altronde gli iniziati stessi non leggevano più la Bibbia, ma ne facevano piuttosto una dissezione per giungere agli elementi a partire dai quali essa sarebbe stata composta" (Ratzinger 1991, 94).

In questa citazione, tratta dalla pagina iniziale della famosa conferenza di New York (1988)<sup>3</sup>, c'è l'indicazione di due effetti indesiderati, che testimoniano una sorta di eterogenesi dei fini: il metodo che prometteva una lettura obiettiva del testo finisce

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<sup>3</sup> Il testo, pronunciato per la prima volta il 27 gennaio 1988, è certamente uno dei maggiori contributi esplicitamente dedicati al nostro tema da Joseph Ratzinger: cfr. Gagliardi 2023, 87. Una sintesi di questo "discorso programmatico" è offerta da Prosper Grech; Grech avanza anche qualche proposta che sembra capace di prolungare la prospettiva in esso delineata: cfr. Grech 2007.



con l'impedire un reale accostamento allo stesso, nella forma di una barriera oppure di un ripiegamento del testo su se stesso. Raccogliamo l'indicazione, per soffermarci poi sull'esito drammatico e problematico, per la fede, del percorso storico-critico nel suo insieme e sulle possibilità, praticabili e impraticabili, per uscire dall'*impasse* che si è determinata.

## 2.1. L'effetto siepe

Una prima possibile conseguenza del metodo storico-critico si ha quando le sue diverse versioni e le sue complesse articolazioni finiscono con il costituire un ostacolo, una barriera che impedisce ai "non iniziati" di accostarsi al testo. Come scrive Giuseppe Angelini: "Le forme assunte dalla ricerca di carattere analitico [...] minacciano di produrre questo esito sconveniente, di sottrarre il testo biblico, non soltanto all'arbitrio dell'allegoresi di letture soggettive suggerite da non verificate intenzioni 'attualizzanti', ma anche alla meditazione edificante e più radicalmente alla competenza della fede" (Angelini 1998, XVIII).

Si può sinteticamente parlare, sempre secondo Angelini, di "effetto siepe", quello per cui "la sofisticata ricerca biblica di carattere specialistico alimenta nel non addetto ai lavori la persuasione di non poter leggere personalmente il testo biblico, ma di doversi affidare appunto ai 'risultati' prodotti dalla ricerca di carattere specialistico" (Angelini 1998, XVIII).

Fra i "non addetti ai lavori" si possono comprendere i semplici credenti, ma anche i pastori e gli stessi teologi. L'"effetto siepe" fotografa un risultato problematico e segnala un percorso da rivedere e verificare.

## 2.2. La dissezione del testo

C'è poi una forma di attenzione al testo, che procede a una sua raffinata dissezione analitica, ma finisce col "dimenticare" il contenuto dello stesso. Questa è un'altra possibile deriva. Così il testo, in un certo senso, si ripiega su di sé e non apre più a un contenuto.

Nel campo degli studi biblici, si è in tal modo determinata una situazione molto simile a quella descritta da Tzvetan Todorov a proposito degli studi letterari: il mezzo sostituisce il fine; il metodo fa dimenticare il contenuto; la lettura dei critici sostituisce quella del testo. Ci riferiamo ad alcune sue puntuali osservazioni circa lo studio e l'insegnamento della letteratura (cfr. Todorov 2008)<sup>4</sup>. L'Autore segnala, al riguardo, il rischio di una preoccupante e, a lungo andare, esiziale inversione fra strumento

<sup>4</sup> Le posizioni espresse da Todorov in questo scritto risultano ancor più significative alla luce dell'itinerario intellettuale dell'Autore, considerato uno dei protagonisti di quella stagione strutturalista che ha contribuito in qualche modo a diffondere l'approccio alla letteratura che qui viene stigmatizzato.

e fine. Todorov ricorda che l'obiettivo primo dello studio della letteratura è quello di farci pervenire al significato delle opere, perché tale significato aiuta a comprendere l'uomo e il mondo, la realtà tutta. "La realtà che la letteratura vuole conoscere – scrive il nostro Autore – è semplicemente (ma, al tempo stesso, non vi è nulla di più complesso) l'esperienza umana" (Todorov 2008, 66) e, proprio per questo, essa può sostenere la *nostra* esperienza umana: "quando mi chiedo perché amo la letteratura – chiosa Todorov –, mi viene spontaneo rispondere: perché mi aiuta a vivere. [...] Al di là dell'essere un semplice piacere, una distrazione riservata alle persone colte, la letteratura permette a ciascuno di rispondere alla propria vocazione di essere umano" (Todorov 2008, 16–17)<sup>5</sup>.

Questa prospettiva è stata però messa in ombra e pericolosamente compromessa da una teoria della letteratura che ha privilegiato e (quasi) assolutizzato una preoccupazione di tipo "formale", lo studio cioè delle tecniche e degli strumenti in azione nel testo (stile, composizione, tecniche narrative, etc.). Così, ora, "gli studi letterari hanno lo scopo principale di farci conoscere gli strumenti di cui si servono. [...] A scuola non si apprende che cosa dicono le opere, ma che cosa dicono i critici" (Todorov 2008, 20). La letteratura comincia ad occuparsi di sé, fino a chiudersi claustrofobicamente in se stessa. Ricollocare al centro dell'approccio all'opera il significato dell'opera stessa non significa ovviamente negare valore alla dimensione metodologica e formale, ma ricomprenderne l'autentico significato e il fine.

### 2.3. A cosa serve una finestra?

Un'annotazione in piena sintonia con quanto appena ricordato è offerta, con specifico riferimento all'ambito teologico, da Giacomo Biffi, in una sua riflessione sullo stato della teologia (cfr. Biffi 1989). In questo saggio, l'Autore indica due posizioni antitetiche quanto al sapere (teologico) (v., in particolare, Biffi 1989, 20–23). La prima di esse è ben sintetizzata dal noto adagio tomista: "*actus credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile sed ad rem*"<sup>6</sup>. L'atto di fede non può dunque arrestarsi prima di raggiungere la sua *res* e la teologia non potrà che riferirsi a questa *res*. Non bastano dunque al cristianesimo una "verità ermeneutica" che non attinga al proprio "oggetto" e una teologia ridotta a "regolatore" del linguaggio. La prospettiva opposta è definita da Biffi – con riferimento alla distinzione operata da Immanuel Kant fra "noumeno" (inconoscibile) e "fenomeno" (oggetto dell'intelletto dell'uomo) – come "kantismo" inconsapevole, un'espressione che indica un pericolo che sembra incombere sull'odierna riflessione teologica. Si cade in questo pericolo, quando la *res* della fede

<sup>5</sup> "La letteratura può molto. Può tenderci la mano quando siamo profondamente depressi, condurci verso gli esseri umani che ci circondano, farci comprendere meglio il mondo e aiutarci a vivere. Non vuole essere un modo per curare lo spirito; tuttavia, come rivelazione del mondo, può anche, cammin facendo, trasformarci nel profondo" (Todorov 2008, 65).

<sup>6</sup> S. Th. II-II, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2um.

è considerata inattuabile (come il noumeno kantiano), così che il pensiero teologico si esercita solo sui fenomeni; i fenomeni però – a questo punto – non sono più via alla comprensione della *res*, ma schermo, ostacolo, barriera.

I modi del “kantismo” inconsapevole sono diversi: la riduzione del sapere teologico a metodologia, l'autoreferenzialità dell'esegesi, la risoluzione della teologia in storiografia, etc. Con riferimento al nostro percorso, si può richiamare il limite di un'esegesi biblica che “chiude” il testo invece di “aprirlo”:

La Sacra Scrittura – puntualizza al riguardo il Card. Biffi – è, per così dire, una finestra sul mondo invisibile e vero, che ci è stata donata dalla sapiente misericordia di Dio perché potessimo con sicurezza guardare di là. Se invece di guardare di là, noi ci attardiamo a esaminare il davanzale, i fregi, i serramenti della finestra nella loro stupenda fattura e nel vario materiale di cui sono composti, noi compiamo un'operazione legittima e culturalmente pregevole, ma anche nettamente inadeguata e non rispondente allo scopo primario per cui la finestra è stata praticata (Biffi 1989, 22).

La situazione che viene a determinarsi è analoga a quella descritta da Todorov a proposito degli studi letterari: il mezzo sostituisce il fine; il metodo fa dimenticare il contenuto. Si tratta di una situazione ironicamente segnalata da Luis Alonso Schökel nel suo brillante “decalogo” per esegeti: “Lo studio biblico è diventato la scienza non della Bibbia, bensì dei suoi studiosi; ma la Bibbia non è stata scritta per gli studiosi”<sup>7</sup>, come le opere letterarie – secondo quanto notato da Todorov – non sono state scritte per i critici<sup>8</sup>.

## 2.4. Il dramma di annaspare nel vuoto

Gli sviluppi del metodo storico-critico e i suoi esiti meriterebbero una considerazione più attenta. Sempre seguendo Ratzinger, guardiamo però solo alla linea tendenziale di tale sviluppo e al preoccupante risultato a cui approda. I progressi della ricerca storico-critica comportano – come abbiamo appena visto – analisi sempre più puntuali e sottili, però, dietro di esse, “la figura di Gesù, su cui poggia la fede, divenne sempre più nebulosa, prese contorni sempre meno definiti” (GNI, 8). Le ricostruzioni di Gesù sono via via sempre più numerose e contrastanti. Cresce però il dubbio sul valore effettivo di queste ricostruzioni e dunque la diffidenza verso di esse:

Come risultato comune di tutti questi tentativi è rimasta l'impressione che, comunque, sappiamo ben poco di certo su Gesù e che solo in seguito la fede nella sua divinità abbia plasmato la sua immagine. Questa impressione, nel frattempo, è penetrata profondamente

<sup>7</sup> Il “decalogo” è riportato a conclusione di Ravasi 2008, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Quanto abbiamo detto non vuole giustificare alcuna svalutazione dell'aspetto metodologico nell'approccio alla Scrittura, ma solo segnalare i rischi di una sua unilaterale assolutizzazione.

nella coscienza comune della cristianità. Una simile situazione è drammatica per la fede perché rende incerto il suo autentico punto di riferimento: l'intima amicizia con Gesù, da cui tutto dipende, minaccia di annasparsi nel vuoto (GN I, 8).

## 2.5. Abbattere le barriere: il rischio del fondamentalismo

Il credente non può però annasparsi nel vuoto, la fede non può vivere senza punti di riferimento definitivi: "È questo il motivo per cui ha cominciato a guadagnare adepti un approccio radicale, detto 'fondamentalismo': i suoi fautori stigmatizzano come falsa in se stessa e assurda ogni applicazione del metodo storico alla Parola di Dio" (Ratzinger 1991, 95).

La reazione alle derive del metodo storico-critico non può, ad ogni modo, essere questa<sup>9</sup>. La barriera, per riprendere l'immagine già proposta, non può venire semplicemente ignorata o abbattuta. Come scrive Thomas Söding: "Va bene un accesso privo di barriere alla casa della Bibbia, ma ogni banalizzazione è sbagliata. Com'è possibile un'interpretazione spirituale della Scrittura al di là del fondamentalismo? E come può la scienza biblica promuovere questa *lectio divina*?" (Söding 2011, 80).

Come si intrecciano allora virtuosamente esegesi storica ed esegesi teologica? Come si accordano metodo storico ed ermeneutica teologica, comprensione esegetica ed ermeneutica spirituale? Il tentativo di rispondere alla questione che queste domande circoscrivono ci pare identifichi il perno della riflessione teologica di Ratzinger sull'ermeneutica della Scrittura.

## 3. Egesi storico-critica ed esegesi teologica

Il testo del n. 12 della *Dei Verbum* è, per Ratzinger/Benedetto, un riferimento chiave per considerare il metodo storico-critico nella sua imprescindibilità e per affermare, insieme, l'esigenza di una sua integrazione/composizione con la dimensione propriamente teologica dell'esegesi. Lo riportiamo dunque integralmente (omettendo le note):

12. Poiché Dio nella sacra Scrittura ha parlato per mezzo di uomini alla maniera umana, l'interprete della sacra Scrittura, per capir bene ciò che egli ha voluto comunicarci, deve ricercare con attenzione che cosa gli agiografi abbiano veramente voluto dire e a Dio è piaciuto manifestare con le loro parole.

Per ricavare l'intenzione degli agiografi, si deve tener conto fra l'altro anche dei generi letterari.

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<sup>9</sup> Sull'interpretazione fondamentalista della Scrittura, v. VD 44.

La verità infatti viene diversamente proposta ed espressa in testi in vario modo storici, o profetici, o poetici, o anche in altri generi di espressione.

È necessario adunque che l'interprete ricerchi il senso che l'agiografo in determinate circostanze, secondo la condizione del suo tempo e della sua cultura, per mezzo dei generi letterari allora in uso, intendeva esprimere e ha di fatto espresso. Per comprendere infatti in maniera esatta ciò che l'autore sacro volle asserire nello scrivere, si deve far debita attenzione sia agli abituali e originali modi di sentire, di esprimersi e di raccontare vigenti ai tempi dell'agiografo, sia a quelli che nei vari luoghi erano allora in uso nei rapporti umani.

Perciò, dovendo la sacra Scrittura esser letta e interpretata alla luce dello stesso Spirito mediante il quale è stata scritta, per ricavare con esattezza il senso dei sacri testi, si deve badare con non minore diligenza al contenuto e all'unità di tutta la Scrittura, tenuto debito conto della viva tradizione di tutta la Chiesa e dell'analogia della fede. È compito degli esegeti contribuire, seguendo queste norme, alla più profonda intelligenza ed esposizione del senso della sacra Scrittura, affinché mediante i loro studi, in qualche modo preparatori, maturi il giudizio della Chiesa. Quanto, infatti, è stato qui detto sul modo di interpretare la Scrittura, è sottoposto in ultima istanza al giudizio della Chiesa, la quale adempie il divino mandato e ministero di conservare e interpretare la parola di Dio.

Quanto al nostro tema, seguendo Bruno Maggioni, è bene osservare innanzitutto che

il dettato conciliare non concede alcun appiglio a chi fosse tentato di immaginare la lettura esegetica e quella teologica come due percorsi differenti e separati, con possibilità di scelta: chi preferisce il percorso esegetico e chi preferisce la lettura spirituale. In realtà il concilio le immagina come due tappe inseparabili di un solo cammino. Non, da un lato, la ricerca esegetica e, dall'altro, la lettura teologica, due letture tutt'al più complementari, più scientifica la prima e spiritualmente più ricca la seconda. Bensì due letture l'una dentro l'altra. La lettura teologica si regge sul fondamento dell'esegesi, e l'esegesi credente sfocia, senza salti indebiti, nella lettura teologica e spirituale (Maggioni 2001, 84)<sup>10</sup>.

Che cosa ha impedito di pensare queste due tappe nella loro inseparabilità? Come appena ricordato, Ratzinger/Benedetto riprenderà molte volte questo testo conciliare, riproponendo in buona sostanza le stesse sottolineature e segnalando, in particolare, una "dimenticanza". Se la prima parte del n. 12 è stata compresa e attuata, la seconda parte – contrastante con l'orientamento di fondo dell'esegesi moderna – è stata obliterata: "Così la recezione post-conciliare della Costituzione ha praticamente lasciato cadere la parte teologica della Costituzione stessa come una concessione al passato,

<sup>10</sup> "A questo proposito, occorre segnalare il grave rischio oggi di un dualismo che si ingenera nell'accostare le sacre Scritture. Infatti, distinguendo i due livelli dell'approccio biblico non si intende affatto separarli, né contrapporli, né meramente giustapporli. Essi si danno solo in reciprocità. Purtroppo, non di rado un'impreduttiva separazione tra essi ingenera un'estraneità tra esegesi e teologia" (VD 35).

comprendendo il testo unicamente come approvazione ufficiale ed incondizionata del metodo storico-critico” (Ratzinger 1991, 99)<sup>11</sup>.

Le due dimensioni, ricerca esegetica e lettura teologica, non sono state pensate nella loro unità, perché una delle due, la seconda, è stata sostanzialmente dimenticata<sup>12</sup>. Ne è derivato uno iato tra esegesi e dogma, che non può non ostacolare la fede: “per la vita e per la missione della Chiesa, per il futuro della fede, è assolutamente necessario superare questo dualismo tra esegesi e teologia” (Benedetto XVI 2008a). Si tratta di un lavoro che richiede tempo: “Sarà necessario il lavoro di una generazione almeno, per condurre a buon fine una simile impresa” (Ratzinger 1991, 100). Forse anche di più.

### 3.1. Il metodo storico-critico: imprescindibile e insufficiente

A scanso di equivoci, ribadiamo che, in più occasioni, Ratzinger, afferma con chiarezza l'imprescindibilità del metodo storico-critico, che “è e rimane una dimensione irrinunciabile del lavoro esegetico. Per la fede biblica, infatti, è fondamentale il riferimento a eventi storici reali. [...] Se mettiamo da parte questa storia, la fede cristiana in quanto tale viene eliminata e trasformata in un'altra religione. Se dunque la storia, la fatticità in questo senso appartiene essenzialmente alla fede cristiana, quest'ultima deve esporsi al metodo storico. È la fede stessa che lo esige” (GN I, 11).

Il metodo storico-critico è dunque anche a difesa del realismo dell'avvenimento: un'esigenza costitutiva del cristianesimo<sup>13</sup>. Non esaurisce però il compito dell'interpretazione e deve perciò riconoscere i propri limiti<sup>14</sup>.

Nella “Premessa” al primo volume del *Gesù di Nazaret*, questi limiti vengono richiamati nella loro specificità. Il primo è che il metodo storico “deve lasciare la parola nel passato” (GN I, 12). Se e in quanto rimane fedele a se stesso, il suo compito è questo: cercare la parola come qualcosa di passato e lasciarla nel passato. Qui è la sua forza, qui il suo limite. Nella *Meditazione* al Sinodo sulla Parola di Dio, Benedetto XVI, per chiarire questo tratto, fa riferimento a Erode che, all'arrivo dei Magi,

<sup>11</sup> “Solo dove i due livelli metodologici, quello storico-critico e quello teologico, sono osservati, si può parlare di una esegesi teologica – di una esegesi adeguata a questo Libro. Mentre circa il primo livello l'attuale esegesi accademica lavora ad un altissimo livello e ci dona realmente aiuto, la stessa cosa non si può dire circa l'altro livello. Spesso questo secondo livello, il livello costituito dai tre elementi teologici indicati dalla *Dei Verbum*, appare quasi assente. E questo ha conseguenze piuttosto gravi” (Benedetto XVI 2008a). V. anche GN II, 7 e VD 34.

<sup>12</sup> Le conseguenze più preoccupanti dell'estraneità tra approccio esegetico e lettura teologica sono indicate in VD 35.

<sup>13</sup> “L'opinione che la fede come tale non conosca assolutamente niente dei fatti storici e debba lasciare tutto questo agli storici, è gnosticismo: tale opinione disincarna la fede e la riduce a pura idea. Per la fede che si basa sulla Bibbia, è invece esigenza costitutiva proprio il realismo dell'accadimento” (Ratzinger 2003, 59). Cfr. anche Benedetto XVI 2008a e VD 32.

<sup>14</sup> “Il metodo storico-critico è una delle dimensioni fondamentali dell'esegesi, ma non esaurisce il compito dell'interpretazione per chi nei testi biblici vede l'unica Sacra Scrittura e la crede ispirata da Dio” (GN I, 12).

consulta Scribi e Farisei. Nella loro modalità di approccio alle Scritture, si mostra un rischio che è anche nostro: “Questo è un grande pericolo anche nella nostra lettura della Scrittura: ci fermiamo alle parole umane, parole del passato, storia del passato, e non scopriamo il presente nel passato, lo Spirito Santo che parla oggi nelle parole del passato. Così non entriamo nel movimento interiore della Parola, che in parole umane nasconde e apre le parole divine” (Benedetto XVI 2008b).

L'esegesi critica, inoltre, “deve trattare le parole che ha di fronte come parole umane” (GN I, 13). Con un'attenta riflessione, può forse intuire una dimensione ulteriore e più alta; il suo oggetto proprio rimane però la parola degli uomini in quanto umana. Infine – terzo appunto – all'esegesi scientifica sfugge l'importanza della Bibbia come insieme: “l'unità di tutti questi scritti come ‘Bibbia’ non gli risulta come un dato storico immediato” (GN I, 13).

L'enucleazione dei limiti analitici del metodo storico-critico è rilevante in ordine alla sua possibile integrazione, l'attenzione di Ratzinger sembra comunque sempre rivolta, in primo luogo, all'esito a cui globalmente conduce la prevalenza unilaterale del metodo storico-critico. Emerge qui una deriva preoccupante. Si arriva infatti a delineare una figura di Gesù così “debole”, da non poter fungere da autentico riferimento per il rapporto con Lui: “Il ‘Gesù storico’, come appare nella corrente principale dell'esegesi critica sulla base dei suoi presupposti ermeneutici, è troppo insignificante nel suo contenuto per aver potuto esercitare una grande efficacia storica; è troppo ambientato nel passato per rendere possibile un rapporto personale con Lui” (GN II, 8–9)<sup>15</sup>.

La figura viva di Gesù “in realtà non può essere riconosciuta attraverso l'esclusivo metodo storico, ma soltanto nella fede. La fede non misconosce la storia, apre però gli occhi per poterla pienamente comprendere” (Ratzinger 2004a, 50).

A partire dal punto d'arrivo della storia dell'esegesi moderna, sono allora possibili un giudizio e un auspicio: “Una cosa mi sembra ovvia: in 200 anni di lavoro esegetico, l'interpretazione storico-critica ha ormai dato ciò che di essenziale aveva da dare. Se la esegesi scientifica non vuole esaurirsi in sempre nuove ipotesi diventando teologicamente insignificante, deve fare un passo metodologicamente nuovo e riconoscersi nuovamente come disciplina teologica, senza rinunciare al suo carattere storico” (GN II, 6).

### 3.2. “Critica della critica”

L'esegesi scientifica deve dunque fare un passo, anzi – potremmo dire – due: uno in avanti e uno indietro. L'esperienza dei propri limiti spinge innanzitutto l'esegesi

<sup>15</sup> La proposta di Ratzinger/Benedetto presuppone la fiducia nei Vangeli: “io ho fiducia nei Vangeli” (GN I, 17). Tenendo conto della moderna esegesi, “ho voluto fare il tentativo di presentare il Gesù dei Vangeli come il Gesù reale, come il “Gesù storico” in senso vero e proprio. [...] Io ritengo che proprio questo Gesù – quello dei Vangeli – sia una figura storicamente sensata e convincente” (GN I, 18). Un altro esito è dunque possibile.



critica ad aprirsi verso altri metodi complementari come quello proposto dall'esegesi canonica, che porta all'evidenza alcune dimensioni capaci di favorire l'attuazione della seconda parte, la parte "dimenticata", di DV 12. La prima sottolineatura riguarda l'unità della Scrittura. Anche *Verbum Domini* richiamerà l'unità intrinseca della Bibbia, citando anche una nota espressione di Ugo di San Vittore, che puntualizza la centratura cristologica della stessa: "Tutta la divina Scrittura costituisce un unico libro e quest'unico libro è Cristo, parla di Cristo e trova in Cristo il suo compimento" (cfr. VD 39). Il percorso della storia della salvezza non è lineare e continuo, ha passaggi frammentati, confusi e drammatici, ma, se guardato a partire da Cristo, acquista una direzione chiara, dall'Antico al Nuovo Testamento, e mostra la sua unità. Questa lettura presuppone una scelta di fede e non può derivare dal puro metodo storico (cfr. VD 39-41). Ci sono poi altri due aspetti da segnalare. Se questo metodo è attento al significato originario delle parole nel contesto nel quale sono state dette e scritte, è però importante considerare anche la capacità delle parole di sporgere al di là di tale contesto: la parola reca in sé una rilevanza superiore alla immediata consapevolezza che ne ha l'autore nel momento in cui la scrive. Da ultimo, si dovrà considerare il rapporto vitale della Scrittura con il soggetto "popolo di Dio": la Scrittura è nata ed è cresciuta con il popolo di Dio e cammina con esso.

Se l'apertura del metodo storico-critico guarda – per così dire – avanti, risulta interessante anche seguire il passo indietro che, rispetto a esso, Ratzinger sembra suggerire con la formula "critica della critica". Si tratta di un passo necessario per non fermarsi a questioni di dettaglio, ma arrivare alla radice della problematica:

Ciò che si mostra necessario, è quel che si potrebbe chiamare una critica della critica; non una critica esercitata dall'esterno, ma una critica che si sviluppi dal suo interno, a partire dal potenziale critico che il pensiero critico possiede.

In altre parole, abbiamo bisogno di un'"autocritica" dell'esegesi storica, che possa prolungarsi in una critica della ragione storica, e che sia dunque continuazione e sviluppo delle critiche kantiane della ragione (Ratzinger 1991, 101).

Il programma è vasto, Ratzinger ne è ben consapevole.

"Quanti si dedicano allo studio delle sacre Scritture devono sempre tener presente che le diverse metodologie ermeneutiche hanno anch'esse alla base una concezione filosofica occorre vagliarla con discernimento prima di applicarla ai testi sacri" (FR 55). Preso in tutto il suo spessore, questo suggerimento della *Fides et ratio* ripreso dalla *Verbum Domini* (VD 36)<sup>16</sup> è un invito a mettere in luce i presupposti

<sup>16</sup> "Al pari di altri moderni metodi scientifici, il metodo storico-critico è importante sia per la comprensione della Sacra Scrittura come della tradizione. Il suo valore dipende, però, dal contesto ermeneutico (filosofico) nel quale esso viene usato" (Ratzinger 1992, 38).

filosofici del metodo storico critico: “il dibattito attorno all’esegesi moderna non è nel suo nucleo centrale un dibattito tra storici, ma un dibattito filosofico” (Ratzinger 1991, 113). Nella lettura diacronica della storia dell’esegesi moderna, i presupposti filosofici emergono con maggior chiarezza e “l’auto-critica del *metodo* storico cede il posto ad una autocritica della *ragione* storica, senza la quale la nostra analisi resterebbe prigioniera di questioni preliminari” (Ratzinger 1991, 111). A cosa e a chi potrebbe giungere questo scavo? Quale premessa guida la storia dell’esegesi moderna? Cosa c’è davvero in gioco?

Il vero presupposto filosofico di tutto il sistema mi sembra si situi nella svolta filosofica compiuta da Kant, secondo la quale la voce dell’essere in sé non può essere percepita dall’uomo; questi può intenderla solo indirettamente, nei postulati della ragion pratica, che sono rimasti, per così dire, la fenditura stretta attraverso la quale avviene per l’uomo il contatto con ciò che gli è proprio, col suo destino eterno. Riguardo a tutto il resto, riguardo ai contenuti delle attività della sua ragione, deve accontentarsi dell’ambito categoriale (Ratzinger 1991, 112).

C’è una frattura, che rende impossibile pensare a un’autentica rivelazione e che rischia di far regredire a mito ciò che appare come manifestazione diretta del divino. In questa linea, “il problema esegetico si identifica totalmente con il dibattito contemporaneo sul fondamento” (Ratzinger 1991, 113). Con queste considerazioni, l’approccio critico al metodo storico sembra aver toccato il suo livello più radicale<sup>17</sup>.

### 3.3. Esegesi teologica

Giunti alla dimensione più profonda dell’autocritica del metodo storico, si apre la strada al compito positivo, cioè al ripensamento dell’ermeneutica biblica nell’integralità delle sue dimensioni, un compito che appare ancor più difficile dello stesso lavoro critico (cfr. Ratzinger 1991, 114). È stato fatto più di un cenno ai contributi di Ratzinger/Benedetto in questa direzione. Si sono ad esempio appena ricordati gli ampliamenti che l’esegesi canonica, ma non solo, suggerisce rispetto alle chiusure dell’esegesi critica. L’apporto della riflessione ratzingeriana all’attuazione della seconda parte di DV 12 meriterebbe comunque un’attenzione più mirata e più globale. Ricostruirlo nel suo insieme è però obiettivo esorbitante rispetto ai limiti dal presente

<sup>17</sup> Ignacio Carbajosa suggerisce di percorrere la via dell’“autocritica” dell’esegesi storica anche per evitare di cadere in tre tentazioni che insidiano il tentativo di oltrepassare l’*impasse* determinatasi a partire dall’intreccio tra esegesi critica e teologica: eliminare il metodo storico-critico, che è alla radice del problema; difendersi dai risultati più “dannosi” del metodo storico-critico, ineliminabile, con una sorta di auto-affermazione della fede e dei dogmi al di là della storia e della ragione e – infine – la via “intermedia”, che impiega il metodo storico-critico, ma vorrebbe accettarne solo i risultati compatibili con la Tradizione: cfr. Carbajosa 2017, 20–24.

lavoro. Ci limitiamo così a segnalare rapidamente solo due macro temi “inevitabili” per chi vuole muoversi nella linea appena indicata.

Il primo coincide con la questione della Tradizione e, più precisamente, con la triade Rivelazione, Tradizione e Scrittura. Il tema, centrale nell’impegno del giovane teologo Ratzinger al Concilio Vaticano II, è oggetto del suo interesse almeno a partire dall’*Habilitationsschrift* su san Bonaventura (1955) e ritorna nell’intero arco della sua riflessione. La teologia ratzingeriana della Tradizione, già a un primo sguardo d’insieme, appare articolata e capace di aprire diverse prospettive di ricerca, promettente, ma complessa (cfr. Gagliardi 2023)<sup>18</sup>.

Il secondo macro tema è il rapporto della Scrittura con la Chiesa. La *Verbum Domini* precisa, al riguardo, come segue: “*Il luogo originario dell’interpretazione scritturistica è la vita della Chiesa*. Questa affermazione non indica il riferimento ecclesiale come un criterio estrinseco cui gli esegeti devono piegarsi, ma è richiesta dalla realtà stessa delle Scritture e da come esse si sono formate nel tempo [...]. La Bibbia è il libro della Chiesa e dalla sua immanenza nella vita ecclesiale scaturisce anche la sua vera ermeneutica” (VD 34)<sup>19</sup>.

Nella prospettiva del criterio *intrinseco* andranno compresi anche il ruolo del Magistero e la funzione del dogma<sup>20</sup>. La Chiesa non è una barriera esterna all’interpretazione della Scrittura<sup>21</sup>. L’esegeta è chiamato a vivere nell’immanenza della vita ecclesiale, “deve riconoscere che la fede della Chiesa è quella forma di ‘simpatia’ senza la quale la Bibbia resta un libro sigillato” (Ratzinger 1991, 125). Torneremo – pur velocemente – su questo tema, la dimensione ecclesiale dell’interpretazione della Scrittura, nelle note che seguono.

#### 4. Per continuare la ricerca

Concludiamo il nostro percorso con alcune brevi considerazioni, che vorrebbero suggerire qualche linea di ricerca per riprendere, prolungare e approfondire quanto

<sup>18</sup> Questo testo consente una visione d’insieme rispetto ai temi trattati. All’intento ricostruttivo aggiunge osservazioni critiche certamente meritevoli di ulteriore considerazione e discussione. V. anche Carrai 2023.

<sup>19</sup> “Noi leggiamo la Scrittura nella comunità vivente della Chiesa e dunque sulla base di decisioni fondamentali, grazie alle quali è divenuta storicamente efficace e ha precisamente gettato le basi della Chiesa. Non bisogna separare il testo da questo contesto vivente” (Ratzinger citato in Ghiberti 2007, 57).

<sup>20</sup> Si veda, a mo’ di illustrazione, il ruolo riconosciuto ai grandi Simboli della Chiesa antica per l’interpretazione della Scrittura così come è sottolineato da Ratzinger nel confronto con Kasper, confronto acceso dalla recensione dello stesso Kasper alla *Einführung in das Christentum* di Ratzinger: è nel riferimento a questi Simboli che si può cogliere il criterio per comprendere il centro della Scrittura e l’obbligatorietà delle sue diverse affermazioni: cfr., anche per più complete indicazioni bibliografiche, Prato 2024, 25.

<sup>21</sup> In proposito, si può ricordare come Ratzinger richiami a volte l’osservazione di Guardini sui suoi maestri di teologia ai tempi del modernismo: il loro cattolicesimo – così Guardini – era un liberalismo limitato dall’obbedienza al dogma: cfr. Ratzinger 1993, 47 e Ratzinger 1997, 51.

fin qui emerso. Ci siamo concentrati sulla questione del rapporto fra metodo storico-critico ed ermeneutica teologica, che è, come più volte ricordato, al centro della ricerca teologica di Ratzinger sull'interpretazione della Scrittura, oggetto di domande che, nate nel tempo della formazione, accompagnano la sua riflessione negli sviluppi successivi. Abbiamo sostanzialmente cercato, con intento perlopiù ricostruttivo, di ripercorrere il cammino di Ratzinger/Benedetto, segnalando le sottolineature più evidenti e ripetute all'interno dello stesso. Vorremmo ora indicare, in maniera sintetica e non senza il rischio di qualche ripetizione, tre direzioni di ricerca, all'interno della riflessione di Ratzinger e al di là dei suoi confini, quali possibili vie, da sondare e verificare, in ordine alla prosecuzione del lavoro. È un modo per tornare ancora all'interrogativo sull'attuazione integrale di DV 12.

La prima direzione ha a che fare con il rapporto ragione-fede. La conferenza di New York afferma con chiarezza che l'autocritica del metodo storico sfocia in una autocritica della ragione. È un tema, quest'ultimo, molto presente nel pensiero ratzingeriano, il tema cioè della critica a una figura ridotta della ragione che condiziona la stessa ricerca teologica. In uno dei discorsi più famosi del suo pontificato, quello proposto all'Università di Regensburg, il 12 settembre 2006, Benedetto XVI parla dell'"autolimitazione moderna della ragione, espressa in modo classico nelle 'critiche' di Kant". La critica di tale autolimitazione, la critica della ragione moderna, non comporta però un ritorno a prima dell'illuminismo: "si tratta invece di un allargamento del nostro concetto di ragione e dell'uso di essa" (Benedetto XVI 2006). Molto ci sarebbe da dire sulle modalità e i percorsi di tale "allargamento". Ad ogni modo, un modello di ragione allargata apre a una maniera nuova di pensare il rapporto tra ragione e fede. È su questo punto che vorremmo richiamare l'attenzione e sul suo specifico riflesso su rapporto fra lettura esegetica e teologica. La prima non esclude la seconda (come vorrebbe la ridotta ragione moderna): ambedue sono necessarie e complementari. Possono allora essere intese solo come due tappe consecutive (la prima nel segno della ragione, la seconda della fede)? Non c'è, forse, un loro legame più intrinseco, che merita di essere portato alla luce e interrogato proprio con riferimento al modo di intendere il rapporto ragione-fede? Il ripensamento del rapporto ragione-fede potrebbe insomma introdurre una comprensione più unitaria dell'atto interpretativo della Scrittura nei suoi due versanti.

La domanda sull'interpretazione della Scrittura si propone a Joseph Ratzinger in un contesto nel quale c'è una forte spinta a identificarla completamente con l'esegesi storico-critica. Egli si opporrà sempre a tale identificazione/riduzione: nella lettura della Scrittura non ci si può affidare al solo metodo storico-critico. All'esegesi scientifica deve accompagnarsi un'ermeneutica teologica. Se l'esegesi storico-critica non esaurisce la lettura della Bibbia, essa però non copre neppure, oggi, tutta la sfera dell'esegesi scientifica. All'interno di essa, ci si accosta al testo in prospettiva diacronica, ma diverse sono anche le vie di taglio sincronico. Abbiamo accennato a come Ratzinger/Benedetto fa ad esempio propri alcuni impulsi dell'esegesi canonica per

segnalare alcuni limiti del metodo storico. Il nostro secondo suggerimento per continuare il lavoro è di muoversi in questa prospettiva, guardando però tendenzialmente all'intero ventaglio di metodi e approcci<sup>22</sup>. Ci si potrebbe allora interrogare, anche rimanendo all'interno dell'impostazione di fondo ratzingeriana, su come i singoli metodi possano interagire col metodo storico-critico (valorizzandone le acquisizioni ed evidenziandone i limiti) e quale apporto possano offrire all'attuazione piena di DV 12.

Torniamo così, per l'ultima volta, a DV 12 e al compito incompiuto che essa richiama, quello di articolare un'ermeneutica integrale, che tenga conto delle due dimensioni ivi richiamate: ricerca esegetica e lettura teologica. La prima dimensione è stata approfondita, la seconda dimenticata. Le vie percorse e percorribili, da parte della ricerca teologica, per uscire da tale oblio sono molte. Non è possibile indicare una strada unica. Vorremmo piuttosto suggerire una sorta di possibile "punto di fuga", che possa attrarre le linee di questo ripensamento. La dimensione spirituale o teologica dell'ermeneutica biblica potrebbe dunque essere intesa anzitutto con riferimento alla dimensione ecclesiale della Bibbia e al nesso Scrittura-Chiesa: questa è la nostra ultima proposta. Come scrive Andrea Bellandi: "*La fede viva della chiesa quale locus ermeneutico imprescindibile*. È questo il criterio che, per il teologo tedesco, sorregge e giustifica anche gli altri" (Bellandi 2009, 126). Non pensiamo a un criterio esaustivo, ma a un punto prospettico sintetico, che potrebbe forse fungere da bussola e catalizzatore della ricerca. Si tratta comunque, ovviamente, di verificare e valutare l'attitudine del "criterio ecclesiale" a svolgere tale compito.

Il nesso tra Scrittura e Chiesa rimane in ogni caso essenziale. Se il nesso virtuoso tra i due si spezza, c'è un danno per ciascuno dei membri della coppia:

La separazione tra Chiesa e Scrittura tende a svuotarle entrambe dall'interno. Infatti: una Chiesa senza più fondamento biblico credibile diventa un prodotto storico casuale, un'organizzazione accanto alle altre, quella cornice organizzativa umana di cui parlavamo. Ma anche la Bibbia senza la Chiesa non è più la Parola efficace di Dio, ma una raccolta di molteplici fonti storiche, una collezione di libri eterogenei dai quali si cerca di tirare fuori, alla luce dell'attualità, ciò che si ritiene utile. Una esegesi che non viva e non legga più la Bibbia nel corpo vivente della Chiesa diventa archeologia: i morti seppelliscono i loro morti (Ratzinger and Messori 2005, 75).

Riprendendo il riferimento evangelico proposto nelle ultime parole della citazione, potremmo dire, per chiudere, che, tutto il lavoro di Ratzinger sull'ermeneutica della Bibbia ha come scopo proprio quello di non lasciare che essa sia un libro morto. Non si tratta di una collezione di reperti archeologici, memoria di una sfuocata figura del passato, ma della testimonianza di una persona viva. È in gioco la possibilità di vivere un rapporto personale e un'intima amicizia con Gesù. È in gioco, cioè, la fede.

<sup>22</sup> Un'attenta disamina dei diversi metodi e approcci si trova in Pontificia Commissione Biblica 1993.

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# *Deus Caritas Est.* Benedict XVI's First Encyclical and Its Johannine Foundation in the Exegesis of St. Augustine

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**Abstract:** The article examines the Johannine foundation of the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. It shows how Benedict XVI drew heavily on the Augustinian exegesis of the Johannine literature (with a particular focus on the First Epistle of John). The analysis follows the three fundamental elements that the Pope identifies at the beginning of the document, comparing the texts of the two authors (St. Augustine and Benedict XVI): the lexical clarification of *eros* and *agape*, the interaction between the love of God and the love of neighbor, and finally the pneumatological foundation of love. Then, starting from this last element, the article proposes to interpret the second part of the Encyclical as a pneumatological ecclesiology that the Pope presented to the Church at the beginning of his pontificate.

**Keywords:** love, charity, eros, agape, Holy Spirit, pneumatology, ecclesiology, Benedict XVI, Augustin of Hippo, Encyclical, Johannine exegesis, Johannine literature

At the beginning of his first Encyclical, Benedict XVI pointed to the Johannine quotation “God is love” (1 John 4:16) as the central and synthetic formula of the Christian faith, because it expresses “the Christian image of God and also the consequent image of man and his journey.” (*DCE* 1) The Pope therefore chose to open his pontificate by exploring the essential relationship of Christian life between faith and love, recovering “some fundamental elements” of the believer’s experience, understood as “human response to divine love.” (*DCE* 1)

The quotation reveals a significant rootedness of Benedict XVI’s thought in Johannine theology and literature. As we try to show below, the Pope’s debt is more precisely to St. Augustine’s exegesis of the First Epistle of John and the Fourth Gospel. In fact, the comments of the Bishop of Hippo are a precious key for interpreting what the Pope Benedict XVI proposed to the whole Church at the beginning of his pontificate. Therefore, the demonstration of the real presence of this debt is the first purpose of this paper.

The order in which these Augustinian interpretive keys will be studied follows the sequence of the Encyclical, focusing on the “fundamental elements” that compose it (*DCE* 1). The first focuses on the lexical clarification between *eros* and *agape*: this is not present in the Johannine texts, but is instead treated in the Augustinian commentaries. The second element deals with the theme of the “necessary

interaction between love of God and love of neighbor” (DCE 18): a theme that is extensively treated in the First Epistle of John, but also explored in detail by the Bishop of Hippo. The third element, finally, concerns the pneumatological foundation of love, an object of particular attention for St. Augustine.

This last topic deserves special attention, since it seems to be mentioned only at the beginning of the second part of the Encyclical (DCE 19). However, on the basis of the Johannine Augustinian exegesis, we would like to propose a different assessment and hypothesis for the interpretation of the entire second part of the papal text (DCE 19–39). Thus, illustrating this hypothesis is the second purpose of this paper.

## 1. *Eros* and *Agape*, the Augustinian Lexicon of Love

The assertion that God is love inevitably raises a number of theological questions. The first of these is the need for lexical clarification. Today’s cultural context, in which this concept is inflated and subject to a wide semantic spectrum, underscores the importance of this need. For this reason, Pope Benedict makes explicit the need for terminological clarification at the beginning of his Encyclical: “Today, the term ‘love’ has become one of the most frequently used and misused of words, a word to which we attach quite different meanings. Even though this Encyclical will deal primarily with the understanding and practice of love in sacred Scripture and in the Church’s Tradition, we cannot simply prescind from the meaning of the word in the different cultures and in present-day usage.” (DCE 2)

Undoubtedly, the need to clarify what is meant by the term “love” when referring to God has its roots in the suspicion of a rather closed attitude on the part of Christianity towards the erotic form of love. It is the Pope himself who recalls Friedrich Nietzsche’s accusation that *eros* has been poisoned, not by killing it, but by distorting it to the point of becoming a vice (DCE 3. See Nietzsche 1999, 102).

In addition to the cultural instance, there is also a biblical one, especially in the Johannine literature. Of the three Greek words that make up the semantic field of love, the one that appears most frequently is *agape*; otherwise, the term *eros* plays a marginal role, while in Greek literature it enjoys greater prominence.<sup>1</sup>

The originality of the use of these words certainly also expresses the novelty of the Gospel message, also with regard to the theme of love. However, the Encyclical is careful to point out that this distinction does not correspond to a discrimination of *eros* with respect to *agape*; on the contrary, it is necessary to bring the one and

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<sup>1</sup> In Johannine literature, and more generally in both New Testament and general Greek literature, the third word (*philia*) has a more specific use.

the other back into unity, so that man may be fully himself.<sup>2</sup> The reference to different aspects of love, signified by the terms *eros* and *agape*, does not necessarily imply an understanding of different kinds of love, as David C. Schindler (2006, 378) has well observed. Rather, as Pope Benedict XVI has emphasized, the plurality of terms indicates the semantic richness of the one love, which thus has a variety of dimensions: all are necessary to sustain the full meaning of love.

Such a terminological reflection might seem to distance the magisterial argument from the Johannine text and its exegesis; so much so that the Pope himself does not hide the rather philosophical character of his initial reflections, then offering an *excursus* on the erotic images applied to God in the Old Testament and on some suggestive interpretations of certain Church Fathers (DCE 7–11).

However, there is a strong affinity between the understanding of *eros* proposed by Benedict XVI and that offered by St. Augustine in some of his commentaries on Johannine passages. Emblematic in this regard is his exegesis of the passage: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). The Bishop of Hippo dwells on the dynamics of attraction – using terms such as *attrahere*, *delectare*, *voluptas* – and describes it in terms of a yearning, that is, the pursuit of a pleasure that makes one move and search:

It is not a great thing to be attracted by a voluntary impulse when even pleasure can attract us. What does it mean to be attracted to pleasure? “Find your pleasure in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps 37:4). There is a kind of pleasure of the heart (*voluptas cordi*), for which the heavenly bread is sweet. [...] If the senses of the body have their pleasures, why should not the soul? [...] Give to him who desires, and he will hear what I say. Give to him who yearns (*desiderantem*), give to him who hungers (*esurientem*), give to him who wanders and thirsts in this desert and sighs at the fountain of the eternal home: give to such a one, and he will know what I say. (Augustinus, *In Joannis Evangelium* [PL 35, 1608])<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Years earlier, Ratzinger himself had claimed that these reflections were the fruit of his personal theological and spiritual extension of the philosophical work on love proposed by Josef Pieper (Ratzinger 1991, 82–84; see Pieper 1992, 221–28). Pieper questions the relationship between happiness and love. The one who loves recognizes in the beloved a goodness that produces happiness. But what kind of happiness is that? And, consequently, how is love to be understood? The philosopher answers by appreciating every dimension of love, both the erotic and the agapic. On the one hand, distancing himself from other authors, Pieper values *eros* by describing it as “an opening of the sphere of existence to an infinite quenching that cannot be had at all ‘here’” (Pieper 1992, 252): it is a longing for happiness and beatitude that is not to be abolished or made absolute, but to be fulfilled. On the other hand, since erotic desire so understood has a deeply creaturely connotation, *agape* (*caritas*) achieves this fulfillment precisely because it is intertwined with *eros*. Pieper (1992, 242) explains: “Otherwise, on the contrary, we are rather prepared to find what is ‘by nature’, that is, ‘by virtue of creation’, strictly ethical matters and the supernatural so closely interwoven that the seam can scarcely be detected. Or at least it cannot so long as all three impulses, that which springs from nature, that which springs from ethical freedom and that which springs from grace are in harmony with one another.” So it is not the privileging of the one or the other kind of love, but the harmonization and the unification of all of them, that is the answer to the original question of happiness.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent translations of patristic texts are the author’s.

St. Augustine interprets this Johannine dynamic of being drawn to the Father as an opening of desire that brings out the inwardness of the person and pushes him beyond himself. This dynamic of man's movement from the inwardness to the outwardness of the self was already linked to a Platonic matrix by Cardinal Ratzinger a few years before he began his Petrine ministry:

For example, let us take Plato's *Phaedrus*. Plato contemplates the encounter with beauty as the salutary emotional shock that makes man leave his shell and sparks his "enthusiasm" by attracting him to what is other than himself. Man, says Plato, has lost the original perfection that was conceived for him. He is now perennially searching for the healing primitive form. Nostalgia and longing impel him to pursue the quest; beauty prevents him from being content with just daily life. It causes him to suffer. In a Platonic sense, we could say that the arrow of nostalgia pierces man, wounds him and in this way gives him wings, lifts him upwards towards the transcendent. (Ratzinger 2002)

Although there is no explicit reference in the Encyclical to this interpretation of the Johannine concept of attraction, one finds in it the recognition of *eros* as a capacity for "ecstasy towards the Divine:" it is thus disciplined and purified so as not to be content with a "fleeting pleasure", but to foretaste "the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns." (DCE 4) So much so that *eros* gives to love a dimension of infinite and eternal openness to "a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence." (DCE 5)

Such an interpretation not only does not exclude *eros* from the life of faith, but even integrates it so that it participates in the more agapic dimension of the believer's life. The supreme example of this union of *eros* and *agape* is to be found in the history of St. Augustine, when, at the end of the tenth book of his *Confessions*, he prays:

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you! Lo, you were within, but I outside, seeking there for you, and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong, I, misshapen. You were with me, but I was not with you. They held me back far from you, those things which would have no being were they not in you. You called, shouted, broke through my deafness; you flared, blazed, banished my blindness; you lavished your fragrance, I gasped, and now I pant for you; I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst; you touched me, and I burned for your peace. (Augustinus, *Confessiones* 10.27.38 [Augustine of Hippo 2012, 296])

Therefore, *eros* is not censored: far from poisoning it, writes the Pope, the Christian way proposes its healing in view of its true greatness (DCE 5), uniting it with every other human dimension, beginning with that of *agape*.

## 2. The Necessary Interaction Between the Love of God and the Love of Neighbor

The second fundamental element that Benedict XVI addresses in his Encyclical is the relationship between love of God and love of one's neighbor: the theme is exquisitely Johannine. As the Pope himself points out, it develops in a reflection on the relationship between the knowledge of God made visible in Jesus and the love with which he first loved us, so that we too might love one another (*DCE* 16). Although the reference in the Encyclical is limited to 1 John 4:7–10, the issue touches on a much broader exegetical point in the Johannine literature that is very strategic for the interpretation of 1 John.

If we look overall at the way the Epistle deals with this theme as a whole, we can see how the verses commented on by Benedict XVI are at the crossroads of this argument. Indeed, if in the preceding part of the Johannine text the relationship between the knowledge of God and fraternal love is more explicitly addressed (1 John 2:3–11; 3:23–24), in the following part the interaction between the love of God and fraternal love is more considered (4:20–21; 5:1–3). The Encyclical thus takes up the central point of the entire argument of the Johannine Epistle and interprets it in such a way as to emphasize two aspects in particular: on the one hand, *the primacy of God's love* in Jesus over fraternal love; and on the other hand, *the priority of fraternal love* over God's love (*DCE* 17 and 18, respectively). Again, these are two paths of interpretation that show great agreement with St. Augustine's exegetical commentaries.

### 2.1. The Primacy of God's Love

With regard to the primacy of the love of God in Jesus over fraternal love, the Pope first excludes the danger of a possible constrictive interpretation: "He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love. God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has 'loved us first,' love can also blossom as a response within us." (*DCE* 17)

Such a comment has a perceptible affinity with the way the Bishop of Hippo also speaks of it, when he excludes the suspicion that the commandment of love involves a form of imposition and compulsion to love: "How can we love if we have not been loved first? The Evangelist himself says it very openly in his Epistle: 'We love God because He first loved us' (1 John 4:19). [...] Therefore, it is not we who first keep the commandments, so that he may come to love us, but the reverse: if he did not love us, we could not keep his commandments." (Augustinus, *In Joannis Evangelium* [PL 35, 1843])

The primacy of God's love is even more understandable in the light of the Augustinian "triadic conception" of love, as expressed at the end of the eighth book of

*De Trinitate*: “But love is of someone that loves, and with love something is loved. Behold, then, there are three things: he that loves, and that which is loved, and love (*amans et quod amatur et amor*).” (Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 960])

The interplay of these three dimensions of love helps to better specify how the commandment is not a mere imposition, but opens up a space of relational freedom between the one who loves and the one who is loved, in which love takes concrete form. Indeed, the subject who loves (*amans*) does not simply perform an action toward the object of his love (*quod amatur*), but rather performs love itself (*amor*). On the other hand, the object of love enables the loving subject to experience love in its concrete form. In this way it is possible to state that “there is only love where something is loved.” (Dideberg 1975, 141) What determines the dynamics of love, then, is not only the loving subject but also the beloved object: one is not enough without the other for there to be love. “The love that loves is the living, transparent coincidence of itself with itself in that which is loved.” (Dideberg 1975, 141)

Thus, according to St. Augustine, love lives in its self-giving and in its being received, and its vital dynamism cannot be reduced to an extrinsic order: in the Augustinian conception, love cannot be imposed or suffered, but is desirable and desired for its own sake.<sup>4</sup>

Besides excluding that love is obligatory, both St. Augustine and Pope Benedict XVI also exclude that it is static. In fact, by referring to the primacy of Christ’s love, the commandment of love takes on a very dynamic aspect. The Pope emphasizes that the experience of being loved before loving is an appropriate condition for realizing the path of purification of *eros*, to the point of experiencing the fullness of love. In other words, the experience of being loved, even before loving, allows one to feel inside a path of growth in which there is time and a way to mature.

But this process is always open-ended; love is never “finished” and complete; throughout life, it changes and matures, and thus remains faithful to itself. [...] Our will and God’s will increasingly coincide: God’s will is no longer for me an alien will, something imposed on me from without by the commandments, but it is now my own will, based on the realization that God is in fact more deeply present to me than I am to myself. (*DCE* 17)<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, St. Augustine also emphasizes that the commandment of love has a dynamic dimension of maturation, in which love itself is a path to be traveled rather

<sup>4</sup> In the thirty-fifth *quaestio* of *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* (PL 40, 23), St. Augustine expresses, in other words, how the need to love is not imposed, but attractive, desirable: “But if love is loved for the sake of other things to love, it is not said to be rightly loved. For there is nothing else to love than to desire something for itself. Then is love to be desired for its own sake, or else, if that which is loved is lacking, it is undoubtedly misery? Since love is a kind of movement, and there is no movement except toward something, when we ask what is to be loved, we consequently ask what it is necessary to move toward.”

<sup>5</sup> See also Augustinus, *Confessiones* (PL 32, 686–88).



than a command to be fulfilled immediately. Indeed, reflecting on the meaning of perfection in love, he writes:

So this is perfect love. But is it perfect at the time of its birth? It is born to perfect itself; when it is born, it is nourished; when it is nourished, it is strengthened; when it is strengthened, it is brought to perfection.

[...] And he [the Lord] had said this: "As he laid down his life for us, we also ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 John 3:16). This is the perfection of love, and there is no greater. But since it is not perfect in all things, there is no need to despair where it is not perfect, when what is to be perfected has already been born. And of course, when it is born, it must be nourished, and brought to its proper perfection by its proper nourishments. (Augustinus, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* [PL 35, 2014.2019])

## 2.2. The Priority of Fraternal Love

Alongside the primacy of God's love, there is the priority of fraternal love. The Encyclical interprets this priority in two ways. On the one hand, fraternal love is the most direct way in which the believer takes on the very form of Christ: "In God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. [...] Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. [...] Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave." (DCE 18)

Thanks to the learning of "the perspective of Christ" (*ad Iesu Christi mensuram*), the priority of fraternal love is explained not from a purely practical point of view, but from an understanding of the commandment of love. Indeed, the discovery of God's love is possible for everyone through the love of one's neighbor: "Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me." (DCE 18)

Again, there are significant similarities in Augustine's exegesis of the First Epistle of John. Commenting on the call to fraternal love found in 1 John 4:11–12, the Bishop of Hippo dwells on the interplay between the invisibility of God and the practice of charity: it is effectively described in the concreteness of the gestures and body parts involved, suggesting that in them it is possible to see the very body of God at work:

If you want to see God: God is love. What is the face of love? What shape does it have? What is its stature? What kind of feet and hands does it have? No one can say. But it has feet, because they themselves lead to the Church; it has hands, because they themselves reach out to the poor; it has eyes, because they can recognize who is in need. The limbs

are not separated in different places, but he who has love sees the whole together with the intellect. So abide in love and it will abide in you; remain in it and it will remain in you. (Augustinus, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* [PL 35, 2034])

Again building on the theme of God's invisibility, St. Augustine also illustrates how fraternal love becomes a way of discovering and reaching God and His love:

"If you do not love your brother whom you see, how can you love God whom you do not see?" (1 John 4:20). Behold, it is said to you: "Love God." If you say: "Show me whom I love," I will answer what John himself says: "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18). But do not think that you are completely excluded from seeing God: "God, he says, is love; whoever remains in love remains in God" (1 John 4:16) There you will see God as much as you can. So begin to love your neighbor. Break your bread for the hungry and bring the needy without a bed into your house; if you see him naked, clothe him, and do not despise the family of your offspring. But what will you gain by doing these things? Then your light will break forth like the morning light. Your light is your God. (Augustinus, *In Joannis Evangelium* [PL 35, 1531–32])

### 2.3. Summary of Comparison

In his Encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI develops the theme of the relationship between the love of God and the love of one's neighbor in a way that can be understood in the light of St. Augustine's exegesis of the central point of 1 John.

According to this interpretation of the Johannine text, the reflection and practice of fraternal love is specifically theological because it is a way to God himself. The interplay between *amans*, *quod amatur*, and *amor* proposed by the Augustinian exegesis clarifies the meaning of this theological value: in loving one's neighbor, one loves not only the object of love (the neighbor), but also love itself, which is ultimately God.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of what has been shown, we also understand what Benedict XVI means when he says that "love is not just an emotion" (*DCE* 17). The Latin expression used in the papal document is *animi affectum*. It is then described as something unstable, like coming and going. While not excluding emotion, the Pope extends the human experience of love to "all man's potentialities," including the practical, intellectual and volitional dimensions of the human person. This involvement of "the whole man"

<sup>6</sup> Dany Dideberg (1975, 142) summarizes the theological value of fraternal love according to the Augustinian exegesis using the following syllogism: "Applied to fraternal love, this tripartite scheme of *amor* constitutes the major of a syllogism for which the *Prima Ioannis* provides the minor. Here are the two premises and the conclusion of the argument: (A) he who loves his brother, necessarily loves love; (B) now, love is God, since 'God is love' (1 John 4:8, 16); (C) therefore, he who loves his brother, loves God. Augustine's argument is a synthesis of philosophical schema and biblical verse."

comes from the recognition of “the visible manifestations of God’s love”: man loves love itself, which is ultimately God, from what he experiences when the whole of him is involved and when, in this involvement, he recognizes God himself.

In the gradual unfolding of this encounter, it is clearly revealed that love is not merely a sentiment. Sentiments come and go. A sentiment can be a marvelous first spark, but it is not the fullness of love. [...] It is characteristic of mature love that it calls into play all man’s potentialities; it engages the whole man, so to speak. Contact with the visible manifestations of God’s love can awaken within us a feeling of joy born of the experience of being loved. But this encounter also engages our will and our intellect. Acknowledgment of the living God is one path towards love, and the “yes” of our will to his will unites our intellect, will and sentiments in the all-embracing act of love. (*DCE* 17)

### 3. The Pneumatological Foundation of Love

The third key element, based on themes and language typical of the Johannine literature, is found especially at the beginning of the second part of the Encyclical, which deals with the theme of love from an ecclesiological perspective.

Benedict XVI opens the argumentation, which is more explicitly focused on the Church, with a Trinitarian – and more precisely, a pneumatological – reflection: it is the gift of the Holy Spirit after Easter that harmonizes the hearts of the believers “with the heart of Christ and moves them to love their brothers and sisters as he has loved them.” (*DCE* 18) However, the reflection on the relationship between the action of the Spirit and the life of the Church according to the Johannine texts seems to stop at the first paragraph of the second part of the Encyclical (see *DCE* 19). In what follows, the text gives the impression of dealing rather with questions more concretely related to the ways and means by which the Church is called to carry out her service of charity in the world.

In truth, what Benedict XVI is proposing is the result of a reflection that he had already developed before his election as Pope. Among the many examples that can be cited, we refer to an article written in 1998 by Ratzinger, in which the German theologian dwelt on the definition of the Holy Spirit as God’s love – and here the Johannine foundation is evident – once again helped by the exegesis of St. Augustine.

In particular, Ratzinger dwells on two definitions that the Bishop of Hippo applies to the Holy Spirit in the light of the Johannine texts: he is *God* and *gift* in relation to love. This dual identification is found in the commentaries on the First Epistle of John, as well as in the book *De Trinitate*, where the St. Augustine distinguishes between love *ad se* and love *ad nos* to understand the Spirit. In relation to himself, the Spirit is the theological dimension of love, the God-love that proceeds

from the Father and the Son. In relation to humanity, the Spirit is a gift of love insofar as he is the very act of God's gift of love to humanity (Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 1086]).

### 3.1. The Holy Spirit, God-love

In addressing the identification of the Spirit as love *ad se*, St. Augustine first seeks to clarify why the Johannine statement "God is love" should refer specifically to the third person of the Trinity: "Therefore, the Scripture does not say: 'The Holy Spirit is love,' for if it had said that, it would have greatly clarified the matter. But it did say: 'God is love' (1 John 4:8, 16), so it is uncertain, and therefore to be investigated, whether God the Father is love, or God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit, or God the Trinity Himself" (Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 1080])<sup>7</sup>

In other words, while St. Augustine acknowledges that one cannot speak of love for only one of the three divine persons to the exclusion of the other two, he wonders whether such a theological definition can refer specifically to one of them.

The resulting exegetical argument begins by contrasting two seemingly contradictory statements in 1 John 4:7, 8: "Love proceeds from God" (v. 7) and "God is love" (v. 8) (Ratzinger 1998, 329).<sup>8</sup> From here, the Bishop of Hippo begins to rule out the possibility that these statements are to be attributed in any particular way to the person of the Father: "How do we relate the two expressions just mentioned [...]? In fact, both are found in the Epistle: 'Love is from God,' and 'Love is God.' In the case of the Father, the Scripture does not say that He is from God. When you hear the expression 'from God,' it means either the Son or the Holy Spirit." (Augustinus, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* [PL 35, 2031–32])

In the book *De Trinitate*, St. Augustine also writes that the expression "God is love" refers to the action by which God dwells in the believer and vice versa, and therefore concerns the Holy Spirit: "'This is how we know that we remain in Him and He in us, that He has given us of His Spirit' (1 John 4:13). Therefore, the Holy Spirit, of whom He has given us, makes us abide in God and He in us: this is the work of love. So the Holy Spirit is the God of love." (Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 1082])

Thus, in Augustine's interpretation, the Johannine concept of love is linked to the dimension of permanence and has a profound pneumatological relevance. Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who, as divine love, makes possible the permanence of God in the believer and vice versa: "The love that is from God and it is God is

<sup>7</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger quotes mainly from the book *De Trinitate*. In order to be consistent with the topic of this article, we will also quote the Bishop of Hippo's interpretation of the First Epistle of John, which seems to us to be more pertinent because it develops the same reflections.

<sup>8</sup> Playing on the juxtaposition of the two Johannine expressions, Ratzinger effectively summarizes Augustine's exegetical argument on the Spirit: "If you put the two together, love is equally 'God' and 'from God'; in other words, love is 'God from God.'" (Ratzinger 1998, 329)

properly the Holy Spirit, through whom the love of God is spread in our hearts, so that the whole Trinity dwells in us (see 1 John 4:7–8, 16)” (Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 1080]).

### 3.2. The Holy Spirit, Gift of Love

The Holy Spirit is also a gift: in fact, he is not only divine love, but is also the one who proceeds from God as love, and enables humanity itself to be itself filled with such love:

“He who keeps his commandments remains in Him, and He in them, and the way we know that He remains in us is from the Spirit that He gave us.” (1 John 3:23–24; John 13:34; 15:12) Is it not clear that this is what the Holy Spirit does in a person, so that there may be love (*dilectio*) and charity (*caritas*) in him? If you find that you have charity (*caritas*), you have the Spirit of God to help you understand: it is an absolutely necessary reality. (Augustinus, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* [PL 35, 2025])

The Spirit is therefore a necessary gift for recognizing God's life of love in the form of charity. In other words, it can be said that the practice of charity is an important criterion for recognizing the presence of the Spirit in the believer and in the Church. Without the Spirit, human reality cannot experience the love of God that abides in it. And, therefore, it cannot even live by this love, either toward God or toward its neighbor. This is what Augustine says in his commentary on the First Letter of John: “So if you want to know that you have received the Spirit, examine your heart, lest you run the risk of having the sacrament but not having its effect. Examine your heart, and if there is fraternal love there, rest assured. There is no love without the Spirit of God.” (Augustinus, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* [PL 35, 2025–26])<sup>9</sup>

In this way, the examination of a concrete life of love, that is, of charity, acquires a profound pneumatological value, both for the individual believer and for the community of believers that is the Church.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, such an examination

<sup>9</sup> See also Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 1082]: “God, the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from God, when He gives Himself to a person, sets him on fire with the love of God and of his neighbor.”

<sup>10</sup> It would be interesting to examine the relationship between charity and communion in the light of Augustinian exegesis, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. Very useful in this regard is a summary offered by Ratzinger himself on Augustine's definition of the Spirit as *communio*: “This already has a fundamentally ecclesiological meaning [...]. It opens pneumatology up into ecclesiology, and reverse connection of ecclesiology into theology. Becoming a Christian means becoming *communio* and thereby entering into the mode of being of the Holy Spirit. But it can also only happen through the Holy Spirit, who is the power of communication, mediating it, making it possible and is himself a Person. Spirit is the unity which God gives himself. In this unity, he himself gives himself. [...] The Spirit's own paradoxical and unique property is being *communio*, having his highest selfness precisely in being fully the movement of *communio*” (Ratzinger 1998, 327).

must be considered necessary and urgent: the absence of the effects of love signals the risk of a lack of openness to the gift of the Spirit and, therefore, of resistance to its action.

### 3.3. A Proposal: Prospects for a Pneumatological Ecclesiology (DCE 19–39)

The preceding observations suggest that the second part of the Encyclical *Deus caritas est* should be interpreted not only as the implementing and operative part of the papal document, but rather as the more exquisitely pneumatological and therefore concrete part.

A first confirmation of this reading hypothesis can be found in the Latin title that opens this part of the text: Benedict XVI proposes to the Church an *exercitatio amoris*, that is, an “exercise of love” and not simply a practice. This exercise is introduced by the Pope with a strong reference to the Holy Spirit and his fundamental action of love, starting from the life of the first Christian community after Pentecost.<sup>11</sup>

The Pope then refers to the Spirit as the one who conforms the charitable life of the believers to the love of Christ, moving them toward their neighbor in the style of the Son of God. This conformation, Benedict XVI continues, takes on a witnessing power for all humanity, making it participate in God’s own life of love. This is the Church’s service to the world:

The Spirit is also the energy which transforms the heart of the ecclesial community, so that it becomes a witness before the world to the love of the Father, who wishes to make humanity a single family in his Son. Love is therefore the service that the Church carries out in order to attend constantly (*perpetuo*) to man’s sufferings and his needs, including material needs. And this is the aspect, this *service of charity*, on which I want to focus in the second part of the Encyclical. (DCE 19)

The concreteness of this pneumatological foundation can be understood precisely by the emphasis on the Church’s perseverance in the service of charity. The adverb “constantly” could recall the aspect of *dwelling* that is proper to the Holy Spirit as God and gift.

The value of using this adverb is confirmed by what Ratzinger wrote even before he began his Petrine ministry. Commenting on St. Augustine’s reflection on the Spirit as a gift, the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith understood constancy in love as a characteristic aspect of the Spirit’s action and thus as a fundamental criterion for identifying his operative presence:

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<sup>11</sup> Between paragraphs 19 and 20 of the Encyclical, the focus shifts from the Augustinian exegesis of love as it is treated in the Johannine literature to the Lucan account of the Acts of the Apostles.

The basic criterion of love – its characteristic activity and therefore the characteristic activity of the Holy Spirit – is that it creates abiding. Love proves itself in constancy. Love is not recognizable right at any given moment, or in just one moment; instead, love abides, overcomes vacillation, and bears eternity within itself, which also shows, in my opinion, the connection between love and truth. Love in the full sense can only exist where constancy exists. Where abiding exists. Because love has to do with abiding, it cannot take place anywhere except where there is eternity. (Ratzinger 1998, 238–39)

In the same article, Ratzinger argued that in order to understand the meaning and value of the Church's own life, it is necessary to adopt this pneumatological criterion of constancy in love. As a creation of the Spirit, the Church is the Body of the Lord, built up by the Holy Spirit himself. For this reason the Church herself is a gift of love offered by God to the world.

In the light of Augustinian reflection, the Cardinal continued, if the Church is a gift of love through the action of the Spirit, then she must persevere in love: as the Spirit dwells in the Church, love remains in her, to the point of saying that “the Church is love.” Otherwise, if the experience of believers does not persevere in the love that makes the Church united, then the Spirit himself is rejected:

The dogmatic statement “The Church is love” is not merely a dogmatic statement for the manuals, but refers to the dynamism that forms unity, a dynamism that is the force holding the Church together. Thus, Augustine thinks of schism as a pneumatological heresy which takes root concretely in the act of living. To remove oneself from the abiding, which is the spirit, from the patience of love, is to revoke love by revoking abiding and thereby denying the Holy Spirit, who is the patience of abiding, of reconciling. (Ratzinger 1998, 332–33)

In the light of these considerations, we could then interpret the second part of the Encyclical as a genuine proposal of a pneumatological ecclesiology. In this regard, the Pope refers to the service of charity as one of the three responsibilities of the Church in the world: far from confusing charity with a kind of welfarism that does not produce justice (*DCE* 26), and without claiming to replace the State and the responsibilities of political and civil life, the Church cannot fail in her *spiritual* responsibility to be a concrete gift of divine love in the world:

Love – *caritas* – will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. [...] There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbor is indispensable. *The Church is alive with the love enkindled by the Spirit of Christ.* This love does not simply offer people material help, but refreshment and care for their souls, something which often is even more necessary than material support. (*DCE* 28b)



A few years later, in *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI reaffirmed his pastoral concern for this spiritual responsibility. Understanding *caritas* as the “force that originates in God, Eternal Love and Absolute Truth”, the Pope emphasizes the need to link charity and truth: thus love takes the concrete and personal form that is ultimately embodied in Jesus Christ (CV 1). As he wrote in CV 2, his intention with this encyclical is to revive the social doctrine of the Church as a style of charity rooted in the incarnate person of Jesus.

Charity is at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine. Every responsibility and every commitment spelt out by that doctrine is derived from charity which, according to the teaching of Jesus, is the synthesis of the entire Law (Matthew 22:36–40). It gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with neighbour; it is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones). For the Church, instructed by the Gospel, charity is everything because, as Saint John teaches (1 John 4:8,16) and as I recalled in my first Encyclical Letter, “God is love” (*DCE*): everything has its origin in God’s love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it. Love is God’s greatest gift to humanity, it is his promise and our hope.

A useful key to this understanding of the exercise of charity from a christological and pneumatological perspective can be found in the early studies of the theologian Ratzinger, especially with regard to the Augustinian understanding of the Church as the spiritual Body of Christ. More than fifty years before his first Encyclical, Benedict XVI had studied this ecclesiological aspect in depth (Ratzinger 1971). In the background there is a broader and more fundamental reflection on the relationship between the invisibility of God and the visibility of the Church in the world. The study shows how Augustine progressively interprets the Body of Christ in the “visible *ecclesia*, that is, in the community that celebrates the sacrament of the Body of the Lord.” (Ratzinger 1971, 252) The unified body of the Church throughout the world is rooted in the communion with the Body of Christ through the Spirit:

[The Church] is represented outwardly in the sacrament of the Body of the Lord, but according to its intimate reality it consists in the communion of the Spirit of Christ. The People of God is the community that represents the unity of those who offer the sacrifice with Christ. The House of God intends this interior “being one” in the Spirit of Christ, which certainly does not come about without “being one” in the Body of Christ. (Ratzinger 1971, 184–85)

In Augustine, the understanding of the Church as the “House of God” is not developed “in relation to the meeting places of the community,” but as an image of the

“People of God” and the “Body of Christ,” in relation to the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ratzinger 1971, 180).<sup>12</sup> In being the Body of Christ, the Church receives a generative power that Augustine ultimately identifies in *caritas*. In this regard, Ratzinger speaks of the motherhood of the Church, realized through the *communio sanctorum*, by which Christ’s saving grace is offered to the world. The Holy Spirit works in a proper sense in the Body of Christ through the communion of saints, who are therefore “the true and proper *caritas*” (Ratzinger 1971, 150).<sup>13</sup> Therefore, *caritas* is precisely the principle of authentication in the Augustinian identification of the Church as *caro Christi spiritualis* (“spiritual body of Christ”), which Ratzinger has adopted (Ratzinger 1971, 252, esp. n. 21).

## Conclusion

With regard to the two purposes mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we can first confirm that the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* has a strong rootedness in the Augustinian exegesis of the Johannine literature, and especially in the First Epistle of John.

This rootedness is particularly evident in the lexical clarification of the terms *eros* and *agape*, that St. Augustine proposes to explain love in relation to God. The dual emphasis on the primacy of God’s love and the priority of love of one’s neighbor is also due to Augustinian Johannine exegesis, especially with regard to the interplay between *amans*, *quod amatur*, and *amor*.

The most interesting aspect of the research, however, is the deepening of the pneumatological reflection on love: St. Augustine’s understanding of the dynamic of love in relation to the Spirit, who is God and gift, has allowed us to interpret the entire second part of the Encyclical as a pneumatological ecclesiology that explains the Church’s responsibility in the world and in history. Thus, this part of the papal document could be understood as an *exercitatio amoris* based on the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Church, the spiritual body of Christ. From DCE 19 on, the connection between the Holy Spirit and the Church in the world is not a mere allusion or juxtaposition, but is firmly rooted in the theological studies of Augustinian exegesis that the theologian Ratzinger pursued throughout his academic life.

<sup>12</sup> Importantly, Ratzinger points out that by avoiding a spatial identification of ecclesial unity, Augustine protected the church from the temptation to create its own boundary within the world (Ratzinger 2015, 114, n. 51): “As a *communio caritatis*, the Church remains an alien in this world; it is neither an earthly state nor a theocracy but rather achieves its end at the *eschaton*. To that extent Augustine’s sacramental view of the Church maintains rather than does away with an eschatological perspective.”

<sup>13</sup> About the close connection between *caritas* and *communio* for Augustine, see also Ratzinger 2015, 110–13, esp. n. 46 and 48.

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# Church Tradition and Its Biblical Foundations in the Teaching of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. An Outline of Problems

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**Abstract:** The Tradition of the Church has been a vital part of the Christian faith since the apostolic age. It has its tangible, historical basis in Scripture, but at the same time, it is a supernatural, living and ever-present reality of the Church. Because of its relevance to Christian life, tradition is also a frequently debated theological topic in Catholic and Protestant theological circles. As a theologian, Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI created and offered the Church his concept of the Tradition of the Church, and that theological proposal is the subject of the present analyses. They aim to describe the sources, the essence and the constituent elements of the sacred Tradition of the Church in Ratzinger's lectures with particular reference to its biblical basis. A methodologically correct way of dealing with the issue at hand is a historical and, at the same time, theological analysis, since the subject of the study is the Church as a supernatural reality of the community of believers past and present. This article first discusses Joseph Ratzinger's publications on the Tradition of the Church, proceeding afterwards to present the essential elements of his understanding of Tradition and, finally, describing its biblical foundations. For Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, Tradition is the constant actualisation of Jesus' presence in the Church, the memory of him, but also the living experience of salvation.

**Keywords:** Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, tradition, tradition of the Church, Tradition and Scripture, Revelation, theological exegesis

The Tradition of the Church has been a vital part of the Christian faith since the apostolic age. It has its tangible, historical basis in Scripture, but at the same time, it is a supernatural, living and ever-present reality of the Church. Because of its momentousness and significance for Christian life, tradition is also an oft-discussed theological topic not only in Catholic but also in Protestant theological circles. Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI created and offered to the Church his own understanding of Tradition, which has been the subject of many factual discussions.<sup>1</sup> The theological phenomenon that is the concept of Tradition proposed by the German theologian is the subject of the analyses presented here. They aim to describe the sources, the essence and the constituent elements of the sacred Tradition

<sup>1</sup> See studies on the topic of Tradition in the teaching of Joseph Ratzinger: Rowland 2008, 48–65; Hahn 2009, particularly 50–53; Brotherton 2015, 98–103, 111; also Hofmann 2009, 31–58 and 58–63 (“Exkurs: Ratzinger gegen Rahner – Tradition gegen Spekulation?”); for more, see Blanco 2011; Gagliardi 2022.

in Joseph Ratzinger's teachings with particular reference to its biblical foundations. By necessity, the analysis must be set in the broader context of the theological edifice built by Joseph Ratzinger, as noted by the eminent American Catholic theologian Scott Hahn: "He understands all the essential constituent elements of the Church – the hierarchy of apostolic succession, the apostolic tradition, the canon of Scripture, the Creed, and the rule of faith – in relation to the revelation and mission of the Word of God." (2009, 49) A methodologically correct way of dealing with the issue at hand is a historical and, simultaneously, theological approach. This is because the object of analysis is not only the Church in its historical origins but the Church as a supernatural reality of the community of believers past and present. First, Joseph Ratzinger's publications and statements on Tradition are discussed chronologically in order to indicate the essential components of his understanding of Tradition, as well as to make it possible to describe its biblical dimensions, which is done in the final section. Given the vastness and comprehensiveness of Joseph Ratzinger's/Benedict XVI's theological thought, it should be noted from the outset that the discussion presented here is merely introductory to Ratzinger's concept of Tradition.

## 1. Called to Be a Theologian of Revelation

The study of the theological thought of Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) should be preceded by at least a general discussion and evaluation of the sources one intends to consider during the analyses. Indeed, the period of creative scholarly work of the pope from Bavaria, from his priestly ordination (1951) to the end of his life, covers more than seventy years and is embedded in the recent history of the Church. Leaving aside his childhood and family home, the period mentioned above (1951–2022) can be distinguished by at least three distinct phases in his life: first as a student, lecturer and professor (1951–1977),<sup>2</sup> then as a bishop, cardinal and Roman curial (1977–2005), and finally as pope (2005–2022).<sup>3</sup>

Considering the chronological development of Joseph Ratzinger's theological thought is certainly necessary when presenting his concept of the living Tradition of the Church. This is because this issue appears as early as the first stage of the future pope's scholarly work and is present virtually until the end of his public activity. The first inspirations were born out of Joseph Ratzinger's encounter and fascination with the writings of St Augustine (Ratzinger 1954) and St Bonaventure, to whom he dedicated his habilitation thesis on Revelation and Salvation History: Typoskript

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ratzinger presented the initial period of his life in his memoirs while he was already Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Ratzinger 1998; cf. Verweyen 2007, 18–42).

<sup>3</sup> Further detailed information can, of course, be found online and in special studies (Verweyen 2007; Hintermeier 2010; Seewald 2021).

1955 (Ratzinger 2014b), published version — 1959 (Ratzinger 2014c). Selected paragraphs of the unpublished manuscript were printed separately in a more recent study.<sup>4</sup>

An important phase of the first period of Joseph Ratzinger's life was his participation in the work of the Second Vatican Council. The future pope was present at all four conciliar sessions as *peritus*, a theological advisor to the Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Josef Frings (Ratzinger 1998, 120–31; Hofmann 2009, 36–48). This is significant because, among his many different activities, Ratzinger's participation in the work on the conciliar Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, the second chapter of which is devoted to handing on Revelation, i.e., Tradition, Scripture and the *Magisterium Ecclesiae*, deserves special mention here. Joseph Ratzinger not only contributed to this<sup>5</sup> and other conciliar constitutions but, shortly after the Council, wrote a commentary on *Dei Verbum* in German — critical according to some, approving according to others.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Ratzinger commented

<sup>4</sup> For example, Joseph Ratzinger's 1958 article "Offenbarung – Schrift – Überlieferung. Ein Text des hl. Bonaventura und seine Bedeutung für die gegenwärtige Theologie" corresponded thematically to §6 of an unpublished dissertation. Undoubtedly, this article contains a foreshadowing of a future holistic concept of Revelation, Scripture and Tradition (Ratzinger 1958, 2014a). For more, see Verwey 2010; Hofmann 2009, 20–30; Gagliardi 2022, 11–28.

<sup>5</sup> "It is not possible to determine the extent of Ratzinger's influence on the final form of the document, but it can certainly be said that many of the concepts contained in the final form of the Constitution coincide with Ratzinger's convictions, an example of which is precisely the understanding of Revelation." (Zatwardnicki 2014b, 101; for a broader description, see 100–103) This contribution is deemed more modest by Hofmann 2009, 36–42, particularly 39–41. For more, see Verwey 2007, 35–39; Schirmacher 2021, 17–20. Ratzinger's contribution to *Dei Verbum* is further discussed in: Wicks 2008; Wicks 2010; Lam 2013. The last of these authors notes: "Finally, if one is to access about Ratzinger's contribution, then one might say that the value of a product lies in its good preparation. Ratzinger's participation in the early debate on the Schema *de fontibus revelationis* was surely a significant element of this good preparation. The foundation of this preparation, however, was Ratzinger's early studies of the theological classics, in particular the theology of the Seraphic doctor." (Lam 2013, 54)

The information provided by Ratzinger himself in his memoirs also does not settle the question conclusively. Ratzinger recalls: "Thus, it was agreed that Karl Rahner and I together would produce a second, more developed version. This second text, much more Rahner's work than my own, was then distributed among the Fathers and evoked some rather bitter reactions" (Ratzinger 1998, 128); and then adds: "It now became clear that Rahner's schema could not be accepted, but the official text, too, was rejected by a narrow margin of votes. The theme, therefore, had to be postponed. The Constitution on Divine Revelation could be completed only in the final period of the Council after some very complex debates, but the final product was one of the outstanding texts of the Council and one that has yet to be truly received." (Ratzinger 1998, 129) Given the rejection of Rahner's schema, one would be right to assume a greater influence of Ratzinger on the redrafted and subsequently approved text of the Constitution (see below).

<sup>6</sup> One can take the view that J. Ratzinger's assessment of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* seems to have evolved, to have been varied and balanced, as noted by Cardinal Avery Dulles in his lectures; for example, Ratzinger's criticism concerns the not always correct reception of *Dei Verbum*'s statements, including the misinterpretation of Chapter 2 on the mutual relationship of Revelation, Tradition and Scripture: "Ratzinger now makes the point that revelation, as a living reality, is incapable of being enclosed in a text" (cf. Dulles 2008, 468 and 474); also Gagliardi 2022, 42–46. Cf. Ratzinger 1967, 715–31, in which the following general summary of the final outcome of the conciliar commission's work on the *Dei Verbum* Constitution was given: "the effort of a four-year dispute has not been in vain" (Ratzinger 1967, 729: "Aufs Ganze des Erreichten hin gesehen, wird man daher unbedenklich sagen dürfen, daß die Mühe

on Tradition and Scripture on many occasions in the 1960s, as is well illustrated in the following overview:

- 1962 “Die Heilige Schrift und die Tradition. Rec. do Josef R. Geiselmann. Die Heilige Schrift und Tradition. Zu den neueren Kontroversen über das Verhältnis der Heiligen Schrift zu den nicht geschriebenen Traditionen, Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder” (Ratzinger 2018b);
- 1964 “Zur Konzilsdiskussion über das Verhältnis von Schrift und Überlieferung” (Ratzinger 1964, cf. 2016a);
- 1965 “Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriffs” (Ratzinger 1965a, cf. 2008c, 2008b, 2018c);
- 1965 “Tradition: III. Systematisch” (Ratzinger 1965b; cf. 2018d);
- 1967 “Einleitung und Kommentar zum Prooemium, zu Kapitel I, II und VI der Offenbarungskonstitution »Dei Verbum«” (Ratzinger 1967, cf. 2016b).

Joseph Ratzinger perceived the important and valuable experience as an expert of the Second Vatican Council as a confirmation of his vocation, which he described as a “theological vocation” (“Biography of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI” 2024). At the same time, the period before and around the Second Vatican Council was a time when his theological concept of Revelation, Scripture and Tradition and the inter-relationship of these realities took shape.

During and after the Second Vatican Council, Joseph Ratzinger was successively a lecturer at several universities (see Verweyen 2007, 43–61; also Hofmann 2009, 31–58). The period of his work at Regensburg (1969–1977) includes another study in which the future pope addressed the topic of tradition, its anthropological necessity, foundations and conditions, but also stressed the important biblical and Christological components of his understanding of Christian tradition (Ratzinger 1982). The new context of this contribution should also be noted. Indeed, in place of the theological dispute over the sources of Tradition and the ecumenical perspective, the future pope discusses the civilisational and cultural crisis which, in his view, we are facing, including the crisis of faith of modern man combined with a profound crisis of theology and biblical exegesis.<sup>7</sup>

Appointed by John Paul II as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (25 November 1981), Ratzinger relinquished the pastoral leadership of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising (15 February 1982). The papal appointment meant that, as prefect, Ratzinger served in such capacities as chairman of

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eines vier Jahre umspannenden Streites nicht vergeblich gewesen ist”). In this context, let us note a recent publication devoted to “the intellectual struggles of Joseph Ratzinger in 1965–1966.” (Bachanek 2024)

<sup>7</sup> The text included in *Principles of a Catholic Theology* is the final version of a lecture given in the summer of 1973 at the University of Salzburg and subsequently included in a joint publication *Freiheit des Menschen* (Ratzinger 1974); this article cites the English translation of this publication (Ratzinger 1987a; cf. Polish translations: Ratzinger 2009, 111–34; 2018a).



the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the International Theological Commission.<sup>8</sup> This is significant because the aforementioned commissions published many important documents during his tenure as prefect, although it is difficult to clearly define his contribution to their creation.<sup>9</sup> A special mention should be made of *the Catechism of the Catholic Church* from that period, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was chairman of the commission working on it (1986–1992). The question of Tradition and Scripture and their relationship to each other was given its rightful place in the Catechism (CCC 74–83).<sup>10</sup>

The final stage of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's life was his election as the 265th Pope of the Roman Catholic Church (19 April 2005) and his subsequent papal ministry. During his early pontificate, Benedict XVI delivered a series of catechesis, one of which was explicitly dedicated to the living Tradition of the Church (Benedict XVI 2006).<sup>11</sup> A little later came the publication of the apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010), in which the Pope also referred to the theme of Tradition (VD 17–18). As he did earlier in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, so too in the *Verbum Domini* and his other speeches, Benedict XVI seems to follow the conciliar Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.<sup>12</sup> A year later (2011), the International Theological Commission subcommittee presented the document *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, in which the topic of Tradition was extensively and factually elaborated (ITC 2012, 32–42). Piotr Rossa concludes his analysis of the concept of Tradition as seen in this document with the apt statement that “the topic of Tradition is no longer a divisive one among Christians.” (Rossa 2013, 324) Undoubtedly, this was in no small

<sup>8</sup> Much detailed information from this period was provided by the Pope's secretary Georg Gänswein (Gänswein and Gaeta 2023, 27–52).

<sup>9</sup> Out of the numerous International Theological Commission documents, at least three are worth mentioning in the context of the issue of Tradition. During the creation of the first one, *Catholic Teaching on Apostolic Succession* (1973), Ratzinger was a member of the International Theological Commission (see Olejnik 1976). While the second document — *The Interpretation of Dogma* (1989) — was being drafted, he served as commission chairman, acting in his capacity as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The last document, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria* (2012), which was written over many years (2004–2011), was already created under the pontificate of Benedict XVI, and the topic of Tradition was prominently featured in it. See ITC 2012, 32–42 (No. 25–32); cf. Benedict XVI 2012; also: Rossa 2013 and footnote 13 below.

<sup>10</sup> “Im Juli 1986 rief Johannes Paul II. eine Kommission aus Kardinälen und Bischöfen unter dem Vorsitz des Präfekten ins Leben. Sechs Jahre arbeitete er intensiv an einem Grundlagentext für das tägliche Leben der Christen.” (Gänswein and Gaeta 2023, 51) The new catechism essentially repeats the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the living Tradition of the Church; however, it also features some original elements (see CCC 78a, 80b, 83a; cf. DV 7–10).

<sup>11</sup> The above series of catechesis given by Benedict XVI during the general audiences between Wednesday, 15 March 2006, and Wednesday, 14 February 2007, has been published at least three times in Polish (Benedykt XVI 2007a, 2007b, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Brotherton 2015, 102–3. In the referenced exhortation *Verbum Domini*, the expressions “Tradition,” “the living Tradition” and “the Church's living Tradition” (along with a singular case of “sacred Tradition” in VD 47) occur some thirty times, excluding the colloquial use of the term in such phrases as ecclesial tradition, biblical tradition, Latin tradition, etc.

part thanks to the theologian Joseph Ratzinger, although the Pope had no direct involvement in its creation.<sup>13</sup> Finally, one must not forget that Joseph Ratzinger also worked and published privately, first as a prefect and then during his pontificate.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Tradition as the Actualisation of Christ's Presence in the Church

Even a cursory reading of Joseph Ratzinger's theological works and publications indicates that he formulated the basic elements of his understanding of the Tradition of the Church early on in his scholarly journey. Three factors can be cited that influenced his concept of Tradition: his studies on the theological thought of St Bonaventure, the legacy of the Council of Trent on the two sources of Revelation and the prospect of ecumenical dialogue with Protestants (the question of *sola Scriptura*). The latter two factors led Ratzinger to deal with this issue mainly as a conciliar expert (*peritus*), while the first factor provided him with the philosophical and theological basis for his concept of Revelation, Scripture and Tradition.<sup>15</sup> It suffices to quote the still-young theologian who wrote in 1958 (he was 31 years old at the time):

For today's discussion about the concept of tradition, the lesson should thus arise that an all too purposeful narrowing of the conversation to the immediate question of the proof of tradition and the proof of Scripture is inadequate from its starting point and so not very promising. Rather, it will be important to consider the entire complex of the relationship between revelation, Scripture, and tradition, and, in doing so, to develop a correct understanding of the basic concept of revelation itself [...] (own translation)<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Fr. Prof. Jerzy Szymik, a member of the International Theological Commission for two terms (2004–2014), remarked in an interview that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, while still Chairman of the Commission, attended its annual plenary session (4–8 October 2004) and spoke at the end of the meeting, giving indications to those present on such things as the planned document *Theology Today*. While he no longer attended later International Theological Commission meetings as pope, his theological ideas did appear in speeches by committee members.

<sup>14</sup> "Pope Benedict made it clear from the beginning that he was going to continue to privately write books and meet with his students. He took on an esteemed office, but he had not become another person. The Jesus Trilogy is a visible monument of this new attitude, as the Pope wrote not as the Pope but rather as Ratzinger the private individual and theologian." (Schirrmacher 2021, 3; see also Gänswein and Gaeta 2023, 25–27)

<sup>15</sup> Aaron Pidel's monograph also refers to St Bonaventure as a source of inspiration for Joseph Ratzinger's theological thought, but this time in relation to his model of biblical inspiration (Pidel 2023, 53–99, particularly 54, 97).

<sup>16</sup> "Für die heutige Diskussion um den Traditionsbegriff dürfte sich so die Lehre ergeben, daß eine allzu zweckgebundene Verengung des Gesprächs auf die unmittelbare Frage des Traditionsbeweises und des Schriftbeweises von ihrem Ausgangspunkt her unzulänglich und so wenig aussichtsreich ist. Es wird vielmehr darauf ankommen, den Gesamtkomplex des Verhältnisses von Offenbarung, Schrift und Überlieferung ins Auge zu fassen und dabei gerade ein rechtes Verständnis des Grundbegriffs der Offenbarung selbst zu erarbeiten [...]" (Ratzinger 1958, 27; cf. 2014a, 635)

Joseph Ratzinger then wrote the following seven years later (1965), during the Second Vatican Council:

To make further progress, it will therefore be necessary to deepen our approach, not being preoccupied with such superficial implications as the sufficiency or insufficiency of Scripture, but presenting as a whole the overall problem of the mode of presence of the revealed word among the faithful. Then we can see that we have to reach beyond the positive sources of Scripture and tradition, to their inner source: the revelation, the living word of God, from which Scripture and tradition both spring and without which neither can be grasped in the importance they have for faith. The question of “Scripture and tradition” remains insoluble so long as it is not expanded to a question of “revelation and tradition” and thereby inserted into the larger context in which it belongs. (Ratzinger 2008c, 50; cf. 2018c, 355)

The starting point for understanding the place and role of Tradition and Scripture in the Christian life is a correct understanding of Revelation, which precedes and exceeds both of the aforementioned realities. Revelation is their source, but it is neither identical nor synonymous with them.<sup>17</sup> This is where another element comes in, without which Revelation and salvation history, and thus also Tradition, would be impossible. The revealing God expects a response of faith on the part of the subject receiving the Revelation. Ratzinger writes about this in *Principles of a Catholic Theology*:

If we are correctly to assess the meaning of the Church, we must recall an insight at which we had arrived earlier in our general analysis of the concept of tradition. Tradition, we said, always presumes a bearer of tradition, that is, a community that preserves and communicates it, that is the vessel of a comprehensive common tradition and that becomes, by the oneness of the historical context in which it exists, the bearer of concrete memory. This bearer of tradition in the case of Jesus is the Church. (Ratzinger 1987a, 100; cf. 2018a, 440)

The reflection on the receiving subject of Revelation accompanied the future pope from the beginning. Joseph Ratzinger would once again refer to his youthful conclusions many years later, while already serving as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which indicates the extraordinary importance of this thesis:

[...] the receiving subject is always also a part of the concept of “revelation”. Where there is no one to perceive “revelation”, no re-vel-ation has occurred, because no veil has been removed. By definition, revelation requires a someone who apprehends it. These insights, gained through my reading of Bonaventure, were later on very important for me at the time of the conciliar discussion on revelation, Scripture, and tradition. Because, if Bonaventure

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<sup>17</sup> The relationship between Revelation and Scripture as seen by Joseph Ratzinger was discussed at length by Sławomir Zatywardnicki (2014b; see also 2022, 141–256).

is right, then revelation precedes Scripture and becomes deposited in Scripture but is not simply identical with it. This in turn means that revelation is always something greater than what is merely written down. And this again means that there can be no such thing as pure *sola scriptura* (“by Scripture alone”), because an essential element of Scripture is the Church as understanding subject, and with this the fundamental sense of tradition is already given. (Ratzinger 1998, 108–9)

Joseph Ratzinger places Scripture and Tradition in the broader context of a theology of Revelation in which Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God to man. Jesus Christ, with all his history revealing and fulfilling God’s plan of salvation for man and the world, is the fullness of Revelation. The locus of the Revelation is the receiving subject, the Church as a community of believers, and the indispensable salvific consequence of this process is the emergence of Scripture<sup>18</sup> and Tradition (Christian tradition). Only here is it possible to present Tradition as Ratzinger defines it in his publications, supplementing the description with his later statements as prefect and pope.<sup>19</sup>

The basic determinant defining Tradition appeared in Ratzinger’s statements quoted above, and this is the essential difference between the reality of Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: “The fact that there is ‘tradition’ rests first of all on the incongruence between the two entities ‘revelation’ and ‘Scripture’. For revelation signifies all God’s acts and utterances directed to man; it signifies a reality of which Scripture gives us information but that is not simply Scripture itself. Revelation goes beyond Scripture, then, to the same extent as reality goes beyond information about it.” (Ratzinger 2008c, 51)

Ratzinger illuminates further the reality of Scripture as the written word of God, emphasising the different meanings of Scripture in the Old and New Covenants and its different interpretations, as well as the crucial importance of this for the Christian tradition. The final revelation of God in his Son was decisive: “The reality that comes to be in Christian revelation is nothing and no one other than Christ himself. He is revelation in the proper sense: ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’, Christ says in John (14:9).” (Ratzinger 2008c, 56) The Church, on the other hand, is merely the “bearer of Jesus’ tradition” and is its interpreter.

The explication of the reality of Christ took place in the apostolic Church in two ways, as a *Christological* interpretation of the Old Testament and later as an uninterrupted explanation in the Spirit of the event of Christ in the community of the Church (*ecclesial* interpretation).<sup>20</sup> “This latter is possible because Christ is not dead, but

<sup>18</sup> Notably, this was also the time when Karl Rahner published *Über die Schriftinspiration*, in which he emphasises the ecclesial foundation of biblical inspiration: the constitutive element of the birth of the Church was God’s intended creation of Scripture (Rahner 1958, 1969).

<sup>19</sup> See Ratzinger 2008c, cf. 1965a, 1965b; see Polish translations: Ratzinger 2008b, 2018c, 2018d.

<sup>20</sup> On the interpretation of the Old and New Covenant Scriptures in the context of the emerging Tradition, see Ratzinger 1965a, 59–62; 1965b, 293–96; cf. 2008c, 54.

living; not merely the Christ of yesterday, but just as much the Christ of today and of tomorrow. It is precisely in his Church, however, that he is living and present: she is his body, in which his Spirit is at work.” (Ratzinger 2008c, 58; cf. CCC 80)

In a 1965 article, the future pope pointed to three roots of the reality called “Tradition”: it grows out of the greater richness of the reality of Revelation, in juxtaposition with Scripture (1); another causal factor is the special character of New Testament Revelation, construed as the *pneuma*, in contrast to the *gramma* of the Old Testament: the living faith and its confession is above the specific record (2); the third root of Tradition is “the character of the Christ-event as present and the authoritative presence of Christ’s Spirit in his body, the Church, and associated with this the authority to interpret the Christ of yesterday with the Christ of today [...]” (3) (Ratzinger 2008c, 63; cf. 1965a, 45; also see Brotherton 2015, 101).

Tradition has its origin in the historical event of Revelation and, at the same time, is a living and ever-present reality of the Church as “accomplished and continuing revelation” (cf. Zatwardnicki 2022, 210–27). The Tradition of the Church is the modality (way) of communicating the word of God, which is different from Scripture: “The Church is tradition, the concrete situs of the *traditio* of Jesus, into which – let us admit it – much human pseudotradition has found its way; so much so, in fact, that even, and even precisely, the Church has contributed to the general crisis of tradition that afflicts mankind.” (Ratzinger 1987a, 100)

Several elements can be mentioned, which together constitute the mystery of Tradition; Joseph Ratzinger speaks of its four successive “strata” (German: *Schichten*) (Ratzinger 2008c, 63–64; cf. 1965a, 45–46):

- (a) In the beginning is the gift of the Father to the world, the gift of the Son (*Urparadosis*), who gave himself to the world and who is permanently present in his body, the Church (cf. CCC 79); the mystery of Christ’s presence is a comprehensively construed reality handed down in Tradition, which precedes detailed explanations, including the interpretation of Scripture (cf. CCC 78);<sup>21</sup>
- (b) Tradition exists concretely as a present in the faith which, being the indwelling of Christ in the believer, is fruitful, alive and takes concrete form;
- (c) Tradition has its own organ in the Church hierarchy, in those who have authority in the Church;<sup>22</sup>
- (d) Tradition also exists, as already expressed, in what by virtue of faith has become a rule of faith (*symbolum, fides quae*).

<sup>21</sup> Aaron Pidel aptly articulates this fundamental truth by noting: “At the most global level, tradition encompasses nothing less than the ‘entire mystery of Christ’s presence’ in history, the surplus of meaning in revelation that can never be exhaustively captured in writing.” (2023, 113)

<sup>22</sup> The author refers here to a separate study on the Magisterium and Unity of the Church (Ratzinger 1963; cf. Ratzinger 2008a).

What is striking and puzzling at the same time is the absence in the above description of Tradition of an explicit, dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, the Guarantor of the living Tradition, although it can be assumed in item (b).

The Author distributes the emphasis differently in the article compiled for the *Lexikon für die Theologie und Kirche*, in which he lists six elements of Tradition. Nonetheless, the essence of his argument remains the same: Scripture is part of Tradition, interpreted first as the Old and then as the New Testament — Christologically and ecclesiastically (a and b); a fundamental element of the Christian concept of Tradition is the idea of *successio apostolica* (c); another component in the structure of the concept of Tradition is the idea of *regula fidei*, which was later replaced by *symbolum* (d); a strong awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the time of the Church (“Das Präsens des Pneuma gehört konstitutiv zur christlichen Tradition”) (e); in contrast, the idea of unrecorded apostolic traditions, which emerged later in Catholic theology, is not constitutive of the notion of Tradition (f) (Ratzinger 1965b, 293–96; cf. 2018d, 385–88).

Finally, it is worth recalling the statements made by Benedict XVI in his general audience in which he emphasises the unique role of the Holy Spirit (see Benedict XVI 2006):

This permanent actualization of the active presence of the Lord Jesus in his People, brought about by the Holy Spirit and expressed in the Church through the apostolic ministry and fraternal communion is what, in a theological sense, is meant by the term “Tradition”: it is not merely the material transmission of what was given at the beginning to the Apostles, but the effective presence of the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus who accompanies and guides in the Spirit the community he has gathered together.

The Pope then adds:

Tradition is the communion of the faithful around their legitimate Pastors down through history, a communion that the Holy Spirit nurtures, assuring the connection between the experience of the apostolic faith, lived in the original community of the disciples, and the actual experience of Christ in his Church.

In other words, Tradition is the practical<sup>23</sup> continuity of the Church, the holy Temple of God the Father, built on the foundation of the Apostles and held together by the cornerstone, Christ, through the life-giving action of the Spirit [...].

<sup>23</sup> This passage should read “the organic continuity”; the Italian version of this catechesis reads: “la continuità organica”; the German translation: “die organische Kontinuität,” much like the other language versions.

To put the Pope's thought succinctly, Tradition is the "permanent actualization of the active presence of the Lord Jesus in his People" or in other words, "Tradition is the organic continuity of the Church [...] through the life-giving action of the Spirit"; thus, the Pope virtually equates Tradition with the Church. A concise opinion on Tradition in Benedict XVI's lecture was given by Tracey Rowland, who states: "His is a position which favours an understanding of tradition as a medium for the transmission of Revelation..." (2008, 64) An equally brief but very apt synthesis of Benedict XVI's thought on Tradition is given by Scott Hahn, who summarises the Pope's position as follows: "The Tradition: Church as *Memoria Ecclesiae*, *Viva Vox*," (see 2009, 50–53) and then specifies: "Tradition, then, is nothing less than Christ's living and saving and interpretive presence in the Church." (2009, 51)

To conclude this section, let us add that Ratzinger's concept of Revelation, Scripture and Tradition and the reciprocal relationship of these realities would hardly change or undergo any significant correction in his later publications and speeches, with only some specific issues concerning Tradition being clarified further; e.g. some authors emphasise Ratzinger's greater openness to the material dimension of Tradition (see Gagliardi 2022, 113–48, particularly 121–29).<sup>24</sup>

### 3. The Biblical Foundations of the Church's Living Tradition

The publications cited in section one and the subsequent outlining of the theological, holistic concept of Revelation, Tradition and Scripture with particular reference to Tradition, now make it possible to recall the biblical components of the living Tradition of the Church in Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's lectures.<sup>25</sup> The starting point must be to recall the truth, also present in successive documents of the Church, that Tradition and Scripture flow from the same divine wellspring, are closely linked to each other and have the same mission to fulfil ("For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same

<sup>24</sup> It is worth recalling a more extensive excerpt from Mauro Gagliardi's opinion, as it is a good summary of the analyses so far: "Il primo è che lo studio giovanile condotto da Ratzinger su Bonaventura gli ha fatto sviluppare una visione di teologia della Rivelazione che egli ha mantenuto praticamente immutata nell'arco dell'intero percorso della sua produzione teologica. Come è ovvio, attraverso decenni di lavoro e centinaia di pubblicazioni, egli ha potuto limare e rivedere, o anche migliorare qualche aspetto di dettaglio; ha potuto supportare la sua visione con le nuove conoscenze che andava acquisendo, ma la sua visione fondamentale sulla Rivelazione, la Scrittura, la Tradizione e sul rapporto tra le ultime due è rimasto praticamente immutato." (Gagliardi 2022, 7)

<sup>25</sup> Recent Church documents regularly address the reciprocal relationship between Tradition and Scripture (see DV 7–10; CCC 80–82; VD 17–18); cf. Brotherton 2015, 102.



end”) (*DV* 9; cf. *CCC* 80). However, the sacred Tradition of the Church precedes the Scripture and is also the place of its constant interpretation.<sup>26</sup>

The fundamental, organic constituent of the Tradition of the Church is Jesus Christ. It is in him that Tradition originates and continues, for in him the Word became Flesh (John 1:14) and he continues to live in the Church. As a consequence of this salvific truth, Scripture — originally the books of the Old Covenant — received a *Christological* interpretation in the teaching of Jesus and later his disciples, becoming a constituent part of Tradition.

At this point, it is important to note Jesus’ unique relationship to biblical (Old Testament) and Jewish tradition. As Son and Word incarnate, Jesus is unique and special, and therefore, also occupies a unique and special place in the structure of Tradition. Conscious of his mission and filial dignity, Jesus strongly criticises human traditions, but at the same time, defends the authentic tradition already present in the Old Testament:

Even apart from content, this seems to me to offer a most significant insight with regard to structure: Jesus did not present his message as something totally new, as the end of all that had preceded it. He was and remained a Jew; that is, he linked his message to the tradition of believing Israel. He did not abandon the Old Testament as something antiquated and now superseded. He lived it and, in doing so, revealed his meaning: his message was the creative referral of tradition to its original foundation. Traditions were criticized in order that genuine tradition might be revealed. (Ratzinger 1987a, 95; for a broader description, see 94–101)

The fullness of Revelation in the person of Jesus Christ, attested in the New Testament, in turn, became the content of *ecclesiastical* interpretation, this time of the Old and New Testaments. The apostolic Church was the bearer of the tradition of Jesus and its interpreter. In the context of the origins of Tradition, the future pope evoked the Christological texts of St Paul’s letter (2 Cor 3:14–18; cf. Jer 31:33–34); then, only generally, the Gospel of St John (“the age in which everyone is taught by God himself”; cf. Isa 54:13 and John 6:45) and St Peter’s first address in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14–36; cf. Joel 3:1–5) (see Ratzinger 2008c, 53–56). First passed down orally as an apostolic tradition, it gave rise to the writings of the New Covenant. The New Testament witnesses to the living Tradition of the Church (cf. *CCC* 83).<sup>27</sup> Consequently, Tradition makes it possible to accept Scripture as the word of God and also to understand it more and more fully in the history of the Church: “by means of

<sup>26</sup> For more on the function of exegesis within such an understanding of Tradition, see Ratzinger 2008c, 64–67; cf. 2018c, 365–67.

<sup>27</sup> *CCC* 83 reads as follows: “The first generation of Christians did not yet have a written New Testament, and the New Testament itself demonstrates the process of living Tradition.” Was this statement an authorial addition by the Chairman of the commission that worked on the new catechism?

the same tradition, the full canon of the sacred books is known to the Church and the holy Scriptures themselves are more thoroughly understood and constantly made effective in the Church.” (VD 17; cf. DV 8; CCC 66)<sup>28</sup>

The canon of sacred books also took shape within the sacred Tradition. Initially, Jesus and his disciples only had Scripture, later called the Old Testament, as noted several times above. In contrast, the books that now make up the New Testament were only just being formed, and it was the Magisterium of the Church that later authoritatively designated the canon of the Old and New Testaments; the formation and emergence of the biblical canon is an important component of the living Tradition of the Church (DV 8).

The above basic theses on the relationship between the earlier, living Tradition of the Church and Scripture have their basis in the biblical testimonies of the emerging Christian tradition. The biblical texts outline its origins, underpin it and guarantee its truthfulness, which can be illustrated by discussing particular aspects of Christian Tradition (see Benedykt XVI 2007b, 42–43).

One of Joseph Ratzinger’s fundamental claims was the observation that Revelation needs a receiving subject — the community of believers (Ratzinger 1987a, 100; 1998, 108; 2008c, 52, 57). Thus, the origins of the Church’s Tradition are the disciples, those who believed and followed Jesus. It is not surprising, then, that in his statements on Tradition, the Pope refers to the biblical texts describing the origins of the Church: the calling of the disciples and the commissioning of the Twelve, and the entrusting to them of the mission of preaching the Gospel, with which Christ’s assurance of his permanent presence among the disciples was linked. In this context, the Pope cites key ecclesial texts illustrating his thesis: the commissioning of the Twelve (Luke 6:13), entrusting them with the mission of teaching the nations (Matt 28:19) and the uninterrupted celebration of the Paschal Commemoration until the glorious coming of Christ (1 Cor 11:26).<sup>29</sup> The indication of the selection of the Twelve from among the disciples of Jesus is intended by the Pope, since Jesus’ mission, though directed originally to the House of Israel, is intended for the whole world and all eras. Just as the Old Testament received a Christological interpretation in the Church, so likewise the commissioning of the Twelve emphasises the historical-salvific continuation of God’s people of Israel in the new God’s people of the Church, which will continue until the eschatological future and the judgment on the “twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19:28) (see Hahn 2009, 48; cf. ITC 1973, I. 3). Further, the Pope points out that Jesus explained his teaching to his disciples in private (Mark 4:34; 7:17; 8:29–30), which takes us back to the very beginnings of the living

<sup>28</sup> Ratzinger 1965b, 293–94; 2018d, 385–86; cf. ITC 1989, B. I, 1–3; also see Zatwardnicki 2014b, 107–10; Pidel 2023, 113.

<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, in *Principles of a Catholic Theology*, Joseph Ratzinger pointed to the following New Testament texts while discussing the offices and ministries in the apostolic Church: Mark 3:13–19; Matt 10:7–9, 40; Luke 10:16; John 20:21. See Ratzinger 1987b, 273.

Tradition and its personal foundations, and thus to the beginnings of the *traditio* and *successio apostolica*: “‘Tradition’ is indeed never a simple and anonymous handing on of teaching, but is linked to a person, is a living word, that has its concrete reality in faith.” (Ratzinger 2008a, 23) A little later, Joseph Ratzinger elaborates and concretises his view on the role of the apostles and their importance for Tradition: “‘Apostolic succession’ is by its nature the living presence of the word in the personal form of the witness. The unbroken continuity of witnesses is derived from the nature of the word as *auctoritas* and *viva vox*.” (Ratzinger 2008a, 30–31)

The task of the apostles was to “teach all nations,” a mission they carried out after the Ascension as representatives of Christ, acting in the power of the Spirit (cf. *VD* 15). Here we encounter another biblical dimension of the emerging, living Tradition, which is the words of Jesus assuring us of his presence “to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19–20). In the light of Benedict XVI’s theological exegesis, these words guarantee the constant, active and effective presence of Jesus Christ in the Spirit in the community of the Church and its official representatives (cf. Heb 13:8).<sup>30</sup> Such a theological exegesis of biblical texts is something characteristic of the Author in question, who wrote the following as early as 1965: “Because the Jesus’ tradition is not an enslaving human historical tradition, but a presence of the Spirit (‘The Lord is the Spirit’: 2 Cor 3:17!), therefore, the word of the Lord can and must be understood as present and related to the present” (own translation).<sup>31</sup>

The same role of constant actualisation of the presence of Jesus in the community of believers is also fulfilled by the Paschal Commemoration, which is celebrated continuously. The Eucharist not only makes the saving death of Jesus present each time but is also a sacramental gift of salvation for all peoples and all times (1 Cor 11:26).<sup>32</sup>

In turn, the following biblical texts cited by Benedict XVI bring closer the intrinsic nature of the Church’s living Tradition, of which the Holy Spirit is the Author and Guarantor. Benedict XVI was particularly preoccupied with the theme of the Holy Spirit. This is reflected in his speeches, which contain numerous references

30 Hahn 2009, 49: “For Benedict, the Office of the apostle is a sharing in the divine power of Christ. He finds support for this in Christ commissioning the apostles: ‘Anyone who listens to you listens to me; anyone who rejects you rejects me’ and again, ‘As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.’ The apostle is more than a spokesman for Christ, however. He proclaims the same words as Christ, announcing the coming of the kingdom of God. But he also, by the divine gift, ‘has the power to make the coming visible by signs of power’” (in conjunction with footnote 16); cf. Pidel 2023, 83–84.

31 “Weil die Jesusüberlieferung nicht verknechtende menschliche Geschichts-Tradition ist, in der es auf archivarische Bewahrung ankommt, sondern Gegenwart vom Geist her (‘Der Herr ist der Geist’: 2 Kor 3, 17!), darum kann, ja muß das Wort des Herrn als ein gegenwärtiges und auf die Gegenwart bezogenes verstanden werden” (Ratzinger 1965b, 294; Polish translation: Ratzinger 2018d, 386).

32 Cf. ITC 1973, II: “This foundation is not only historical; it is also spiritual. Christ’s pass-over, anticipated at the Last Supper, establishes the New Covenant and thus embraces the whole of human history. The mission and task of preaching the Gospel, governing, reconciling, and sanctifying that are entrusted to the first witnesses cannot be restricted to their lifetime.” Cf. Olejnik 1976, 13–14.

to biblical texts that speak of the Spirit's activity, as well as a full quotation of these texts (Benedict XVI 2006):

Thanks to the action of the Paraclete, the Apostles and their successors can realize in time the mission received from the Risen One. "You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you" (Lk 24:48 ff.).

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And this promise, which at first seems incredible, already came true in the Apostles' time: "And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him" (Acts 5:32).

According to the Pope, the action of the Holy Spirit, fundamental to the living Tradition of the Church, does not consist only in empowering the disciples of Jesus to bear witness to Jesus and his Gospel. The Holy Spirit, through the laying on of hands of the apostles and their prayer, consecrates and sends out missionaries and preachers of the Gospel (Acts 13:3–4; 1 Tim 4:14). The Pope stresses that the biblical texts speak interchangeably of Paul's appointment of "elders in every Church" (cf. Acts 14:23) and the Spirit's establishment of "guardians of the flock" (cf. Acts 20:28); therefore, he concludes: "The action of the Spirit and the action of Paul thus are deeply interwoven." Likewise, the Spirit guides the community of believers and individuals and is present when making decisions of momentous importance for the life of the Church, enabling a new interpretation of Christ's message (Acts 15:28) (Ratzinger 2008c, 60; cf. ITC 1989, B, I, 2).

Guided by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict XVI also reminds us that the Tradition initiated by Christ and the Apostles "makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit," so that "there is a growth in insight into the realities and the words"; over time, the Church gains a deeper understanding of the truth revealed in the Scriptures (see VD 17). In this context, it is puzzling that the Council Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* — much like Pope Benedict XVI in his exhortation *Verbum Domini* — do not refer to the texts of John that speak of the Paraclete who will lead the disciples into all truth (see John 14:26; 16:13–15); the Council Fathers pointed to Marian texts (Luke 2:19, 51) (DV 8).<sup>33</sup>

As a final note, it is worth recalling an issue that is well-known and repeatedly discussed in the subject literature — theological exegesis, Benedict XVI's hermeneutics of faith. The fact that Scripture is a human word, the Pope argues, justifies its

<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Ratzinger wrote the following in an article for the *Lexikon für die Theologie und Kirche* (1965): "Endlich ist aus den Paraklet-Sprüchen des Jo-Ev. ein starkes Bewußtsein von der Anwesenheit des Heiligen Geistes in der Zeit der Kirche hervorgewachsen, das sich in altchristlicher Zeit in der Vorstellung von der Inspiriertheit der ökumenischen Konzilien äußert [...]" (Ratzinger 1965b, 295; cf. 2018d, 387) See also ITC 1973, II (last paragraph); Olejnik 1976, 14.

interpretation according to the principles of historical exegesis (the historical-critical method). However, Scripture is first and foremost the word of God and hence requires the consideration of theological principles of interpretation — theological exegesis, which is only possible in faith and in the Spirit (Rowland 2008, 58; Hahn 2009, 41–46). The theological exegesis of Joseph Ratzinger’s biblical texts and also the entire earlier biblical formation of the German pope form the biblical-theological basis of the concept of the living Tradition of the Church he developed.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The vision of Tradition presented by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI is part of his holistic view of God’s Revelation and the community of believers as a historical and spiritual reality at the same time. Tradition is an indispensable component of his ecclesiology. A discussion of the available subject publications has shown that there is no single, systematic and complete presentation of the topic of the living Tradition of the Church in the works of the German theologian and pope. Nonetheless, his numerous publications, released over several decades in a changing ecclesial context, are available. A fruitful beginning to Ratzinger’s work on Revelation, Tradition and Scripture and their reciprocal relationship was his encounter with the theological thought of St Bonaventure, and the conciliar discussions on the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* accelerated the development of his ideas. Also significant, as is evident from his writings, was the perceived crisis of faith in the post-conciliar period, including the crisis that affected biblical theology and exegesis. Joseph Ratzinger presented an innovative view of the reality of Tradition in its relation to Scripture, but he did not immediately gain approval for his proposal. In retrospect, however, it is important to recognise that his understanding of Tradition has found expression in official Church documents and has similarly established itself in contemporary theology (cf. Rowland 2008, 65). For Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, the living Tradition of the Church is the constant actualisation of Jesus’ presence in the Church, the memory of him (*memoria*) and at the same time the living experience of salvation (*viva vox*): “Thanks to Tradition, guaranteed by the ministry of the Apostles and by their successors, the water of life that flowed from Christ’s side and his saving blood reach the women and men of all times. Thus, Tradition is the permanent presence of the Saviour who comes to meet us, to redeem

<sup>34</sup> See Verweyen 2007, 84–98; The subject literature on Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI’s theological exegesis is extensive; not all biblical scholars share the Pope’s hermeneutical and exegetical views. For further literature sources, see Szymik 2012; Zatwardnicki 2014a. The current volume of *Verbum Vitae* also offers discussions of Benedict XVI’s hermeneutical proposals: Crimella 2024; Hahn 2024; Prato 2024; cf. ITC 1973 (Introduction!); Olejnik 1976, 10–11.

us and to sanctify us in the Spirit, through the ministry of his Church, to the glory of the Father.” (Benedict XVI 2006)

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# 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)<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> In my article, I would like to touch upon one of the essential themes of the papal narrative: the relationship between metaphysics and theology,<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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,<sup>6</sup> secondly, it is of great ecumenical

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.”

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

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 existential<sup>9</sup> dogmatics.<sup>10</sup>

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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)

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

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

<sup>9</sup> 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 exegetical and theological convictions of his author, but also his certainty about the metaphysical deposits of the Revelation itself.<sup>11</sup> 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

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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.

<sup>10</sup> 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)

<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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)

<sup>12</sup> *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,<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> The combination, fusion of being and action makes the relational ontology extremely dynamic (cf. JN II, 131).<sup>15</sup> 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,<sup>16</sup> 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).<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

## 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

<sup>17</sup> 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."

<sup>18</sup> 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 confession<sup>19</sup> 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

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<sup>19</sup> 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 inward<sup>20</sup> 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,

<sup>20</sup> 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 Anthropological 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,<sup>21</sup> 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.

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<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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

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<sup>22</sup> *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.<sup>23</sup>

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

<sup>23</sup> 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).<sup>24</sup> 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.

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<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> 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." (Stallsworth 1989, 107–8) For the extensive treatment of this method cf. Ramage 2017, 56–100.



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# Benedict XVI's Interpretation of the Psalms

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**Abstract:** This article aims to analyze the way Pope Benedict XVI quotes and interprets biblical psalms. In the introductory section, the author presents statistics and the ways in which Benedict XVI quotes Book of Psalms, and then offers a general, introductory look at psalms and their analysis in papal catechesis. In subsequent sections of the article, the author focuses on the pope's historical-critical exegesis and linguistic analyses of the psalms, followed by the pope's Christological, ecclesiological, Mariological, and actualizing reading of the Psalms. In the concluding section, the author discusses the relationship of the psalms to prayer, the pope's references to the Fathers of the Church and recalls Benedict XVI's most personal statements on the Psalms.

**Keywords:** Benedict XVI, psalms, hermeneutics of faith, historical-critical exegesis, theological exegesis

The purpose of this article is to analyze Pope Benedict XVI's interpretation of the Psalms. The pope has repeatedly quoted or referred to psalms in his writings and public speeches; several psalms were chosen as the theme for Wednesday catechesis, whether continuing the commentary on the psalms and songs of Lauds and Vespers initiated by John Paul II (2005–2006) or analyzing them during his catechesis on prayer (2011). Despite the fairly large number of publications on Benedict XVI's biblical hermeneutics, the question of interpreting psalms has not been explored in detail.<sup>1</sup> Given also that psalms are part of the Old Testament, the question arises as to how the pope applies Christological interpretation and puts into practice the hermeneutics of faith, the presuppositions of which he has spoken on several occasions.<sup>2</sup>

The introductory section will discuss statistics and citation methods, then Benedict XVI's general view of psalms and will proceed to offer an analysis of the papal catechesis on psalms. The following sections will focus on historical-critical exegesis and linguistic analyses, and a Christological, ecclesiological, actualizing and Mariological reading. Also, attention will be drawn to the relationship of psalms to prayer, the Tradition of the Church (mainly of the patristic period), and Benedict XVI's

<sup>1</sup> Of the publications on Benedict XVI's hermeneutics of faith, it is worth mentioning Szram 2007, 263–72; M. Chrostowski 2011, 5–23; Manicardi 2011, 393–416; Muszyński 2011, 1115–26; Szymik 2012, 217; Głuchowski 2012, 3–20; Pietkiewicz 2020, 21–37; Zatwardnicki 2014; Carl 2015; Zatwardnicki 2016, 141–64; Pidel 2023.

<sup>2</sup> See especially VD 32–41 as well as the forewords in Benedict XVI 2007n, 2011s.

statements on the Psalms, in which he reveals his most personal attitude to certain passages of the Psalter.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Pope's Comments on the Psalms

### 1.1. Statistics and Formal Issues

Given that almost all papal texts are published in Italian and posted on [vatican.va](http://vatican.va), the statistics presented were based on this language and source. From 20 April 2005 to 1 March 2013, the word "psalm" in the singular ("salmo") appears more than 584 times in 233 papal documents, in the plural ("salmi") it occurs 330 times in 93 documents. The siglum denoting the Book of Psalms ("Sal" and "Ps") occurs 297 times in 225 documents. The word "psalmist" ("salmista") is used 166 times in 91 documents and "psalter" ("salterio") 19 times in 16 documents. In total, a passage from the Book of Psalms was quoted 403 times.

The way that biblical sigla are provided varies. Two hundred sixteen times the numbering is given according to the MT, 101 times according to the Greek-Latin numbering, and 77 times with double numbering. With the passing years of the pontificate, one can notice a tendency to write more often according to Hebrew numbering (in 2006, 15 citations according to the Vulg. against 20 according to the MT; in 2012, 9 according to the Vulg. against 33 according to the MT). It is noteworthy that in all texts addressed to Jewish communities, psalm numbering is always provided according to the TM. The double numbering is written differently: 31/30 or 118/119, 39 (40) or 73 (72). Sometimes the Holy Father himself explains that a particular psalm has two different numbers.<sup>4</sup> In one text he gives two different numberings for the same psalm (Sal 50:14 and 51:19 in Benedict XVI 2011o). Once the Roman numbering (XIII) of the psalm is used, perhaps because the word was spoken on the occasion of a musical concert (Benedict XVI 2011a).

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<sup>3</sup> A natural limitation related to the matter explored here is the fact that Benedict XVI is not the author of all the texts that are signed with his name. This is the usual practice of offices, not only the papal office, hence, on the one hand, it is necessary to be aware that these are Benedict XVI's statements, since they have been accepted and published as such; on the other hand, not every text by Benedict XVI is necessarily a text by Joseph Ratzinger. This is why attempts to gain insight into Ratzinger's thinking are always somewhat limited. In addition, the Pope himself, when beginning Wednesday's catecheses, indicated that he was continuing to comment on the psalms and hymns of Vespers; he even speaks of a commentary prepared by John Paul II ("the reflections that he had prepared"). It is therefore not entirely clear to what extent these are texts by John Paul II and to what extent they are already by Benedict XVI. According to Mariusz Szram (Szram 2007, 263), the authorship of these catecheses should be attributed entirely to John Paul II.

<sup>4</sup> For example: "Psalms 141 and 142, according to the Jewish numbering" (Benedict XVI 2008d), or: "It is Psalm 23 [22, according to the Greco-Latin numbering]" (Benedict XVI 2011d).

Twice one can note an incorrect notation of the psalm quoted: 8:1 instead of 8:2 (Benedict XVI 2009k) and 32:2 instead of 34:2 (Benedict XVI 2007l). To this one must add about 30 quotations of the commentaries of the Church Fathers on the Psalms (mainly St. Augustine).

The most frequently quoted psalms are: 119(x24); 118(x21); 23(x20); 51(x20); 104(x16); 139(x15); 85(x13); 131(x12); Ps 40(x10). In turn, the most frequently quoted verses are: 119:105 ("Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" [x12]); 133:1 ("Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" [x10]); 104:30 ("when you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" [x6]). In total, Benedict XVI refers to almost 100 different psalms in his writings and speeches.<sup>5</sup>

As far as publications outside the official Vatican website are concerned, Benedict XVI's books from the time of his pontificate, which he branded with his name and treated as private statements, that have been taken into account in this article are: *Light of the World* (Benedict XVI and Seewald 2010) and *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (Benedict XVI 2007n); *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two. Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (Benedict XVI 2011s); *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (Benedict XVI 2012n).<sup>6</sup>

In *Light of the World* the reference to the Book of Psalms is found only in the motto (Ps 53:3–5).<sup>7</sup> In *Jesus of Nazareth*, on the other hand, almost 50 different psalms are quoted or mentioned more than 90 times (most often 2; 40; 110; 118). The pope also refers to three psalms not mentioned in the official teaching (15; 55; 97). To this one must add the reference, in a dozen or so places, to the Book of Psalms without indicating a specific work or place.

Summing up the statistical and formal issues, several conclusions can be drawn. The Book of Psalms is a biblical book very frequently quoted by Pope Benedict XVI. The variety of quotations is striking, and although there are psalms or verses used more frequently, the reference to more than 100 different psalms testifies

<sup>5</sup> Psalms not quoted by Pope Benedict XVI: Ps 7; 12; 15; 20; 26; 28; 30; 35; 48; 49; 52; 53; 54; 55; 56; 58; 59; 60; 61; 64; 65; 74; 75; 76; 79; 81; 83; 87; 88; 92; 94; 97; 100; 101; 102; 107; 109; 111; 112; 120; 123; 124; 129; 132; 134; 137; 140; 146; 147; 148; 149.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI's book *What Is Christianity? The Last Writings* (Benedict XVI 2023) is a record of his thoughts already after he resigned from the papal office in 2013, hence it was not taken into account in the analysis of the material.

<sup>7</sup> It is intriguing that, depending on the translation, the motto is not identical. The German original quotes as motto the text from Ps 53, verses 3 and 5b. However, it states that it quotes verses three, four and five. Cf. Benedikt XVI and Seewald 2010, 5. The Italian edition states that it quotes verses one to five. The error, however, is that the publisher actually quotes only verses 2 to 5. Cf. Benedetto XVI and Seewald 2010, 5. The Polish edition quotes only the third verse and states that it quotes verses 3 to 5. Cf. Benedykt XVI and Seewald 2011, 5. The English edition follows the German text exactly. The problem is that it is faithful even where the Germans have made a mistake. They state that they quote Ps 53:3–5 and quote only 53:3,5b. Cf. Benedict XVI and Seewald 2010, 5.

to the treatment of the Psalter as a rich reservoir of thought. A tendency towards increasing use of Hebrew numbering is evident. On the other hand, the current differences in the notation and numbering of sigla are more attributable to editorial work than to Benedict XVI's inconsistency.

## 1.2. The Pope's General Outlook on the Psalms

While Benedict XVI has spoken on many occasions about psalms in a general or holistic way, it is worth noting the introductory catechesis on the Book of Psalms, delivered on June 22, 2011 during the Wednesday audience in St. Peter's Square in Rome, which can be considered one of the best introductions to the Book of Psalms (Benedict XVI 2011e). Right at the outset, the Pope calls the Book of Psalms "the book of prayer" *par excellence*, "which the Biblical Tradition offers the people of believers so that they become their and our prayer, our way of speaking and of relating to God." He proceeds to point out that the psalms contain an entire range of human emotions and experiences that human beings present to God. Although he mentions different genres of psalms such as hymns, lamentations, individual and collective supplications, songs of thanksgiving, penitential and wisdom psalms, he notes that there are two main types of prayer in the Psalms: petition, which sometimes turns into supplication, and thanksgiving, which sometimes turns into praise. He is also fairly original in showing what the uniqueness of the prayers contained in psalms consists in. Here the pope evokes the figure of parents who, wishing to teach their children to communicate with them, speak to them in the language they wish to use. In the case of psalms, "Since they are a word of God, anyone who prays the Psalms speaks to God using the very words that God has given to us, addresses him with the words that he himself has given us." This unique introduction also does not omit the name of the Hebrew Book of Psalms (*tehillîm*) and David as the traditional author of psalms, which also allows the Pope to move on to the messianic idea, realized in Jesus Christ ("The connection of the Psalms with this outstanding King of Israel is therefore important because he is a messianic figure, an Anointed One of the Lord, in whom, in a certain way, the mystery of Christ is foreshadowed."). Thus, in this short catechesis, the pope has included what will recur continually in his interpretation of psalms: elements that relate to scholarly exegesis, an understanding of the Book of Psalms primarily as a book of prayer, and a Christological, existential, ecclesiological and actualizing reading.

## 1.3. Benedict XVI's Catechesis on Selected Psalms

After a general look at the Book of Psalms, the psalms that Benedict XVI made the subject of the entire Wednesday catecheses deserve special attention. This is

because while the use of a particular quotation or idea from individual psalms is fragmentary, the interpretation of entire psalms sheds light on Pope Ratzinger's hermeneutics. Initially, the Holy Father continued the catechesis begun by John Paul II, hence the commentaries he delivered are only on the following psalms (according to Hebrew numbering): 111; 112; 113; 116; 121; 122; 123; 124; 125; 126; 127; 130; 131; 132; 135; 136; 137; 138; 139; 144; 145.<sup>8</sup> Also, the pope began catechesis on prayer in 2011, in which he devoted attention to the following psalms: 3; 22; 23; 110; 119; 126; 136.<sup>9</sup> As can be seen from the statistics, Ps 126 and Ps 136 have twice become the subject of the pope's analysis.

Regarding the first group of psalms, the catechesis of 2005–2006 follows the same structure. First, general information is given (e.g. that Ps 120 belongs to the collection of “Psalms of Ascent”), the literary genre and the *Sitz im Leben* of the psalm in question. Occasionally, the pope indicates how many times a word specific for a particular psalm occurs in it (e.g. *shamar* “to guard, protect” – 7 times in Ps 120), or he undertakes a semantic analysis in order to understand better the meaning or at least the associations that the phrases may evoke (e.g. the heights turn one's thoughts to the worship of pagan idols or standing at the right hand is the position of a defender). Essentially, the pope analyzes the selected psalms verse by verse in an attempt to understand the thought of the psalm in question, and in this his commentary resembles contemporary standard scholarly commentaries on the psalms. After the analysis of a given psalm, there is always a reference to the Church Fathers, or authors from the first millennium of Christianity in general. Sometimes this reference is a quotation from a particular author's commentary on the psalm in question (e.g. Theodoret of Cyrus to Ps 136), and sometimes a quotation of a thought that links the ancient author to a thought present in the psalm (e.g. Ambrose to Ps 123). Reference to the Church Fathers often becomes a way of demonstrating a Christological reading of the psalm (e.g. Cyprian's words to Ps 136:10–26) and a bridge to its actualization, expressed, for example, in sentences such as: “This prayer, then, is a song of hope to turn back to when one is immersed in moments of trial, fear, threats and inner oppression” (to Ps 126; Benedict XVI 2005d); “let us allow this Word of God to awaken us” (to Ps 136:1–9; Benedict XVI 2011f), “let us pray to the Lord that in all of us this desire, this openness to God, will be reawakened.” (to Ps 137; Benedict XVI 2005e)

The second set of the pope's commentaries on the psalms, delivered as part of the catechesis on prayer, differs slightly from the first, as best seen in Ps 126 and 136. Before the pope offers an analysis of a particular psalm passage, he quotes it so that the reader does not have to go back to the very beginning to remember what

<sup>8</sup> Cf. W. Chrostowski 2006; Jan Paweł II and Benedykt XVI 2007; Benedict XVI 2013; John Paul II and Benedict XVI 2023.

<sup>9</sup> The catecheses were delivered from May 4, 2005 to February 8, 2006.

the passage is talking about. Benedict XVI pays slightly more attention to the semantic analysis of the discussed psalm, referring to the original Hebrew (e.g. “‘for us’, or more precisely ‘with us,’ in Hebrew *‘immanû’*”). As in the previous psalms, he explores literary matters, which is well evident in the analysis of Ps 119, when the pope explains what acrostic structure is:

In today’s Catechesis I would like to reflect on Psalm 119, according to the Hebrew tradition, Psalm 118 according to the Greco-Latin one. It is a very special Psalm, unique of its kind. This is first of all because of its length. Indeed, it is composed of 176 verses divided into 22 stanzas of eight verses each. Moreover, its special feature is that it is an “acrostic in alphabetical order”, in other words it is structured in accordance with the Hebrew alphabet that consists of 22 letters. Each stanza begins with a letter of this alphabet and the first letter of the first word of each of the eight verses in the stanza begins with this letter. This is both original and indeed a demanding literary genre in which the author of the Psalm must have had to summon up all his skill. (Benedict XVI 2011f)

As a rule, he does not wait until the end of the analysis to move on to a Christological reading or actualization, but interweaves it directly into the text being commented on. Also, the volume of the papal commentaries on the second set of psalms is generally larger than in the first, although they have the same form of expression as the papal Wednesday catechesis.

## 2. Historical-Critical Exegesis of the Psalms

One of the distinctive features of Benedict XVI’s exegesis is its use of the achievements of the historical-critical method, which is particularly evident in the Wednesday catecheses on psalms. This approach also appears in other statements in which the pope refers to psalms. The pope, speaking of the Babylonian captivity (to the responsorial psalm of Benedict XVI 2007e), points out that Ps 24 was a cultic song used during the temple procession (Benedict XVI 2007j), interprets the author of Ps 41 to be a Levite who longs for the temple in Jerusalem (Benedict XVI 2007g), explains the double character of the metaphor of the vineyard (Benedict XVI 2010k) and the expected messiah who is also depicted in Qumran as a priest or king (Benedict XVI 2010j), uses psalms when looking for the background of the Old Testament temptation of Jesus in the desert (Benedict XVI 2012e), explains that the law as understood in the Bible was not understood as a burden (Benedict XVI 2012b).

Benedict XVI also occasionally reaches out to ancient languages, especially Hebrew. Commenting on Ps 131, he points out that “The original Hebrew text does



not speak of a newborn child but of a child that has been 'weaned' (Benedict XVI 2005f) When commenting on Ps 132, he explains that "the term 'anointed', in fact, expresses the Jewish term 'Messiah.'" (Benedict XVI 2005f) On the other hand, in his explanation of Ps 145, he writes: "In Hebrew we have two typical adjectives to illustrate the Covenant between God and his People: *saadiq* and *hasid*." (Benedict XVI 2006f)

In his homily during the Mass of the Lord's Supper, the pope explains that "thank-ing and blessing God reached its culmination in the *berakah*, which in Greek is *eulogia* or *eucaristia*: praising God becomes a blessing for those who bless him." (Benedict XVI 2007i) Referring to the recited passage Ps 31:16, he states that although they prayed with the words "In manibus tuis sortes meae", "in the *Vetus latina* the text was: 'In manu tua tempora mea'; the Italian translation says: 'Nelle tue mani sono i miei giorni'; the Greek text speaks of *kairoi mou* [the English translation is 'my times are in your hands']." (Benedict XVI 2007o) At the same time, he concludes that each of these versions conveys the same truth about man's dependence on God. In turn, commenting on Ps 23, he points out that the word that is translated "will dwell" (v. 6), can also be translated as "return": "The Hebrew verb used here has the meaning of 'to return' but with a small vowel change can be understood as 'to dwell'. Moreover, this is how it is rendered by the ancient versions and by the majority of the modern translations." (Benedict XVI 2011d)

Benedict XVI also explains that the word "amen," used frequently in the liturgy, "derives from *'aman*, which in Hebrew and in Aramaic means 'to make permanent', 'to consolidate' and, consequently, 'to be certain', 'to tell the truth.'" (Benedict XVI 2012f)

In *Jesus of Nazareth*, commenting on Peter's use of a quotation from Ps 16 after Pentecost, Benedict XVI points out that linguistic issues have, in a sense, affected the message of faith. This is because Peter quotes Ps 16:10 according to the Greek version ("my flesh will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life") and not according to the Hebrew text ("You do not give me up to Sheol, or let your godly one see the Pit. You show me the path of life"). The pope writes: "If in the early creedal formula from Jerusalem, transmitted by Saint Paul, it is stated that Jesus rose according to the Scriptures, then surely Psalm 16 must have been seen as key scriptural evidence for the early Church. [...] What the early Church deduced from the Septuagint version of Ps 16:10 also determined the viewpoint of the entire patristic period." (Benedict XVI 2011s, 256–57)

### 3. The Theological-Spiritual Dimension of the Interpretation of the Psalms

#### 3.1. A Christological Reading

A distinctive feature of Benedict XVI's hermeneutics is the Christological interpretation of the psalms, which can be illustrated by very numerous examples.<sup>10</sup>

The Son of God in Ps 2 according to the pope is Jesus Christ (Benedict XVI 2005w, 2010f, 2012g; also in Benedict XVI 2007n, 304). The phrase "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage" (Ps 2:8) was fulfilled when Jesus sent his disciples out into the whole world with the missionary command (cf. Matt 28:18–20 – Benedict XVI 2008b). Similarly, the persecuted righteous man in Ps 3 is a figure of Jesus (Benedict XVI 2011g). Together with not a few exegetes, the pope believes that the words of Ps 16:10 ("For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit") refer to the resurrection of Jesus (Benedict XVI 2009c). Those who gaze into the heart of Jesus understand the responsory taken from the same psalm: "You are my inheritance O Lord" (Benedict XVI 2010a). To contemplate the face of God spoken of in Ps 21:7 is to know God through Jesus Christ (Benedict XVI 2013a). Ps 22 is fulfilled by Christ both where the psalmist speaks of abandonment by God and when he announces the proclamation of God's victory to all nations (Benedict XVI 2005ab, 2006m, 2008e, 2011h, 2012h). In the image of the feast that God prepares for the psalmist (Ps 23:6), the pope sees a foreshadowing of the eucharist (Benedict XVI 2010c), and, in the good shepherd – Jesus Christ (Benedict XVI 2011i), who first had to become a lamb himself (Benedict XVI 2012c; also in Benedict XVI 2007n, 285). In Ps 24, the pope links the ascension to the temple with the image of an internal and spiritual ascension with Christ (Benedict XVI 2007j). For him, the words of Jesus on the cross "Into your hand I commit my spirit" are not only a quotation of Ps 31:6, but at the same time a manifestation of the total entrustment of himself to the Father at the moment of abandonment (Benedict XVI 2012p). The theme present in the responsorial psalm (Ps 34 – God liberates his people from the power of evil) finds development in Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (Benedict XVI 2010i). The pope returns several times to the relecture of Ps 40 with Heb 10:8–9, which relates the words of the psalm to the incarnation of the Son of God (Benedict XVI 2007b, 2008h, 2008a, 2011q, 2012l; also in Benedict XVI 2007n, 149–50; Benedict XVI 2011s, 234–35). "The thunder of cataracts" from Ps 42:8 turn his thought to Christ, the source of life in and through whom God's immense love has been poured out upon mankind (Benedict XVI 2011t). The words of Ps 45: "You are the most handsome of men" (Benedict XVI 2006q, 2008i) also refer to Christ. The idea of ascending to the heights present in Ps 68:19

<sup>10</sup> Here and in the following sections, the psalms are quoted and discussed in the canonical order of their occurrence in the Book of Psalms.

becomes a picture of Christ attracting humankind towards God (Benedict XVI 2012o). Ps 72:10–11, which speaks of kings bearing gifts, is a prophetic vision announcing the arrival of the Magi in Bethlehem to worship the newborn Jesus (Benedict XVI 2013b). Ps 80:18 “closely associates the ‘Son of Man’ with the vine.” (Benedict XVI 2007n, 260) The words “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Ps 90:2) are interpreted by the pope in the key of the preexistence of the Son of God (Benedict XVI 2008c). The vineyard described in the psalms and “wine to gladden the human heart” (Ps 104:15), returns the thought to Christ, the true vine (Benedict XVI 2012t). The words of Ps 104:30 which speak of the descent of the Spirit on earth foreshadow what happened when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit (Benedict XVI 2009e). The Melchizedek-like priesthood of Ps 110 is referred to the priesthood of Christ (Benedict XVI 2009g, 2010e). Besides, the whole of Ps 110 is treated as messianic (Benedict XVI 2011j; also in Benedict XVI 2007n, 332–33). According to the pope, the stooping down of God in Ps 113:5 is realized at the birth of Jesus (Benedict XVI 2008g) and the lamp of God’s word spoken of in Ps 119:105 is Jesus (Benedict XVI 2009d; cf. VD 12). Together with the Evangelists, he believes that Psalm 118, quoted at the time of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, is a messianic announcement (Benedict XVI 2008h, 2010g). Christ is also “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” (Ps 118:22), the new Passover and the one who experienced what Ps 118 describes (Benedict XVI 2009i, 2011p, 2012q, 2012k, 2012m; 2011s, 7).

The message of Ps 126 becomes clear and understandable in the mystery of Christ and the New Testament (Benedict XVI 2011k). In Ps 131, the anointed one is Christ (Benedict XVI 2005g). He refers the words of Ps 139 to the risen Christ (Benedict XVI 2008n). Explaining Ps 143, he says that the anointed one in the fullest sense of the phrase is Jesus Christ (Benedict XVI 2006g).

From the only vaguely Christological interpretations given above, it is clear that for Benedict XVI, the presence of Christ in the psalms, the messianic announcements or the fulfilment of the Old Testament in Jesus of Nazareth is only natural. The pope himself succinctly puts it in his exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, writing: “By praying the Psalms, the Scripture readings and the readings drawn from the great tradition which are included in the Divine Office, we can come to a deeper experience of the Christ-event and the economy of salvation, which in turn can enrich our understanding and participation in the celebration of the Eucharist.” (*SacCar* 45)

### 3.2. An Ecclesiological Reading

Another important feature of the pope's exegesis is a reading that sees psalms as a picture of the Church. The Church fulfils the promise of Ps 22:28 to proclaim the victory of God to all nations (Benedict XVI 2005x). The same Ps 22 speaks of the cross of Christ from which the Church is born (Benedict XVI 2006n). With the words of Ps 96, the Church praises God together with Israel and reads it "as a prophecy and also as a task" (Benedict XVI 2008g). The words "When you send forth your spirit, they are created" (Ps 104:30) come from the heart of the Church at all times (Benedict XVI 2008l, 2008j). God builds his Church from those who are rejected like the stone from Ps 118 (Benedict XVI 2009i). Jerusalem from Ps 122 is recognized by the pope as the figure of the Church, "sacrament of Christ and of his Kingdom" (Benedict XVI 2007m). The house that cannot be built without the Lord (cf. Ps 127:1) is a foreshadowing of the Church and its builder – Christ (Benedict XVI 2008m).

The pope reminds us that the words "O taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps 34:9) were referred to the Eucharist as early as the ancient Church (Benedict XVI 2009f) and "rod and staff" from Ps 23 are also present in the life of the Church and in the life of priests: "The Church too must use the shepherd's rod, the rod with which he protects the faith against those who falsify it, against currents which lead the flock astray." (Benedict XVI 2010c) For the Pope, the ecclesiological reading is a consequence of the Christological reading. *Christus totus* – the Head together with the whole Body – is present in psalms and fulfils them, concludes the pope, probably drawing on St. Augustine (cf. Wołyniec 2016, 53–67).

### 3.3. A Mariological Reading

While the Christological and ecclesiological reading is more widely known in the history of the interpretation of psalms, what deserves special attention are all the Mariological themes that Benedict XVI finds in psalms.

The words of Ps 40:9: "I delight to do your will, O my God" are interpreted by Benedict XVI several times in relation to both the Son and the Mother: "Before the mystery of these two 'Here I am' statements, the 'Here I am' of the Son and the 'Here I am' of the Mother, each of which is reflected in the other, forming a single *Amen* to God's loving will, we are filled with wonder and thanksgiving, and we bow down in adoration" (Benedict XVI 2006i); "The 'yes' of the Son: 'I have come to do your will', and the 'yes' of Mary: 'Let it be with me according to your word', this double 'yes' becomes a single 'yes', and thus the Word becomes flesh in Mary. In this double 'yes' the obedience of the Son is embodied, and by her own 'yes' Mary gives him that body" (Benedict XVI 2006j); "The Son's obedience was reflected in that of the Mother and thus, through the encounter of these two 'yeses', God was able to take on a human face" (Benedict XVI 2007e); "The will of Mary coincides with

the will of the Son in the Father's unique project of love and, in her, heaven and earth are united, God the Creator is united to his creature. God becomes man, and Mary becomes a 'living house' for the Lord, a temple where the Most High dwells." (Benedict XVI 2012l) He considers the words of Ps 45:13 "the richest of the people ... will seek your smile" to be a prophecy spoken about Mary, whose smile Christians have long sought and who was depicted, especially in medieval art, as a smiling Madonna (Benedict XVI 2008f).<sup>11</sup> According to the pope, it is in Mary that the words of Ps 67:7 are fulfilled: "The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us." (Benedict XVI 2005y, 2006l, 2011r) Asking what caused Mary to go to her relative Elizabeth, the pope finds the answer in Ps 119:32: "I run the way of your commandments, for you enlarge my understanding." Well, the Holy Spirit, by whose cause the Son of God became present in Mary's body, enlarged her heart to the size of God's Heart and set her on the path of love (Benedict XVI 2007d). The faithfulness of the psalmist described in Ps 119, which is born out of listening to the Word of God, is called a faithfulness similar to the faithfulness of the Word of Mary, and the happiness of the psalmist from fulfilling the Word of God becomes shared in the life of Mary, who fulfils in a perfect way the image of the believer described by the psalmist (Benedict XVI 2011l). The connection between Ps 119 and the person of Mary is original in that the thought present in the catechesis does not appear on the occasion of a Marian feast or visits to Marian shrines, which in some sense can lead to a Mariological reading. By linking the figure of Mary to Ps 119, the pope shows that, for him, Mary's presence in the psalms is not a matter of chance.

### 3.4. An Actualizing Reading

As distinctive a feature of the pope's interpretation as the previous ones is the accommodating reading that Benedict XVI employs in almost every statement in which he refers to the psalms. It is difficult to analyze here the almost 200 statements that link the quoted psalms to the current situation of the Church, Christians, people and the world. The analysis here shall essentially be limited only to some selected texts, especially from the beginning of Benedict XVI's pontificate, in order to show the planes on which the pope applies the accommodation of the biblical text.

Fairly frequent, although in a strict sense the least demanding actualization, is the quotation of a passage from a psalm, which becomes, as it were, the motto of a given meeting or a dedication to the addressee. Thus, the words "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" (Ps 133:1) are the starting point for expressing joy at the meeting with the bishops of South Africa, Botswana, Eswatini,

<sup>11</sup> It would be desirable to find the source of the translation of Ps 45:13 used by Benedict XVI: "the richest of the people ... will seek your smile", since neither the TM, the LXX nor the Vulgate speak of a smile, but rather in accordance about "face" (ἡ ὤψις; τὸ πρόσωπον; *vultum*). The papal expression "sorriso", however, is unanimously translated into other languages as "smile" (*smile*, *Lächeln*, *sourire*, *sonrisa*).

Namibia and Lesotho (Benedict XVI 2005a), with the Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I (Benedict XVI 2006d), with the bishops of Ukraine (Benedict XVI 2007a), the bishops of Belarus (Benedict XVI 2009b), with the poor and the community of Sant'Egidio (Benedict XVI 2009j), with the diocese of Rome (Benedict XVI 2010m), with the Missionaries of Saint Charles Borromeo (Benedict XVI 2011c) or with the cardinals on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of their priestly ordination (Benedict XVI 2011b). The verse also makes the pope's argument that racial or ethnic diversity is not an obstacle to people living united as brothers and sisters (117). The function of dedication is also fulfilled by the words of Ps 139:13–14 (on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the birth of Elio Toaff, rabbi of Rome, Benedict XVI 2005z) or Ps 29:11 on the occasion of the visit to the synagogue in Cologne (Benedict XVI 2005ad). The pope's linking of the joy of the choir singing in the Sistine Chapel to the joy of being in the temple from Ps 84 (Benedict XVI 2005b), or referring the procession with candles on Candlemas to the procession described in Ps 24 (Benedict XVI 2006o), should also be included in this category. A similar function is served by the quotation from Ps 119:105, which was the motto of the 21st World Youth Day (Benedict XVI 2006r).

The words about sins hidden from the psalmist (cf. Ps 19:13) become an occasion to speak of the need for fraternal correction (Benedict XVI 2005ac). Speaking of "the darkest valley" of Ps 23, Benedict XVI mentions several examples of difficult life situations to assure that, as in the psalm, God will not abandon his sheep today (Benedict XVI 2005ab). The words of the Psalmist "And of Zion it shall be said, 'This one and that one were born in it,'" (Ps 87:5) the pope refers to Rome, of which Catholics can say that they were all born there (Benedict XVI 2005v). Addressing the young, the pope speaks of the fact that they may face many difficulties and adversities in life and will be tempted to say along with the psalmist: "I am severely afflicted" (Ps 119:107a). May they not forget to repeat after the same psalmist, "Give me life, O LORD, according to your word." (Ps 119:107; Benedict XVI 2006s)<sup>12</sup> Ps 127, which praises God for his blessing in children, becomes an occasion to express concern about the demographic decline (Benedict XVI 2005h). The spirit of Ps 135 and the call to praise God is to be given to the pope's listeners (Benedict XVI 2009h). Ps 136 shows the good works of God to be a remedy and a help in experiencing the power of evil (Benedict XVI 2005i). Describing the situation of the Jews in the Babylonian captivity, as described in Ps 137, the Pope goes back in thought to the fate of the Jews of the last century: "It is, as it were, a symbolic foreshadowing of the extermination camps to which the Jewish people – in the century we have just left behind us – were taken in an abominable operation of death that continues to be an indelible disgrace in the history of humanity." (Benedict XVI 2005e) Ps 138 assures the reader that, however strong the trials and

<sup>12</sup> On Benedict XVI's legacy to youth, writes, among others, Berry 2024, 175–204. On the Word that can be a light for the young, see especially Berry 2024, 181–82.



forces of evil may be, they will never be separated from God's helping hand (Benedict XVI 2005j). God's concern for man as expressed in Ps 139 (especially the reference to the embryo in v. 16: "Your eyes beheld my unformed substance") becomes a bridge to express the thought that even today, even the weakest are not forgotten by God (Benedict XVI 2005k, 2006c). The words of Ps 145:18: "The LORD is near to all who call on him" become an encouragement that even today, in difficulties, temptations and problems, one should not stop at the theoretical question of where they come from, but respond to them positively, calling on the LORD and taking care to be in living contact with him (Benedict XVI 2006f).

The idea that leads Pope Benedict XVI to actualize psalms and their message seems fairly clear. What the psalmist speaks of was not just his or his people's experience. In psalms, God leaves a word that can become a light in a variety of circumstances and times. What determines the actualization of the psalms is, on the one hand, the belief in the actuality of God's word and, on the other hand, the common or similar idea or experience that connects the psalmist's world with the contemporary world.

## 4. The Liturgical-Religious Context of Interpretation

### 4.1. Psalms and Prayer

A fairly regular recurring theme in the pope's references to psalms is the connection between the Psalter and prayer. As early as in the introductory catechesis to the Psalms (Benedict XVI 2011e), Benedict XVI writes that psalms are above all a school of prayer.

When we pray the psalms, Christ is present among us (Benedict XVI 2006g). We pray with the Lord, who is the true subject of the Book of Psalms, included at the same time in the prayer of all ages (Benedict XVI 2006p, 2008m). It is a prayer that unites different religions and denominations: Christians and Jews, Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox (Benedict XVI 2006k, 2006b). The pope encourages the creation of schools of prayer in which, among other things, the Psalms would become a place for encountering God and discerning his will (Benedict XVI 2006e). In the post-synodal exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Benedict XVI asks for the promotion of traditional forms of prayer such as the Liturgy of the Hours, so that praying the psalms can lead to a deeper experience of Christ and the economy of salvation (*SacCar* 46). Referring to St. Paul, he argues that one is not able to pray of themselves (cf. Rom 8:26), therefore God has left us a suitable word in the Book of Psalms and the liturgical tradition of the Church (*SacCar*; Benedict XVI 2008m). Priests are reminded that without the Liturgy of the Hours and praying the psalms, one cannot be a good priest; moreover, one will lose the essence of one's mission (Benedict XVI 2007p).



Members of religious orders, priests, deacons and bishops should come before God with hymns and psalms, giving thanks and asking, even if the content of their requests and thanksgiving is not specified (Benedict XVI 2007c). The pope recalls that Jesus' prayer fed on psalms, both when he went to the temple and to a synagogue (Benedict XVI 2008m). Praying the psalms and being faithful to *lectio divina* is also meant to help one accept the witness of St. Paul (Benedict XVI 2009a). During a meeting with cloistered nuns, he says that the Liturgy of the Hours sets the rhythm of the days and makes those who pray it interpreters of the Church-Bride, who unites herself to her Lord in a special way (Benedict XVI 2010h). In the exhortation *Verbum Domini*, he describes the relationship between psalms and prayer as follows:

The word of God draws each of us into a conversation with the Lord: the God who speaks teaches us how to speak to him. Here we naturally think of the *Book of Psalms*, where God gives us words to speak to him, to place our lives before him, and thus to make life itself a path to God. In the Psalms we find expressed every possible human feeling set masterfully in the sight of God; joy and pain, distress and hope, fear and trepidation: here all find expression. (VD 24)

Praying the psalms is also mentioned in the passage on the Liturgy of the Hours: "The Liturgy of the Hours, as the public prayer of the Church, sets forth the Christian ideal of the sanctification of the entire day, marked by the rhythm of hearing the word of God and praying the Psalms; in this way every activity can find its point of reference in the praise offered to God." (VD 62)

The words of a psalm sometimes become, for the pope, the words of a specific prayer which he recites, as it were, with his listeners: "Then the Psalm says: 'Arise, God, judge the world' (Ps 81:8). Thus we say to the Lord: 'Arise at this moment, take the world in your hands, protect your Church, protect humanity, protect the earth.'" (Benedict XVI 2010l) Concluding several catechesis on psalms as examples of prayer, the Pope reiterates the invitation to pray the psalms, perhaps even the Liturgy of the Hours, or at least Lauds, Vespers and the Compline before going to bed (Benedict XVI 2011m). Quoting Ps 119, he says that one prays with it on behalf of all people (Benedict XVI 2012s). He points out that adoration of Jesus can take place not only during individual prayer, but also during the common recitation of psalms before Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament (Benedict XVI 2012d). It is also symptomatic that when the pope, speaking of the responsibility of the successor of St. Peter and his collaborators and the duty to strengthen others in their faith, links this duty to the need to pray and refers immediately to the words of the psalm: "It is those who mirror the light of the Face of God on their face and in their life (cf. Ps 4:7) who can answer the many people who are still asking today: 'Who will enable us to see goodness?'" (Benedict XVI 2013c)

The Holy Father offers an interesting reflection on the silence that grows out of praying the psalms, similar to the silence during the recitation of the rosary. This silence brings the ultimate meaning and, transcending what the words of a psalm says, speaks with them to the heart of man (Benedict XVI 2008k). In addition to silence, gestures and music are also important, involving the entire person, from mind to mouth, from heart to whole body. This way of praying is a feature of Hebrew prayer, especially the prayer of psalms (Benedict XVI 2012i). Besides, music – the Pope points out – and especially songs, can make the recitation of psalms acquire “greater communicative force.” (Benedict XVI 2012a)

#### 4.2. The Psalms in the Tradition of the Church

Another characteristic of the reading of psalms proposed by Pope Benedict XVI is the reference to the Fathers of the Church, or tradition in the broadest sense, although mainly referring to the first millennium. The Pope mainly quotes *Expositions on the Psalms* by St. Augustine (to Ps 4:8; 5; 29:9; 44:23; 51:16; 54:9; 60:3; 84:13; 85:1; 85:7; 94:2; 95:7; 98:9(x3); 99:20; 102:5; 103, 109:3; 121:2(x2) 131:1, 7), as well as Basil (*Omellie sui Salmi* 48,8), Gregory of Nyssa (*Sui Salmi* 2,11), Hilary (*Tractatus super Psalmos*, Ps 121:2; 127:1–3), Jerome (*In Psalmum* 147; *Omellia sul salmo* 83, 3; *Breviarum in Psalm*, 66) and Ambrose (*Explanatio Psalmi* 40).

The references to the Fathers of the Church concern especially the Christological reading of psalms. The pope points out that the Church Fathers were fascinated with Ps 45, which they read as an image of Christ's nuptials with the Church (Benedict XVI 2010d) and referred the words of Ps 67:7: “The earth has yielded its increase” to Mary and Jesus (Benedict XVI 2011r). He recalls that Ps 110 in the tradition of the Church was read as a messianic psalm (Benedict XVI 2011n). He quotes Augustine, according to whom Ps 85:12 (“Faithfulness will spring up from the ground”) refers to Christ and his birth from Mary (Benedict XVI 2006a)<sup>13</sup> and the “drinking from the streams” in Ps 110 speaks of the incarnation of the Son of God (Benedict XVI 2011j). The Saint of Hippo considers Ps 123 to be sung by members of the Body of Christ who have reached the fullness of happiness (Benedict XVI 2005l), while Ps 124 speaks of the peace of Christ given to the Church as the new Israel (Benedict XVI 2005m). The same Augustine sees the “house of Israel” and the “house of Aaron” of Ps 135 the venerable and ministering members of the Church (Benedict XVI 2005n), and in Ps 137 the Church imprisoned in this world, which should praise Christ in songs (Benedict XVI 2005e). According to Gregory the Great, the Church built on the foundation of Christ is spoken of in Ps 122 (Benedict XVI 2005o). Gregory the Great, together with the already familiar tradition, also understands Ps 139:16 (“Your eyes beheld my

<sup>13</sup> Augustine finds it easier to relate this passage to Christ, as he uses the translation “Veritas de terra orta est,” making it easier to move on to the One who said “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

unformed substance”) as a reference to Christians who are the weakest in the spiritual struggle (Benedict XVI 2005k). The pope also recalls the commentary of Hesychius of Jerusalem, who understood Ps 132:8 (“Rise up, O LORD, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might”) as a reference to the Incarnation of the Son of God (Benedict XVI 2005g). Irenaeus of Lyons understood this psalm in a similar way (Benedict XVI 2005p). Benedict XVI also refers to Clement of Alexandria, who sees the divine help described in Psalm 135 as the help of Jesus (Benedict XVI 2005q).

Benedict XVI does not only mention the Fathers of the Church in his Christological reading of psalms. He recalls the thoughts of Barsanuphius of Gaza, who, with the words of a psalm, encouraged perseverance in difficulties (Benedict XVI 2005r), or explained the fear of God (cf. Ps 111:10) as abstaining from everything God hates (Benedict XVI 2005s). In interpreting the same passage about fear as the beginning of wisdom, he also refers to John Cassian, who sees such fear as imperfect love (Benedict XVI 2005s). He refers to Basil, who understands “the cup of salvation” (Ps 116:13) as enduring suffering in spiritual warfare and resisting sin until death (Benedict XVI 2005t). He recalls the harp with ten strings (Ps 144:9), which Augustine understands as the Ten Commandments of God (Benedict XVI 2006g), and the words about the happy life in Ps 144:15 become an occasion for Augustine to speak of love as the way to eternal life (*SpS* 14).

The pope, quoting the rule of St. Benedict, who stated about the recitation of the Psalms: «Mens concordet voci», writes: “The *vox*, words, precede our mind. This is not usually the case: one has to think first, then one’s thought becomes words. But here, the words come first.” (Benedict XVI 2006p; also Benedict XVI 2007n, 131) He also shares a beautiful passage from Cassiodorus on the subject of the Psalms (PL 70, 10): „Having rejected and abandoned in Ravenna the demands of a political career marked by the disgusting taste of worldly concerns, having enjoyed the Psalter, a book that came from Heaven, as true honey of the soul, I dived into it avidly, thirsting to examine it without a pause, to steep myself in that salutary sweetness, having had enough of the countless disappointments of active life.” (Benedict XVI 2008o)

Sometimes Benedict XVI refers to the Fathers of the Church who, although they do not comment on the psalm in question, convey a certain idea that comes to the pope when reading the psalm in question (thus, for example, on the thoughts of Clement of Alexandria – Benedict XVI 2005u or Basil the Great and an anonymous fourth-century father – Benedict XVI 2006e).

#### 4.3. Personal References to the Psalms

The pope generally does not show any particular emotion or personal reflection in his commentary on psalms but, on several occasions, he expresses what can be called a reading of psalms that is heart-touching for Benedict XVI.

Such a unique reading of psalms for the pope are two commentaries by Augustine. One to the phrase “quaerite faciem eius semper” – “constantly seek his face”, of which he states: “ever since my student days his words have lived on in my heart” and to which he returns several times as pope. He quotes Augustine, who argues that it is not just this life, but all eternity, during which one will be discovering this face (*Enarr. in Ps.*, 104:3; CCL 40, 1537). The more one enters into the splendor of God’s love, the more beautiful it will be to discover that the search will never end (Benedict XVI 2005aa, 2005c, 2007k). The second passage is related to the pope’s coat of arms. In Munich, the Pope explained that Augustine’s commentary on Ps 73:22–23 and especially on the phrase “jumentum factus sum apud te, et ego semper tecum” (“I was like a brute beast toward you. Nevertheless I am continually with you”) was crucial for him. Augustine discovered himself in this beast, who was burdened with the yoke of holding bishop’s office. He himself had chosen to be a man of study, but God had harnessed him to another role. This new yoke was heavy for him, but it was joyful insofar as it offered the guarantee of always being close to the animal’s owner. The idea of St. Corbinian’s bear associated with Munich, which gave Ratzinger courage in accepting his new task, should also be understood in this context (see Seweryniak 2011, 15–74). With a certain sense of humor, the Pope writes that St. Corbinian’s bear was set free in Rome, whereas in his case “the Lord” decided otherwise (Benedict XVI 2006h).

In addition, Benedict XVI sometimes interjects the information that a particular passage of the Psalms is simply important to him, such as “Today, in the Office of Readings we recited the words of a Psalm which ring especially true and are very precious to me: ‘In manibus tuis sortes meae’ (Ps 31[30]: 16)” (Benedict XVI 2007o); “At Vespers today I was particularly moved by the words of the Psalm in which Israel thanks God for the gift of his command that runs swiftly” (Benedict XVI 2008o); “*Ecce quam bonum et quam iucundum habitare fratres in unum* (Ps 133:1). At this moment, I feel I am really experiencing these words of the Psalm” (Benedict XVI 2011b); “And a phrase in the Psalms always moves me when I pray. ‘Your hands have made and fashioned me’, says the Psalmist (Ps 119[118]:73).” (Benedict XVI 2012j)

The pope also referred to what struck him about the Liturgy of the Hours in the days when there was an earthquake in Italy. To the people affected by the earthquake, the Pope spoke thus:

We priests, as you know — and also men and women religious and many lay people — pray every day using the “Breviary”, which contains the Liturgy of the Hours, the prayer of the Church that punctuates the day. We pray with the Psalms, according to an order which is the same for the whole of the Catholic Church throughout the world. Why am I telling you this? Because in these days, in praying Psalm 46, I came across these words that touched me: “God is our refuge and strength, / an ever-present help in distress. / Therefore we fear not, though the earth be shaken / and mountains plunge into the sea” (Ps 46[45]:2–3). How often have I read these words? Countless times! I have been a priest for 61 years! Yet in moments

like these they make a strong impression for they touch the living, they give a voice to an experience you are now living through and in which everyone who is praying shares. Yet — you see — it is not because these words of the Psalm draw upon the image of the earthquake that they strike me but above all because of what they say about our interior attitude in the face of an upheaval of nature: an attitude of great assurance, based on the sound, unshakeable rock that is God. We “fear not, though the earth be shaken”, the psalmist says, “God is our refuge and our strength”, he is “an ever-present help in distress. (Benedict XVI 2012r)

At times, a psalm becomes for Benedict XVI a starting point for personal reflection: “In the Book of Psalms we read: ‘Your goodness, Lord, surrounds me like everlasting mountains.’ And we are surrounded by this visible, divine goodness in the beauty of the mountain. But during all this time I have above all been surrounded by human goodness, by your goodness, which has always accompanied me. For me, you have really been invisible ‘guardian angels’, silent but ever present, ready; and in my memory remains the memory of your presence in these days.” (Benedict XVI 2007h)

These examples, although few in number but telling, show that for Benedict XVI psalms are not just the subject of catechesis or theological treatises. They are a living word that also permeates the pope’s heart.

## Conclusions

The undertaken analysis of Benedict XVI’s interpretation of psalms has managed to capture some of his essential hermeneutical rules from his pontificate, which can be summarized in four essential principles:

- 1) Attention to historical-critical exegesis, which seems to be the basis for further interpretation. Benedict XVI builds his reading of psalms on solid biblical knowledge, frequently referring to philological issues.
- 2) He treats psalms as a word that is not only a historical record of the experience of the people of God of the Old Testament, but is fulfilled in Christ, the Church, Mary and also in the experience of every believer. In this way, the pope makes it clear that the Book of Psalms contains truths that say much more than the text itself in its literal sense.
- 3) The consistent search for a bridge between the truth contained in the Book of Psalms and the current experience of contemporary man. In this way the Psalms become a book that contains unchanging ideas that are valid for every time and for every person.
- 4) Appreciation of the voice of the Church Fathers. The pope thus reminds us that commenting on psalms cannot overlook the broad Tradition of the Church.

Benedict XVI does not provide ready-made formulas for interpreting psalms. However, the hermeneutical principles he follows and proposes seem to be a good combination of science with faith and theology with human experience. It remains to be hoped that Pope Benedict XVI's hermeneutics of faith will find increasing recognition in contemporary biblical studies, or at least in scholarly commentaries on the Psalms, which most often stop at the level of historical-critical exegesis.

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## REVIEW





**Aaron Pidel, *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture: Testing the Ratzinger Paradigm* (Verbum Domini; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023). Pp. 278. 34,95 \$. ISBN 978-0-8132-3687-2**

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Aaron Pidel SJ received his doctorate from the University of Notre Dame in 2017. He is an assistant professor of theology at Marquette University and a member of the theological faculty at the Pontifical Gregorian University. He has published numerous articles<sup>1</sup> and two monographs: *Church of the Ever Greater God* (Pidel 2020) and *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture* (Pidel 2023). In the first of these, the Jesuit proposed the first English-language study of Erich Przywara SJ's ecclesiology, in which the latter used the concept of *analogia entis* to describe the mystery of the Church. The second of these is the subject of this review.

In the structure of this review, two main paragraphs are distinguished corresponding to the title and subtitle of the reviewed item, in which reference is made to Pidel's contentions. Before that, however, the structure and purpose of the monograph is discussed. The concluding part offers a critical evaluation of this valuable publication, which is definitely one to be recommended not only to scholars of Ratzinger's legacy but to all those interested in the doctrine of Scripture.

## 1. Structure and Purpose of the Monograph

The monograph *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture* begins with Acknowledgements (over 2 pages), after which the reader is given a list of abbreviations (5.5 pages) and an Introduction (14 pages) entitled, not coincidentally, "Setting the Scene." This section introduces five chapters fairly equal in volume (38, 47, 44, 37 and 47 pages accordingly). The publication also consists of an epilogue (exact title: "Epilogue: Three

<sup>1</sup> There are more than twenty articles (including chapters in multi-author publications) in the ATLA Religion Database (ATLA RDB). The following are worth mentioning as related to the reviewed publication: Pidel 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2022.

Achievements” – over 15 pages), a bibliography (22 pages) and an index (9.5 pages). The division of the bibliography is perhaps all too simple: only Joseph Ratzinger’s writings (4 pages) and the remaining literature (18 pages) are distinguished.

The author takes as the aim of his book the search for answers to the questions: what it means that the Bible is the word of God (and not just a word about God), and how true the Bible is and to what extent the word of God expressed in human language can be expected to transcend the cultural level of its time. From the outset, he reveals his conviction that it was Joseph Ratzinger who put Catholic reflection on Scripture on a new trajectory, taking into account both orthodox enduring doctrine and the challenges carried by scientific and historical reason. It is noteworthy that Pidel draws almost exclusively on Ratzinger’s writings as a theologian who writes in his own name (this means that the author deliberately omits Ratzinger’s statements as Benedict XVI) and presents his theology against the background of historical thought on the inspiration and truth of Scripture developed from the 19th century to the present day. As the Jesuit notes, after Vatican II, reflection on the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible was neglected by those for whom it should be of particular interest – that is, biblical scholars. Benedict XVI called for in-depth theological reflection on the inspiration and truth of Scripture (VD 19), and Pidel’s monograph is intended to show that it was Ratzinger who “laid a groundwork for a comprehensive theory of biblical inspiration and truth” (p. 8).

In the introduction, the author reveals his conviction, which would later make itself known in the pages of the book, about the constituent elements of Ratzinger’s synthesis. He would owe most to his study of the legacy of St Bonaventure.<sup>2</sup> Ratzinger juxtaposes the basic intuitions drawn from him with the most important insights of theologians concerned with biblical inspiration (and the corresponding inerrancy or truth of Scripture), the findings of biblical exegesis and the pronouncements of the Magisterium. However, the author of the monograph under review did not intend merely to present Ratzinger’s theology of Scripture, but to demonstrate that it is more useful than other proposals. Accordingly, in his research, he set up the standards of evaluation: the standard of faith (mainly dictated by *Dei Verbum* as the normative expression of the Church’s doctrine of Scripture), the standard of reason (here it would be mainly about the correspondence of the model of inspiration with the results of research carried out using the historical-critical method) and the comparative standard of alternative theologies of inspiration.

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<sup>2</sup> It is precisely the Bonaventurian metaphysics of Scripture that would constitute the distinguishing feature of Pidel’s monograph in comparison with the earlier publications to which Pidel refers (p. 14, n. 40): Rausch 2009; Ramage 2013.

## 2. Ratzinger's Theology of Scripture Against Other Models

### 2.1. Towards a New Paradigm of Inspiration and Truth

The comparison of proposals for a theology of Scripture announced in the introduction begins with the presentation of alternative models in chapter one ("The Search for a New Paradigm of Biblical Inspiration and Truth"). Pidel selects, in his view, the most influential ones that emerged after the publication of the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, when historical consciousness gained dominance, and in which some theory of biblical inspiration developed in philosophical terms can be distinguished. Pidel characterises the models proposed by Pierre Benoit (1906–1987), Karl Rahner (1904–1984) and David Tracy (b. 1939). The author believes that the list of approaches proposed, although not exhaustive, is nevertheless representative of Catholic theology: "they typify the interpretive styles still prevalent today" (p. 11). Pidel uses a double term for these models: the first word in the name designates the school of thought to which the model can be attributed, the second characterises the way in which God becomes the true Author of Scripture. These are:

- (1) Benoit's Thomist-instrumental model of inspiration
- (2) Rahner's Molinist-predefinitive model of inspiration
- (3) Tracy's Heideggerian-disclosive model of inspiration

Each of these models is characterised by Pidel, and he then shows the interpretative implications of the model and evaluates it.

Benoit, the author of the first model, drew on Thomas's notion of prophecy and instrumental causality, both narrowing the concept of prophecy (the divine impulse to write) and broadening it (to include not only truths beyond the reach of the human author's mind). In this model, God uses human instruments, with the result that Scripture is fully human, and at the same time God is its "Author." God and humans "author" Scripture in ways appropriate to their natures and on their own level. As the primary Author, God transcending the limitations of human tools, determines the "*fuller sense*" and inerrancy of Scripture (what the biblical author teaches, is also taught by God). This means that the *sensus plenior* is attributed to God alone, and the *sensus literalis* to God and human tools. In this model, it is not the text (or the tradition prior to it) but the human authors who are inspired. This model resonates with magisterial statements and displays a *metaphysical elegance*. Weaknesses include inappropriate assumptions about the origin and purpose of Scripture, the difficulty of taking into account the communal dimension of its genesis and explaining questionable (erroneous) biblical content, and the reduction of biblical truth to propositional assertions.

The second model was based on the theory of predestinating grace promoted by the Jesuit Luis de Molina (1535–1600) and took into account communal consciousness (a legacy of German Romanticism). Karl Rahner limited his speculations to God's

assistance in the origin of Scripture. Molina and his followers held that God does not so much move the will and determine it towards a goal, but arranges (divine providence) external circumstances in such a way that man can freely choose what God desires. Situating himself in this heritage, Rahner argues that true human authorship is incompatible with the concept of subordinate instrumentality, as is inspiration if it is not to be reduced to God's creative action. He therefore advocates seeing inspiration as a combination of providential circumstances and divine grace. In the Jesuit's view, it should be recognised that God "predefines" the substantive message of the Bible, while the literary form is the work of human authors. Scripture is the unique word of God because it is part of the same type of predefinition that also characterises the apostolic Church. Since the fullest and most perfect revelation was given in Christ, God, as it were, "authors" the Church in the apostolic era. The New Testament is the "incarnation" of the Church's original faith, and God is the author of the mind of the Church; human authors determine the concrete literary shape of that mind. God is treated here as the *originator* providing the revealed ideas rather than an *auctor*. Divine and human authors are seen from different perspectives (cf. also Rahner 1969).

For the interpretation of Scripture, this is of considerable importance, because in addition to determining the intention of the human author, the intention of the Church must also be taken into account. A hagiographer wrote as a member of the Church and thus remained integrated at least implicitly into the universal theology of the Church. Post-apostolic ecclesial doctrine does not obscure but illuminates his intention, and an error-free interpretation of Scripture is linked to the infallibility of the Church's teaching authority. Exegetes should therefore treat magisterial teaching not as a negative limitation of exegesis, but as an intrinsic, positive principle of exegetical research. The evaluation of this model emphasises that it does not explain the apostolic conviction of the Church according to which it received the Scriptures from people chosen by God. By subjecting the role of the prophets and apostles to ecclesiastical consciousness, it deprives inspiration of its meaning. Besides, it can hardly explain the inspiration of the Old Testament. Nor does it provide any natural analogy to illustrate the "mechanism" of the interpenetration of individual and communal intentions; it seems to explain one mystery with another, even greater one.

Originating from an American theologian, the third model draws on the model of disclosure of truth proposed earlier by Martin Heidegger and developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Reaching the truth depends on one's attitude to reality (a more open or manipulative stance) and on the history of effects ("effective-history," German *Wirkungsgeschichte*).<sup>3</sup> David Tracy postulates that Scripture should

<sup>3</sup> The history of the text's effects was pointed out, also with reference to Gadamer among others, by the Australian Jesuit Gerald O'Collins, whom Pidel does not quote in his monograph (O'Collins 2018, 22, 157–59). One Polish biblical scholar (Linke 2017, 41) argues that the history of effects only "superficially" concerns Scripture's inspired character.



not be regarded as a collection of dogmatic and ethical propositional claims, but rather seen as a “classic” – a work of art that opens up to a more authentic world. “The Bible is finally true because the overall world that it projects is most true to life – that is, least inadequate to Jesus Christ’s vision of reality. The historical authors’ intentions do not govern the ever-expanding meaning of the text, nor are their judgments, even if solemnly proposed, always true” (p. 45).

This leads to a new understanding of the authorship of the Bible and the tasks of the interpreter. Not the “world behind the text,” i.e. the hagiographer’s intentions, historical circumstances, etc., but the “world in front of the text” – the vision evoked by the text itself is relevant here. The books of the Old and New Testaments represent, admittedly, a normative (because they are a primary testimony), but only a “relatively adequate” expression of the Christ event (this rather than a different set of symbols and narrative techniques does not reveal the whole). Tracy recognises God as the “implied author” whose vision of the world becomes available through the biblical text. In analogy with classical literature, which imbues the world with meaning, being above such classics, Scripture carries meaning by relating to the world in its liminal situation (the transcendent totality manifest in the humanity of Christ). In other words, the truth of Scripture is not so much to be found in propositional judgements as it is an “event” analogous to a deeper recognition of reality through a work of art. “For Tracey, Scripture is true not so much because its propositional judgments are always true but because it makes truth appear and human authenticity possible” (p. 42). The regulative and determining role of what is “behind the text,” which determines the scope of legitimate interpretations, is relativised. One can only speak of an internal and an external correction of interpretation. The internal one is based on accountability to the overall canonical witness, the external one is based on historical-critical, literary-critical and social-scientific methods through which it is possible to identify arbitrary interpretations. In turn, the role of Tradition as giving access to the full meaning of biblical words is emphasised in hermeneutics (e.g. “classical” figure of Jesus is revealed through *Wirkungsgeschichte*). One can thus speak of a symbiosis between the religious classic and the supra-historical community of readers. Tradition is subject to reform and correction in the community, and Scripture and the Church constitute a type of hermeneutic circle, as each serves as a standard for the other.

In Pidel’s view, this model better explains the *sensus plenior* than Benoit’s model. It frees exegetes from the burden of interpreting dubious biblical historical, scientific or ethical-religious ideas, but it does so at the expense of transforming the inerrancy of Scripture – it abandons the truthfulness of propositional judgments in favour of the truthfulness of life, thus failing to do justice to the historical dimension of Christianity. What is missing here is the translation of existential truth into concrete directives and doctrines. “For those who feel Scripture discloses not only an existential landscape but also, at least on some occasions, concrete

and abiding norms for belief and action, Tracy will have painted with too broad a brush” (p. 48).

Most important, however, is Pidel’s assessment of all the models discussed. None of them adequately corresponds to the Church’s teaching on divine authorship and interpretive implications, especially the whole theory of Scripture as expressed in the constitution *Dei Verbum*. Our author argues that “[t]he council lays down the doctrinal ‘pegs,’ in other words, leaving it to theological ingenuity to stretch a theoretical fabric over them. Each of the models of inspiration surveyed covers some pegs better than others” (p. 48). The models presented do not cover all of them: “neither Benoit nor Rahner nor Tracy accommodates with equal elegance everything that *Dei Verbum* wants to affirm about the reality of Scripture” (p. 52). In the following chapters, Pidel will argue that it is Ratzinger who has been able to build on the strengths of the various models and offer a more adequate theology of Scripture as the word of God.

## 2.2. Biblical Inspiration as Seen by the Bavarian Theologian

Pidel, in his second chapter entitled “Ratzinger on Scripture as God’s Word,” calls Ratzinger’s proposal the “Bonaventurian-ecclesial model of inspiration.” As our author writes, “transposing Bonaventure’s thought, Ratzinger begins to advance a model of biblical inspiration that is mystical, historically progressive, subject-inclusive, and rationally corrective” (p. 53). This model emerges in dialogue with philosophical hermeneutics, personalism and critical exegesis.

Following Bonaventure, Ratzinger emphasises that mystical “revelation” (*revelatio*, but also *inspiratio* or *illuminatio* in medieval terms) is at the root of the recognition of God’s action in history and the creation of the books of the Bible (“inspiration” in the modern sense). A similar transition from *mundus sensibilis* to *mundus intelligibilis* must also accompany the interpreter of inspired texts, since revelation has been expressed in words, but is somehow hidden behind them and demands to be unveiled. Inspiration, therefore, would be a special type of revelation associated with the creation of a textual creation.

From Bonaventure, the Bavarian theologian also adopts the conviction that the subject receiving revelation belongs to revelation itself; consequently: the believing subject is to be seen in indissoluble connection with inspired Scripture, without which it remains a mere dead letter. Revelation encompasses both the text and the ecclesial subject, the material and formal principle. In Ratzinger’s view, Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium constitute one living organism of the word of God that lives in the Church. It is in it as the place of transition from the human spirit to the *Pneuma* that inspiration becomes possible. The authorship of Scripture is seen by Ratzinger triadically, as the mutual interaction of three entities: the individual author, the People of God and God. Pidel uses a telling illustration in this

context – the divine-human structure of God’s word in Ratzinger’s model is “like a set of Russian dolls. God enfolds the faith of the Church, which enfolds the individual author or interpreter, which enfolds the otherwise inert text” (p. 64). In this way the two worlds, behind the text and in front of the text, are integrated with each other.

If, on the other hand, the Church, with its memory, is the primary created subject of Scripture, then, in Ratzinger’s view, the ongoing dimension of *inspiratio* must be valued, at least in the receptive sense (the understanding of inspired texts). Pidel argues that Ratzinger owes this element of the model to Bonaventure as well; having rejected the historical isomorphism of Israel and the Church, the Bavarian theologian recognises that Scripture only reveals its full meaning as the People of God develop in history, in the context of new experiences. “Divine discourse not only enters history but has a history” (p. 67); or: “Bible remains embedded within history, but a history that is itself in motion” (p. 69). From the other side: this word is characterised by the potentialities that can develop over time (in which, according to Ratzinger, inspiration “shines through”).

All these views are summarised by Pidel as follows:

Ratzinger takes from Bonaventure the idea that *inspiratio* constitutes a kind of mystical perception, necessary for both consigning *revelatio* to writing and for interpreting biblical writings in their revelatory sense. The basic form of such mystical perception is none other than the faith of the Church. This means that Scripture does not already constitute revelation in its naked verbalness, but only in conjunction with an “understanding subject” – the People of God. And as this understanding subject gains experience throughout its historical journey – a journey that includes epochal transitions from Israel to Church and from Apostolic Church to post-Apostolic Church – Scripture gradually accrues new layers of text (in the canonical period) and unfolds new layers of meaning (in the periods after the closure of each canon). Ratzinger thus presents the Word of God as living and active “organism,” accruing meaning until the eschaton [...] (p. 97).

Ratzinger’s attention to salvation history as a means of understanding Scripture is also seen by Pidel as having been taken over from the legacy of Bonaventure. The Franciscan emphasised that in the present circumstances (after sin), human reason needs the light of faith to function properly. Ratzinger adds to this the historical and communal determinants of reason and draws the conclusion that there is no perfectly neutral (so-called *view of nowhere*) alternative to the Church’s faith-based tradition of rational examination of Scripture. The Bavarian theologian also elaborates on the need to inscribe private reason in the historical tradition from the anthropological side. Just as reason cannot operate outside the community of language (with its historical conditions), biblical inspiration is a dimension of the mystical tradition. In this way, communal inspiration appears not as a *sui generis* phenomenon, but

rather a supernatural elevation of tradition inherent in human nature. There is thus (unlike in Rahner) a natural analogy for the ecclesial dimension of inspiration, and the emphasis on the role of language additionally takes into account the linguistic turn that has taken place in philosophy (Ludwig Wittgenstein's aporia that language shapes rather than merely reflects thought). If individual thought is only possible through the mediation of a common language, the linguistic community in turn expresses itself through the thought of the individual. Similarly, inspiration expresses the mind of the Church, as hagiographers share the supernatural virtue of faith and cultural and linguistic community with the entire Church.

The Jesuit argues that the model is all the more adequate the more compatibility it shows with the "pegs" established in *Dei Verbum*, while not leaving other doctrinal guidelines unfulfilled. The following doctrinal data, which Ratzinger's model respects, shall be highlighted in turn:

#### (1) Organic unity of Scripture and Church

The triadic model of authorship (especially the emphasis on the People of God) makes it possible to preserve the unity of Scripture, Tradition and the Church's teaching office postulated by *Dei Verbum*. This model enters into the question of communal authorship left open by the Council Fathers. Precisely by virtue of the fact that Scripture takes its shape from the mutual exchange of the individual, the community and the Word, it is marked by an organic relationship to the Church. Ratzinger's model: "better accounts for the organic interpenetration of Scripture and ecclesial tradition by recalling that every linguistic community constitutes something of a collective personality, whose authority must be accepted for the sake of initiation into thought and communion. The interdependence of Scripture and Church represents, therefore, only the supernatural elevation of a natural dynamic everywhere evident [...]" (p. 97).

#### (2) Scripture's unique authority as God's Word

For Ratzinger, the primacy of Scripture demands the mystical preeminence of Christ and the apostles. The Jesuit also emphasises that for Ratzinger both the "once only" of revelation and its "forever" are important. The fullness of revelation, in Ratzinger's view, has its metaphysical roots in the hypostatic union – which happened once only – transposed in Ratzinger's theology into the personal-mystical categories of the Son's relationship with the Father. And the Apostles were included in this intimate dialogue between Christ and God. "For Ratzinger, both the apostles and Scripture seem to fall within the penumbra of the unrepeatable Christ-event and share in its revelatory *preeminence*" (p. 84). If, then, the mystical model of inspiration by itself cannot so satisfactorily justify the distinction between the word of God and the words about God as Benoit's model did, then combining it with a Christological approach linking the unique authority of Scripture to the Incarnation and

its witnesses already does. The God who is the subject of Jesus' words and deeds becomes, through the apostolic witnesses, also the subject of Scripture. In contrast to Rahner, who could acknowledge the primacy of the apostles simply because they belonged to the apostolic Church, Ratzinger links the primacy of the apostolic Church to the mission of the Twelve.

### (3) Inspiration of the Old Testament

About inspiration, the Church has made the unequivocal statement that it originates not from the Church's acceptance of the books of the Old Testament (Vatican Council I), but from God, who inspired both Testaments (Vatican Council II). This means at least that the Old Testament remains the word of God more than any other uninspired religious literature and that it must be seen in continuity with revelation in Christ. In the constitution *Dei Verbum*, there is a passus stating that the word of God is present in a special way (*prae excellenti modo*) in the New Testament (cf. DV 17), which could suggest some type of analogous (different) intensity of inspiration in the two Testaments. In Ratzinger's model, this kind of "unity-in-difference" between the two testaments is clearly indicated. Pidel also sees here the influence of Bonaventure, from whom Ratzinger would take the correspondence between Israel and the Church, only not in a "one-to-one" form. The Jesuit argues that other insights of the Franciscan (e.g. the mystical, subjective-inclusive and historically progressive aspects) may open the way to recognising different intensities of inspiration, according to the stage of salvation history. "After all, if the People of God is Scripture's 'understanding subject,' itself subsisting in the diverse historical modalities of Israel and Church, it follows that the charism of inspiration, too, may know various intensities" (p. 89).

Taking over from Erich Przywara the principle of *analogia fidei*, Ratzinger excludes two types of "false directness" (German *falsche Direktheit*) in the approach to the Old Testament. On the one hand, it is unacceptable to allow for a Judaising exegesis granting the Old Testament only immanent-historical significance (this would be a denial of the dynamic of self-transcendence – *Selbsttranszendierung*). On the other hand, a naïve Christian immediacy that would deny the integrity of the Old Testament testimony<sup>4</sup> and thus also cross out a Christianity derived from an Old Testament source is unacceptable. It is therefore necessary, and this is what Ratzinger does after Przywara, to assume an "analogical unity" of Scripture. The Old Testament is already Christian, since the early Church could read it "Christianly," but it had to undergo a "Christological transformation" (a shift from *gramma* to *Pneuma*).

On the line of contact between Ratzinger's conception of the People of God (covenant people) as the inspired subject of Scripture and Przywara's conception of

<sup>4</sup> The "own" character of the Old Testament, quoted by Pidel on a couple of occasions, is perhaps most forcefully pointed out by Christopher Seitz (cf. 2011).

analogous covenants, one could, according to Pidel, speak of an analogous model of inspiration in Ratzinger (the alternative models of Benoit and Tracy suggested a rather homogeneous inspiration). It is not only the canonisation of the Old Testament by the Church that makes it inspired (as Rahner's model seems to suggest), but on the other hand, the Church nevertheless determines the inspiration of the Old Testament by reading it in the Spirit of Christ. The analogical hermeneutic of Scripture (Ratzinger in his later years more readily writes of the *analogia scripturae*) is justified by Ratzinger's personalist metaphysics of history. "The *analogia fidei* comes to rest ever more decisively in the analogical unity of the faith of the People of God, understood as both Israel and Church" (p. 92).

### 2.3. Ratzinger on the Truth of Scripture

In the third chapter ("Ratzinger on the Truth of Scripture"), Pidel looks at the interpretative implications arising from Ratzinger's model of inspiration concerning the truthfulness of the Bible in its negative and positive aspects. In order to evaluate Ratzinger's model, he assesses it against the theological field and examines the ability to reconcile the basic traditional doctrinal claims with the picture of the Bible drawn from historical-critical exegesis and contemporary hermeneutics. This mainly involves reconciling the doctrine of inerrancy (DV 11) with historical, scientific and religious errors in the Bible. The Constitution on Divine Revelation does not so much reject the anti-modern tradition on the infallibility of Scripture as it reconciles the conviction of inerrancy with the historical-salvific perspective. The compromising statements, in which a certain tension is clearly made known, demand a theological elaboration.

Pidel is of the opinion that Ratzinger's solution is more inclusive, in terms of conciliar claims, than other solutions, in turn being more complex than them. In order to present them, it is necessary, firstly, to explain how Ratzinger changed the classical notion of authorial intention from the individual to the People of God; secondly, to explain the "tests" used by Ratzinger to discern the extent to which the People of God affirm the enduring significance of an idea materially contained in Scripture.

Ratzinger's reformulation of the truthfulness of Scripture was made possible by the compilation of two elements of a subject-inclusive approach to Scripture: the first is the existence of a historical intention transcending that of the individual authors, and the second is the fact that the communal bearer of this intention underwent epochal changes in history. Ratzinger, therefore, takes the position that determining what Scripture actually (and without error) teaches requires determining the intent of the communal author, and this is not possible without taking into account the multi-layered history of God's people. As a result, "Scripture itself, not the hagiographers considered severally, now stands as the grammatical



subject of the intention to affirm” (p. 110). The supra-historical unity of God’s people is determined by the manifold relationship to Christ (prophetic anticipation, direct testimony, retrospective interpretation), so the interpreter must take into account the distinction and unity of the various ‘layers’ in order to find what Scripture actually affirms. “One can ascertain the *vere enuntiata* only by considering both the passage’s historical position vis-à-vis Christ and the relevance of its contents for the Christian mystery” (p. 111). Scripture will be characterised by Christological unity: each part will derive its meaning from the whole, and the whole will take its meaning from the end, from Christ.

In the history of the People of God, two important points of decisive interpretation of Scripture can be distinguished: the reinterpretation of Israel carried out by Christ in the Holy Spirit, and the reinterpretation of Christ’s establishment of the Kingdom of God carried out by early Christianity (as a result of which, as a decision made in the Spirit and complementing Christ’s foundation, the Church of the Gentiles could come into being). Pidel reminds us that, according to Ratzinger, there is not only an Old Testament theology of the Old Testament, a New Testament theology of the Old Testament or a New Testament theology of the New Testament, but also an ecclesial theology of the New Testament that goes beyond its historical meaning (although not contradicting it). The difference between biblical and ecclesial theology is for Ratzinger nothing less than Tradition. “At the most global level, tradition encompasses nothing less than the ‘entire mystery of Christ’s presence’ in history, the surplus of meaning in revelation that can never be exhaustively captured in writing” (p. 113). Therefore, every element of the word of God, from the Old and New Testaments, through ecclesial dogma or *sensus fidelium* plays a role in the expression of this fundamental mystery.

If it is necessary to arrive at what Scripture actually intends to say (*vere enuntiata*), this means that there is an orthodox (non-Bultmannian) demythologisation to distinguish between true claims and an accompanying non-binding worldview. The *case study* presented by Pidel in this context concerning the existence of the devil and alleged geocentrism (Galileo casus) is very interesting. Ratzinger, in his search for the actual truth conveyed by Scripture (demythologisation), applied, according to Pidel, four interrelated criteria (“*standards*”), largely reflecting Ratzinger’s understanding of the layers and elements of Tradition. These criteria, which seek to distinguish the extent to which Scripture intends to affirm formally the ideas that are contained in it materially, include:

- (1) The relationship between Old and New Testament (this corresponds to Old Testament theology and New Testament theology);
- (2) The relationship to the New Testament portrait of Jesus (New Testament theology is invoked here);
- (3) Reception into the faith of the Church (which in turn correlates with, but is not reducible to, New Testament theology of the Church);



- (4) Compatibility with scientific knowledge (which in turn correlates with scholarly reason) (cf. pp. 116–17, 153–64).

Applying these criteria leads to the conclusion that belief in the devil positively passes the normativity test, while geocentrism does not. Of course, the above criteria are only approximations, since Tradition cannot be objectified all the way through and the faith of the Church circled with absolute clarity. For this reason, Ratzinger will make variations of the above tests, adapting them to each individual case: “the variable enumeration of these criteria suggests that Ratzinger often formulates them *ad hoc* and seldom expects them to function with algorithmic precision” (p. 121). As will become apparent especially in chapter four, “the normative interpretation of Scripture [...] remains more an art than a science” (p. 165).<sup>5</sup>

Pidel then goes on to show the positive implications of the fact of inspiration: in addition to the inerrancy of Scripture, there is an *inexhaustibility of meaning* that can manifest itself in the Church. “The same corporate model of inspiration also allows Ratzinger to account for the inexhaustible depth of meaning and irreducible multivalence ascribed to the Bible from the beginning of the Christian tradition” (p. 12). Ratzinger justifies the conviction present in pre-modern hermeneutics by the findings of modern exegesis and philosophical hermeneutics and by reference to *Dei Verbum*, which distinguishes between two interpretative horizons intended to form a synthesis, the human and the divine (the intention of the hagiographer and what God intended to express through them, the departure from the intention of the human author to the meaning of the canonical text itself, the reading in the Spirit), one related to the historical context, the other to the ecclesial-pneumatological. “[T]he Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation appears to entrust the theoretical integration of these hermeneutical poles to future generations of theologians” (p. 136).<sup>6</sup>

Ratzinger’s statements lead one to conclude that, at least later in his theological career, he saw the proper reception of the interpretative principles distinguished in DV 12 (methodological bipolarity) in the traditional doctrine of the four senses of Scripture (or rather, as he preferred the term, the four dimensions of the word<sup>7</sup>),

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also p. 194: “The tests were only ‘aids to judgment,’ not algorithmic inputs generating unambiguous results.”

<sup>6</sup> The tension in the constitution was written about somewhat differently by, unquoted by Pidel but a member of the editorial board of the series in which the monograph under review appeared, William M. Wright IV. The American scholar argues that DV 12 speaks of inquiring into the intention of the hagiographer (attention becomes focused on the text as an expression of *intentio auctoris*), while on the other hand, DV 2 is dominated by a sacramental theology of history (focusing on the history of salvation as presented in the biblical word and bearing the mystery of God) – cf. Wright IV 2017, 83–85.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. e.g. Ratzinger 2007, xx (Polish translation in: Ratzinger 2015, 125–26): “The four senses of Scripture are not individual meanings arrayed side by side, but dimensions of the one word that reaches beyond the moment.”

to which he gives a new theoretical foundation (e.g. the findings of source criticism confirming the potentiality of the word, the role of *Wirkungsgeschichte* once the final version of the texts has been established, etc.). In Ratzinger's view, literal and spiritual sense organically intermingle and serve as an interpretative standard for each other. "Ratzinger's retooled fourfold sense, by aligning the literal sense with the historical-critical meaning and the spiritual senses with their effective-historical meaning, sets the two approaches in a mutually conditioning relationship" (p. 138). According to Pidel, a concrete illustration of the application of the fourfold sense can be found in the discovery of literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical dimensions in the biblical word about Mary.

### 3. Testing Ratzinger's New Paradigm

#### 3.1. Jesus' Teaching on Marriage and Divorce

In chapter four ("The Ethically Normative Interpretation of Scripture: Jesus' Teaching on Divorce"), Pidel addressed "Ratzinger's evolving assessment of the permanently normative content of Jesus' teaching on divorce" (p. 12). Special attention was given to the so-called Matthew clause (cf. Matt 5:32; 19:9), for the interpretation of which it proves necessary to apply a wider range of interpretive tests than those mentioned above. Especially since on exegetical grounds it is not possible, as the contradictory results of research indicate, to come to a firm conclusion as to what the exception clause would consist of. And the Church obviously cannot construct doctrine and practice on uncertain exegetical hypotheses.

Pidel, although Ratzinger does not enumerate the tests he uses, identifies three of those previously mentioned: the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, the reception in ecclesial faith and Tradition, and the relationship to reason. In this case, natural reason is involved, which, however, in Ratzinger's opinion, will not be able to make a binding statement on the indissolubility of marriage. The criterion related to the New Testament portrait of Jesus cannot play its role, as it is not possible for the historian to arrive at conclusions that can be certain on this matter. The test of the history of effects and reception by the Church will prove decisive.

Pidel also notes Ratzinger's changing interpretations over time. This interesting and gripping chapter is virtually impossible to summarise because of the rich content and the numerous threads that determine the evolution of Ratzinger's position – while, importantly, the very method he employs is consistent and enduring, the conclusions changing depending on the data taken into account and the knowledge of the *Wirkungsgeschichte*. It is therefore worth going straight to the conclusions formulated by the author of *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture*:

Ratzinger also seems to imply that the Church's sacramental theology and marital canons evolved from the exception clauses in much the same way that the Marian doctrines evolved from the Marian pericopes in Luke – namely, by meditative relecture in a canonical context. In the end, Ratzinger concludes that the Matthean unchastity clauses do not intend to affirm a real exception to the principle of marital indissolubility. But they do typify an effort to clarify what the Lord means by marriage and divorce, a task that the Church must face anew in every age (p. 180).

What appears most interesting in Ratzinger's entire argument is to point out that Matthew's clauses were neither an editorial retouching of the early Church to invalidate the words of Jesus or to delimit them, nor a casuistic definition of an exception to the indissolubility of marriage. Any concession for pastoral reasons – which is what the scholar was leaning towards earlier – violates the *Grundform*, the “basic form” of marriage. Ratzinger, who is usually (rightly) associated with a defender of the identification of the Jesus of the Gospels with the real Jesus, in this case, having carefully traced the reception history of the words recorded by Matthew, “seems to feel obliged to open distance between the Matthean Jesus and the ‘real’ Jesus in order to close distance between the ‘real’ Jesus and the Catholic Church” (p. 177). The mature Ratzinger treats the passage in Matthew's Gospel under discussion as a so-called case-type (German *Falltypus*), a case-type of editorial addition to Jesus' *ipsissima verba*, which testifies, in Ratzinger's view, to the early Church's awareness of its competence and responsibility for the task of constantly probing the scope and limits of application of the Lord's utterance. In Ratzinger's view, the Matthean “scheme” is like a seed which, in the face of challenges, new experiences and sufferings, will only be opened (the role of *Wirkungsgeschichte*).

In other words, the *πορνεία* clause is a precedent not for a specific marital impediment, but for the process of defining such impediments and establishing them in specific cases. It was the Church that defined the normative scope of Jesus' call by recognising that only marriage as a sacrament between two baptised persons remains indissoluble. The same Church has at the same time indicated the conditions that must be fulfilled for a marriage to be considered valid. At the same time and above all, it is the Church's responsibility “to strengthen the faith of believers to the point where they can live the ‘basic form’ of marriage prescribed by Christ [...]” (p. 171).

Pidel regards Ratzinger's mature interpretation as meeting the criteria of internal consistency and historical reason.

### 3.2. Historicity of the Gospel Accounts of the Last Supper

Also in “The Historicity of the Gospels through the Lens of the Last Supper,” the final chapter, Pidel evaluates Ratzinger's thought according to the double criterion of

doctrinal tradition and historical reason. The author begins by presenting additional doctrinal and rational criteria relevant to the question of the historicity of the Gospels and, more specifically, the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper. To this end, he briefly reviews the genesis and content of DV 19 and refers to Ratzinger's philosophical analysis of the historical-critical method. Together with the above-mentioned four tests, this will provide a sufficient basis for the Bavarian theologian's judgement on the historicity of the Gospel accounts. Pidel maintains that, moving within an "elliptical logic," Ratzinger "continues to employ all four tests, even when he does not expressly enumerate them" (p. 206).

According to Ratzinger, exegetes have not sufficiently separated historical reason from scientific assumptions (positivist and functionalist hermeneutics, imitation of the natural sciences, application of the evolutionary model to the field of history, etc.). Ratzinger advocates a hermeneutics of faith with a simultaneous responsible attitude towards historical reason. He is concerned with a hermeneutic of interdependence: on the one hand, solid historical arguments would concretise the "historicity" postulated in DV 19; on the other hand, a perspective of faith would allow the pseudo-scientific pretensions of historical reason to be dismissed. This viewpoint of faith is accessible, Ratzinger believes, through a supra-historical community – in a communal diachronic listening together with the disciples of Jesus, through which a certain knowledge of the true Jesus is attainable. Pidel takes the position that, just as in the case of the existence of the devil one had to distinguish between what in the Bible constitutes the revealed core and what is merely a peripheral accompanying worldview, something analogous occurs when one wants to distinguish between the historical "foundation" of the Gospels and the editorial elements introduced by the evangelists (various degrees of theological elaboration). Where the historical evidence compels him to recognise in the chronology a theological symbol, Ratzinger will opt for a symbolic chronology that is "realistic," that is, that has a greater *fundamentum in re*. Ratzinger thus remains faithful to the claims of the constitution, which states that the evangelists shared with us "the honest truth about Jesus (*vera et sincera de Iesu*).” (DV 19)

The scope of the study is reduced to the substantive historicity of the Last Supper: chronology and narrative content. Ratzinger opts for John's chronology, and sees a greater use of theological symbolism in the Synoptics. With regard to the first test, that is, the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, the Ratzinger notes both discontinuity (the Last Supper falls outside the meal on a different day in the Jewish calendar) and continuity (the Last Supper in the atmosphere of the Passover feast, as Jesus intended to celebrate a new and definitive Passover, bringing the old one to fulfilment). The *analogia fidei* therefore does not stand against John's historicity. When it comes to compatibility with the New Testament image of Christ (test two), Ratzinger emphasises that Jesus adhered to Jewish feasts, and that a Paschal Christology is present in the New Testament texts with a certainly historical basis. The third

test (reception in the faith of the Church) also indirectly confirms the historicity of the fourth Gospel (Last Supper on Thursday, Crucifixion on Friday).

As Pidel rightly concludes, Ratzinger's exegesis is characterised by the fact that he infers from the "world in front of the text" a proportional and probable historical cause. Consideration of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* allows Ratzinger to draw the bold conclusion that Mark, in presenting Jesus' death as a permanent Passover, presupposes a "sacramental transference" already lived out in the Church between the Passover mystery and the Last Supper. In other words, Mark anticipates future magisterial statements speaking of the Mass as the making present of the Sacrifice of Christ. The fact that this Sacrifice transcends spatial and temporal locality allows him to treat chronology more flexibly; the evangelist's conviction would be difficult to express in a mere historical narrative devoid of symbolic restructuring. In turn, this indirectly testifies in favour of the historicity of the narrative of John's Gospel. As does the fourth test, which takes into account the knowledge of scholars – Ratzinger recognises that those scholars are right who emphasise that the temple authorities of the time could not have chosen Passover as the time of the actions culminating in Jesus' execution.

As far as the words instituting the sacrament of the Eucharist are concerned, Ratzinger argues that the meal, the expiatory theology and the foundational intention derive from Jesus himself, even if the evangelists, in order to bring out the theological meaning, made some editing of the Lord's words. The Bavarian theologian is led to these conclusions, as Pidel again maintains, by the analogical application of the four tests. The relationship between the two testaments (test one) leads one to recognise the substantive historicity of Jesus' words spoken over bread and wine, and at the same time also explains the phenomenon of the redaction of these words. This is because the tradition of Jesus' words was adopted by the early Church, which remained conscious of its obligation to be faithful to the essentials, and at the same time, by relating the event of the Last Supper to the multi-layered history of the covenant and the books of the Old Testament, felt free to place emphasis differently. The broader picture of Christ in the New Testament (test two) would suffer if the Last Supper were "cut out" of the "critical biography" of Jesus. It is Jesus' words and actions in the Cenacle that reveal an original figure of unparalleled authority; only the Lord could express his sonship in such a way, while remaining faithful to the Law and the Prophets, and focus the Jewish feast on his person. The third test – the reception in the life and faith of the Church – also speaks in favour of the historicity of the institution of the Eucharist. The testimonies of Scripture (the accounts of Mark and Paul) indicate that the Eucharist is as old as Christianity itself, so it most likely originated with Christ. Variations on the words of Jesus can be explained by the fact that Jesus only established the essential elements of the new worship, and it was up to the community to work out the definitive liturgical form. In Eucharistic practice, the early Church experienced the same event in the horizon of different experiences.

In line with the fourth test, Ratzinger takes seriously the conclusions of scholars on the “world behind the text” (e.g. the possibility of correcting Jesus’ course in the face of the rejection by the leaders of Israel), but at the same time subjects the aforementioned historical criticism to a critique, freeing it from the assumptions that accompany it. He formulates the inference that the Gospel narrative coincides with the historical foundation in what is essential.

Also in this case, Ratzinger’s position is evaluated by Pidel on the basis of the standards of faith (the requirements flowing from the *Dei Verbum*) and reason (whose requirements are represented by exegetical criticism). Pidel defends Ratzinger against objections that he has weakened the credibility of the Gospels by introducing theological (or better: sacramental) symbolism into the chronology of the Synoptics (although at the same time he recognises that he does indeed allow for a higher ratio of theological symbolism to historical facts than some editors of *Dei Verbum*). Pidel also counters the accusations of exegetes that Ratzinger insufficiently takes into account intra-canonical diversity or even approaches Scripture in a pre-critical manner. The author of *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture* writes that such exegetes themselves adopt a certain standard of evaluation, representing a historically conditioned form of rationality that also needs correction. It is interesting to note the comments of scholars cited by Pidel who recognise that contemporary university exegesis conforms to the demands of the post-denominational liberal state with its political order and educational bodies, and fits in with the privatisation of religion and the principle of *sola scriptura*.

„The second criticism often leveled against Ratzinger’s book is inconsistent application of the historical-critical method” (p. 225). Although indeed, as Pidel admits, a certain inequality is apparent from the historical-critical point of view, it is always in line with the established and above-mentioned criteria. Pidel explains that different events have a different relation to history (it suffices to compare, for example, the Last Supper with the Resurrection), and also the *sensus Ecclesiae* is related to historical episodes in different ways. If Ratzinger does not point to a single measure for determining the distance between Jesus of Nazareth and the Jesus recounted in the Gospels, then “it is untrue that he lacks a consistent method for estimating this distance, however it may vary” (p. 227). For the Bavarian theologian, the historicity of the Gospels is real (*contra* ahistorical symbolism), but is not a form of photorealism. Until proven otherwise, he assumes historicity; in other cases, he favours symbolic narratives with the most realistic basis. In each case, he combines faith with reason.

### 3.3. Pidel on Ratzinger’s Model and Its Three Achievements

In presenting Ratzinger’s new paradigm against alternative models in the second and third chapters, Pidel made a comparison and demonstrated the superiority of Ratzinger’s model. Reference is made here to his assessment by linking it to the three,



as he calls them, achievements left by Joseph Ratzinger in the epilogue. It seems to me that this method gives a better idea of the purpose of the monograph, and one can only express one's astonishment that this path was not followed by the author himself, who did not find it useful to collect all the findings in the final conclusion.

Pidel writes in the conclusion of chapter two that, although Ratzinger's model draws on the strengths of alternative models, it does not overlap with them and, by making corrections, achieves originality and greater adequacy in terms of conformity with doctrinal and exegetical data. "I argue that Ratzinger attains a better revelative adequacy overall. This remains true even though other authors excel at securing one or another doctrinal *desideratum*, and even though Ratzinger leaves certain premises speculatively underdeveloped" (p. 74). Among its many advantages, he counts: that the model affirms that it is God who "authors" both Testaments, albeit in different ways; that it allows Christianity to be seen as the fulfilment of Judaism and the intensification of Israel's faith, but does not introduce supersessionism and the nullification of that faith; and that it explains that the development taking place in the history of salvation is reflected in the pages of Scripture in the form of the analogous unity of the two Testaments. According to the author of *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture*, the failure to explain how the People of God constitute a single (also in a diachronic sense) person who is the author of Scripture, and how it is that the personality of the Church should enjoy a capacity for action superior to that of any kind of juridical person, should be criticised. The reference to the "faith of the Church" is not a conclusion, but another assumption of Ratzinger, which he takes for granted so much that he does not even prove it.

In the last part of chapter three, Pidel makes a comparative assessment – juxtaposing Ratzinger's thought with the views of Benoit, Rahner and Tracy and finding it to be a more adequate attempt at integrating the data than those approaches. The scholar acknowledges that "[t]hough Ratzinger surely did not speak the last word on the truth of Scripture, he spoke perhaps the least inadequate word lately" (p. 102). Among the inadequacies of Ratzinger's model, the author of the reviewed book includes the lack of distinction between organic and inorganic doctrinal development.

In relation to Benoit's model (*sensus plenior* as a sense hidden from human authors), Ratzinger's model better explains how the senses of Scripture develop from the literal sense in the People of God as the "understanding subject," without the need to look for hidden ideas supposedly present in the word from the beginning. The Bavarian theologian also pays more attention than Rahner did to the changing structure of salvation history; the German Jesuit did not sufficiently explain how a single author would encompass the universal theology of the entire Church. Nor did Rahner provide any criteria for determining the correlation between the content of a particular passus and the totality, in light of which the passage could be without error. Not only did Ratzinger elaborate the four tests, but he also took into account the diachronic dimension in the different relationship to Christ at the stage of the two



covenants. By emphasising the *Wirkungsgeschichte*, Ratzinger does not make the mistake made by Tracy, in whose model the interpretive “controls” of DV 11 and 12 were not sufficiently taken into account. Ratzinger is also far from claiming that Scripture offers no authoritative and error-free propositional claims. Pidel writes that “Ratzinger offers more resources for clarifying both how Scripture teaches truth ‘without error’ and how its meaning evolves in continuity with its original sense” (p. 143).

As far as Ratzinger’s achievements listed in the epilogue are concerned, first, Pidel places Ratzinger’s balance in biblical interpretation between a priori and a posteriori aspects. Second, the argumentation for the superiority of an ecclesial-historical hermeneutic aware of epistemological limitations deserves recognition. It is only in the third place that Pidel points to a new paradigm for understanding biblical inspiration and the truth (inerrancy) of Scripture that remains faithful to the doctrinal tradition. To the reader’s surprise, the following scholars, with whose work Ratzinger’s thought is compared, appear in this final section of the monograph. They are: Raymond E. Brown and Romano Guardini (first achievement); Alasdair MacIntyre (second achievement); John H. Newman (third achievement).

Ratzinger, like Brown, criticises the purely deductive (a priori) approach to determining the extent of the inerrancy of inspired writings, although Ratzinger’s conclusions differ from those drawn by Brown. In this, the Bavarian theologian remains indebted to Romano Guardini postulating a hermeneutical circle (*Denkzirkel*), especially in thinking about faith and revelation. Ratzinger’s model of inerrancy presupposes an approach that is both deductive and inductive – a double counterpoint: on the one hand, Scripture participates in unchanging divine truth, on the other, it reflects the signs of the cultural and scientific limitations of human authors. Ratzinger transfers, as already mentioned, the infallible intention from the level of the individual author to that of the People of God. His Bonaventurian-ecclesial model takes into account both enduring doctrinal claims and the results of convincing historical research. It is interesting that of the theologians with whose inquiries Pidel compared Ratzinger’s model, only Benoit was an exegete, but it was his model that proved to be the most a priori.

As far as the Bonaventurian-ecclesial hermeneutic is concerned, Pidel raises the question of whether Ratzinger can acknowledge its superiority without falling into the error of selecting such data that confirm earlier hypotheses (the so-called self-confirming bias). In response, a researcher of Ratzinger’s thought suggests comparing Ratzinger’s argumentation with that of Alasdair MacIntyre on the topic of the primacy of Aristotelian-Thomistic virtue ethics, which cannot be proven directly, but can possibly be proven indirectly, e.g. by pointing to the inability of alternatives to provide verifiable moral standards. In Pidel’s view, analogously, Ratzinger is unable to demonstrate the superiority of his method of interpretation in a way that would make it acceptable to historical criticism. However, he can – and does – propose a model of a hermeneutic of faith that corresponds to historical reason, which

“both yields a stable and coherent way of interpreting Scripture and explains why the alternative, purely historical ‘cognitive posture’ fails to produce lasting consensus” (p. 242).

The third achievement, of developing a new paradigm in the theology of inspiration, is the result of reformulating Bonaventure’s insights and, so Pidel argues, synthesising valuable elements of the concepts of Benoit, Rahner and Tracy. This allowed Ratzinger to draw up a model that was admittedly imperfect, but better able to take into account the doctrinal “pegs” established by successive Councils and open to refinement. This model has not eliminated all tensions, but it can provide a model for further refinement. “I say *preliminary* synthesis because Ratzinger’s theology of Scripture itself remains open to further development and clarification. But I nevertheless say *preliminary synthesis* because Ratzinger has brought the data of faith and reason into a stable configuration” – one can read on the penultimate page of the monograph (p. 245). Our author concludes by proposing yet another way of thinking about Ratzinger’s paradigm shift, which would be to take Newman’s main ideas and give them the expected nuanced and metaphysical (especially Christological) integration. According to Pidel, the Bavarian theologian is close to Newman’s intuition of the possibility of God uttering the whole of Scripture “over again” lending it an inspired sense. In Ratzinger’s view, such a possibility is provided by Christ and the historical organ of God’s people, through whom God can do so.

#### 4. A Sympathetic and Critical Evaluation of Pidel’s Study

In my habilitation thesis, I wrote that “in Ratzinger’s case, one can only speak of an outline of the concept of inspiration,” and while it is difficult to find in Ratzinger a certain type of treatise on inspiration or even a definition of inspiration, “there are, instead, elements which, properly developed, can make an important contribution to the doctrine of inspiration.” (Zatwardnicki 2022, 37–38)<sup>8</sup> I also noted that the question of inspiration was explored by Ratzinger “piecemeal and is scattered in many places.” (Zatwardnicki 2022, 23) For this reason, Aaron Pidel’s effort must be appreciated, as he has managed to create from these reflections, scattered here and there by the future Pope Benedict XVI, a coherent whole that can constitute a preliminary synthesis of the doctrine of Scripture in a new paradigm. To my delight, on many issues his reading of Ratzinger’s legacy coincides with mine, which is probably due to Ratzinger’s ability to expound his argument in a way that the reader can understand. The monograph *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture*, however, is more than a mere

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<sup>8</sup> I characterise the elements that make up Ratzinger’s doctrine of inspiration in Zatwardnicki 2022, 280–310.

presentation of Ratzinger's views; indeed, even at this level of recapitulation of his thought, in certain respects (e.g. theological complexity or contextualisation in dialogue with other theologians) it far surpasses the conclusions of my study.

What deserves to be emphasised is the comprehensiveness of the study, the diachronic reading of Ratzinger's legacy (particularly evident in chapter four), which provides insight into the evolution of his views or the difference in his emphasis at different stages of his theological development, and above all the comparative nature of the author's work. The monograph reads very well, it is written in an understandable way and at the same time at a high academic level. The structure of the work is clear, although some issues are questionable. First, why do names appear in the epilogue other than those with which the author previously contrasted Ratzinger? The conclusion should collect the main findings of the research, not introduce new threads. Second, the comparative approach makes itself known in different ways in the structure: in chapter two, the reader is offered a comparison of Ratzinger with Benoit, Rahner and Tracy in the body of the chapter, while in the following chapter, in successive parts of material, Pidel juxtaposes more clearly Ratzinger's views with each under separate headings. In this way, the starting comparative idea has largely lost its appeal in the course of implementation. I also have my doubts that all the ideas are in the right place, e.g. should not the triadic authorship of Scripture be discussed in chapter two instead of chapter three?

Each new chapter begins with a brief reminder of the conclusions of the previous one, the thought is carried through consistently. The only detriment is that the enjoyment of reading is spoilt by presentations of the conclusions of the research in chapter introductions, which should only be at the end. In this way, the author's initial sympathies towards Ratzinger are compounded by a sense of overemphasising the supremacy of his theology over the views of other scholars.

My study of Ratzinger's work allows me to point out some shortcomings of Pidel's publication. Some issues did not attract attention strongly enough: for example, Ratzinger's exploration of the debates and statements of the Council of Trent, which, like the study of Bonaventure's legacy, influenced the theology of the word of God of the Bavarian theologian. I have the impression that the author of the monograph under review has given too little emphasis to the kenotic dimension of the action of the revealing and speaking word of God – a motif clearly present in Ratzinger's work.<sup>9</sup> Pidel's right noting of Ratzinger's debt to Bonaventure, however, seems to me to be overstated. At many points, Ratzinger as the scholar of the Seraphic Doctor's

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g. Ratzinger 2016, 292–93 (English translation: Wicks 2008, 274–75; German original in: Wicks 2008, 300); Ratzinger 2018, 627: “it is in the human authors that one must see not so much an anticipation as a prefiguration of the figure of Christ. They belong to the future Body of Christ and only in this way are they his voice; therefore only in the light of the Christ who has come can they be correctly interpreted and understood. [...] The sacred authors belong to the future Body of Christ; with them the Incarnation begins, the Logos becomes flesh.”

legacy does with his thought what the Franciscan did with the views of Joachim of Fiore: he accepts what is possible and removes what is unacceptable (cf. Zatwardnicki 2023a, 315). Pidel finds Bonaventure's influence even where Ratzinger would have reached the same conclusions without the medieval thinker (e.g. on the question of the analogy between the inspiration of the Old and New Testaments, which I find it really difficult to see as possible to derive from Bonaventure's juxtaposition of Israel and the Church). I also think that Pidel's criticism of Ratzinger's failure to attempt to explain how the People of God constitute a single (also in the diachronic sense) author of Scripture should be nuanced. Drawing on Ratzinger's entire oeuvre (especially the sacramental ecclesiology according to which it is possible to speak of the Body of Christ, which in turn can be seen in diachronic unity with the People of God of the Old Testament) could shed light on what may not have found expression explicitly in Ratzinger's doctrine of Scripture.

Above all, the reading of Ratzinger's model in juxtaposition with *Dei Verbum* by Pidel – who, incidentally, explicitly admits in the introduction that he reads Ratzinger not uncritically, but with undisguised sympathy – goes in the opposite direction to mine. According to the author of *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture*, it is Ratzinger who is supposed to have made such an adequate theological elaboration of the doctrinal data contained in *Dei Verbum* that – although this is not explicitly stated – the conciliar document should henceforth be read in the light of Ratzinger's theology. And in any case, that Ratzinger's model is precisely what the theological elaboration of the doctrinal data of the Council was waiting for. I, on the other hand, believe that while Ratzinger allows the reader to catch some intuitions not sharply enough articulated as a result of the Council's compromises in the document itself, it is, after all, the content of the Constitution on Divine Revelation that is binding, and it is in the light of this that Ratzinger should be read, perhaps tempering some overly bold theses of the Bavarian theologian.<sup>10</sup>

While Pidel admits that shifting the emphasis from individual authorship to the authorship of the People of God would demand a more in-depth elaboration, which Ratzinger does not provide, he also recognises that his thought is part

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Zatwardnicki 2023a, 335: "Ratzinger viewed the statements of Vatican II from the perspective of a re-lecture of the previous statements of the Magisterium. He himself, however, seems to have carried out a 're-reading of the rereading.' An examination of Ratzinger's work leads to the conclusion that most of his theses are more radical than the statements of the Council fathers. In this way, bearing in mind that the conciliar documents are always the fruit of a certain compromise, Ratzinger's theology makes it possible to grasp that orientation of *Dei Verbum* which, without it, might have escaped our attention. In this sense, Ratzinger would play for us a similar role to that played for Ratzinger by Cardinal Cervini, whose speeches during the Council of Trent, as viewed by our researcher, make it possible to grasp the main lines of reasoning of the Tridentine fathers of the significant conciliar declaration. If Ratzinger enables a better understanding of the position of the *Vaticanum Secundum*, in turn, his speeches should nevertheless be seen – and therefore tempered – from the perspective of the final version of the documents. Especially since Ratzinger himself called for the hermeneutics of the Council not to be sought outside the letter of the texts."

of the document's openness to this type of elaboration. Nonetheless, the question that still troubles me is "Is such a shift reconcilable with the traditional teaching on inspiration and even with the statements of the Constitution on Divine Revelation itself?" And further: "But is it only the relativisation of human singular authorship that opens the field to the activity of the Holy Spirit? [...] At some point, after all, the points of his particular influence on individuals must be identified anyway." (Zatwardnicki 2023a, 335) Similarly, it is not entirely convincing in Ratzinger how the People of God of the Old Covenant would hold primacy in the matter of inspiration over the hagiographer himself (what about 2 Pet 1:21?), since it was only in the New Covenant that the Spirit was poured out on all flesh becoming the Body of Christ (cf. Zatwardnicki 2023a, 336). Perhaps a greater reserve would be called for by the aporia that the canonical rank is only held by the whole of Scripture canonised by the Church over individual writings – which is true in itself, but which nevertheless seems to unduly relativise the importance of individual writings (cf. Zatwardnicki 2023a, 337).

The author of *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture* rightly demonstrates that Ratzinger's proposal relatively better meets the need for a "new paradigm" in the theology of Scripture and does justice to the demands of faith and reason, but wrongly in my view argues that Ratzinger has made use of the strengths of alternative models (cf. e.g. pp. 52, 97 and esp. 242<sup>11</sup>) – this would suggest that he benefited from the thought of those scholars with whose views Pidel juxtaposed Ratzinger. The very choice of such and not other representatives of the different approaches to the theology of the Word of God is defensible, but a somewhat biased "competition" is conducted here for the model that best corresponds to the doctrinal data of *Dei Verbum*, since we know of Ratzinger's influence on the document and can therefore assume a high degree of convergence between the content of the document and the scholar's work in advance (after all, Pidel himself writes on pp. 218–19: "But we should not forget that Ratzinger himself was a redactor of *Dei Verbum*"). At times, the promoter and at the same time the defender of Ratzinger's theology introduces new threads in order to justify a verdict in favour of the one we know from the outset that he will "prevail" (this is the case, for example, in chapter two).

Perhaps this remark applies to all theological geniuses, but it seemed to me, as a reader of Ratzinger's recapitulated arguments, that his theology of the word of God is so sophisticated, multifaceted and nuanced (more art than science, as Pidel admits in the context of the tests applied by the Bavarian theologian in interpreting Scripture) that only Ratzinger himself could say what should be read from Scripture and in what way. For it is also only he who would be able to apply the tests of

<sup>11</sup> "He combined elements of Rahner and Benoit by appealing to the intention not of individual authors but of the People of God. He combined elements of Rahner and Tracy by explaining Scripture's growth in meaning as a function of its ongoing reception by the People of God."

interpretation, adapting them to the problem at hand (e.g. The reference to reason in the case of the Matthew clause suddenly becomes a reference to natural reason – are these surely the same criterion?). In spite of this, Pidel is to be commended for pointing out what, for example, the undersigned completely missed – that it is indeed possible to distinguish certain fixed tests (criteria) in Ratzinger's research. I think that many a theologian will benefit from this valuable contribution, both in understanding Ratzinger's argumentation and in interpreting Scripture and justifying Catholic doctrine.

I appreciate that Ratzinger's dubious (in my opinion erroneous) view of a certain conviction of Thomas Aquinas has also not escaped the attention of our conscientious scholar. The Bavarian theologian sees a devaluation of the allegorical sense in Aquinas' claim that theological argumentation can only proceed from the literal sense. Pidel is conscious to criticise this assessment and notes that such an opinion of Ratzinger's stems from his anachronistic identification of the literal sense with the historical-critical sense (p. 135), whereas it is known, after all, that the Common Doctor understood literal sense differently.<sup>12</sup> Pidel himself, however, has not escaped some mistakes either. He claims, for example, that the *Dei Verbum* constitution postulates the priority of Scripture over the teaching of the Magisterium (cf. p. 19, nn. 14, 74, 81 and p. 83 – in the latter case, it would be Ratzinger who would subordinate the Magisterium and dogma to Scripture), whereas the document refers to the primacy of the word of God (rather than the written word of God).<sup>13</sup>

I also question the treatment of Ratzinger's Mariology as an illustration for his application of the fourfold sense. It would have been better here to refer again to Ratzinger's tests and to point to the role of the dynamically understood Tradition of the Church<sup>14</sup> (the reception of revelation, also through the *sensus fidei*<sup>15</sup>) and the typological interpretation based on the unity of the two testaments. In Ratzinger's

<sup>12</sup> To demonstrate this, just this one sentence from the *Summa Theologiae* (ST I, q. 1, a. 10, resp.) should suffice: "Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy Writ is God, Who by one act comprehends all things by His intellect, it is not unfitting, as Augustine says (*Confess* xii), if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Writ should have several senses" (English quoted from: <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I.Q1.A10>; Polish translation: Tomasz z Akwinu 2023, 38).

<sup>13</sup> This distinction indicated in *Dei Verbum* by the Council Fathers between the word of God and the written word of God was clearly pointed out by the long-time secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Albert Vanhoye (cf. 2008, 106–7).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ratzinger 2016, 145; Wicks 2008, 274–75; Ratzinger and Messori 1985, 107 (Polish translation: Ratzinger and Messori 1986, 90–91): "The four Marian dogmas have their clear foundation in Sacred Scripture. But it is there like a seed that grows and bears fruit in the life of tradition just as it finds expression in the liturgy, in the perception of the believing people and in the reflection of theology guided by the Magisterium." Cf. also Szymik 2015, 227.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ratzinger 1993, 105 (cf. Ratzinger 2018, 610): "The development of dogma in the last 150 years is a clear index of how closely these three elements hang together: the dogmas of 1854, 1870 and 1950 became possible because the *sensus fidei* had discovered them, while the Magisterium and theology followed its lead and tried slowly to catch up with it."



view, Marian dogmas “can become visible only to a mode of perception that accepts this unity, i.e., within a perspective which comprehends and makes its own the ‘typological’ interpretation [...]”<sup>16</sup> The Bavarian theologian even claimed, as I pointed out in my article, that “this will not be a Mariology constructed piece by piece out of its New Testament components; instead, I shall propose immediately the three great Marian dogmas: their biblical foundations will emerge almost spontaneously to the reflective spirit.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ratzinger 1983, 32 (Polish translation: Ratzinger 2002, 25–26). Ratzinger viewed “Old and New Testaments in an interior unity of promise and fulfillment. As a form of interpretation typology includes analogy, similarity in dissimilarity, unity in diversity” (Ratzinger 1983, 63 [Polish translation: Ratzinger 2002, 42–43]). Cf. Zatwardnicki 2023b, 125, 131.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ratzinger 1983, 33 (Polish translation: Ratzinger 2002, 26); Zatwardnicki 2023b, 125.



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