

# THE CHRISTOLOGY OF J. RATZINGER - BENEDICT XVI IN THE LIGHT OF HIS THEOLOGICAL BIOGRAPHY

Jesús Martínez Gordo

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**Jesús Martínez Gordo** is a Doctor of Theology, a Professor in the Faculty of Theology of Vitoria and a Professor in the Institute of Religious Sciences of San Sebastián. Member of the theological department of Centre d'Estudis Cristianisme i Justícia.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Three features might particularly be noted in the recently published Christology of Pope Benedict XVI: his decision to publish it now as a private theologian, his concern that it be given a “sympathetic” reading, and his preference for the so-called “canonical exegesis”. These are three aspects which, apart from the initial surprise, are important, since they condition the way this book will be read and reviewed.

## Personal Christology

We are encountered, first of all, by a Pope who does not want to stop doing theology as an individual. Benedict XVI asks that his Christology be read as a strictly personal contribution, and therefore apart from the consequences that would follow on an act of the official magisterium (whether this be extraordinary, “ordinary and universal”, “definitive” or authentic). While the forms of the extraordinary, “ordinary and universal” and “definitive” magisterium are infallible and so demand the assent of

faith (“*assensus fidei*”), the authentic magisterium, being fallible, seeks simply religious obedience of understanding and will (“*obsequium religiosum*”). But on this occasion there is no requirement of “religious obedience”, nor of course any assent of faith” is required. The work is simply intended as a personal contribution, meant to be a service to the Christian community and to be open to theological debate, and thus should it be taken.

This way of proceeding, as surprising as it may be, is not something new

in the theological biography of J. Ratzinger. When John Paul II asked him to take charge of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Ratzinger, who was then bishop of Munich and Freising, asked the Pope if he could continue acting as a theologian in his own right, that is, in a way distinct from his responsibility as head of that congregation. After opportune consultation, John Paul II informed him that such a procedure was possible. In publishing the first part of his *Christology*, Benedict XVI is simply following the pattern set in the request that was made to and accepted by John Paul II at that time.

It remains to be shown how some of the personal positions of J. Ratzinger have anticipated or taken final form in doctrinal pronouncements made while he was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith.

### **“Sympathetic” reading**

But we are encountered, secondly, by a Pope who not only publishes the first volume of his *Christology* as an expression of his personal search, but who also asks that it be read with a minimum of sympathy “without which no understanding is possible”<sup>1</sup>. Such a request should be taken as excluding two attitudes that are equally detrimental for theological research and for faith: the excessively critical reading by those who might have a poorly solved Oedipus complex regarding the Church (and by extension regarding any authority) and the totally uncritical reading of those who simply rave about

the work because of “the one who wrote it”, thus confusing “sympathy” with adulation.

Between both extreme attitudes, we can find the methodological approach that every Christian should practice in any theological investigation: “critical empathy”, that is, attempting to read and understand an author in his own right, accepting the perspective that he puts into play, hearing and respecting his methodological options and his arguments. Such empathy, however, does not refrain from critically appraising those positions, theses, arguments, perspectives or conclusions that are thought not to be defensible. Such a method of “critical sympathy” or “critical empathy” is the perspective that should be adopted by any reader and, of course, by any theologian. Moreover, this is the genuinely “Catholic” perspective, since it maintains in that unstable balance characteristic of what is Catholic; it applies not only to truths and behaviors, but also to attitudes that appear very difficult to hold together: humanity and divinity, unity and Trinity, Jesus and Christ, singularity and universality, primacy and collegiality, eternity and time, Good Friday and Easter Sunday, and in our case empathy and critique.

Without this “empathy” proper to theological work it is extremely difficult to understand any formulated proposition without distorting it. And without “critique” it becomes impossible for theological knowledge to make progress and not to fall into a discourse that is merely flattering or repetitive. What we need, then, is “critical empathy”.

## Canonical exegesis

There is a third feature that characterizes the first volume of Ratzinger's Christology, namely, its distance from the historical-critical method and its option for the so-called "canonical exegesis".

It is true that Catholic theology, as Ratzinger acknowledges, is open to the historical-critical method, which continues to be an undeniable dimension of exegetical work, but it is equally true that the task of interpretation involves more than that<sup>2</sup>.

Interpretation involves more, because historical criticism is limited by three drawbacks: it concentrates on knowing what happened in the past, leaving the mystery of God in the past, in such a way that it is made incapable of speaking to us in the present; it also approaches revelation as a merely human event; and finally it neglects the unity of the Bible as the Word of God. It consequently sets up a methodological gulf between history and faith that ends up in the latter being left out. Faith, which is ultimately what makes Scriptures to form a single book, ends up dislodged from history, and no attention is paid to what is the constitutive fact of Scripture: that God by his incarnation, his words and his actions has entered into history and has made history<sup>3</sup>.

J. Ratzinger, citing *Dei Verbum* (DV) no. 12, argues that the so-called "canonical exegesis" helps to overcome the mentioned limitations, since it allows one to become internally submerged in the presence of the Word and makes it

possible for the biblical texts to appear in a new light<sup>4</sup>. It is a spiritual, prayerful and theological reading of the sacred texts in their own right, in tune with the use which the Bible makes of its own texts. Indeed, the different biblical books provide abundant testimony of this type of re-reading.

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Ratzinger's theological and  
spiritual trajectory may help  
to clarify the nuances of  
his thought when dealing with  
the mystery of God or the  
situation of Church and society

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Surprisingly, the methodological proposal of Benedict XVI coincides (by and large, not completely) with the argument of those theologians who years ago claimed (correctly, to be sure) that the historical-critical method ran the risk of becoming inflated. Moreover, they called attention to the danger of the scriptures being kidnapped by the exegetes, that "very rich and exclusive club"<sup>5</sup>. This group of theologians also argued that "scripture and reality" illuminated one another mutually<sup>6</sup>; that is to say, by reading the Scriptures we were virtually reading reality and "reading" ourselves<sup>7</sup>. They also claimed that all methods of exegesis had to be "at the service of announcing the Good News to the poor"<sup>8</sup>. These important points, brought to light again by Benedict's personal position, were first introduced by G. Gutiérrez with

unquestionable brilliance some two decades ago. There is no doubt that both theologians hold that Scripture is the “soul of theology” (cf. DV 24) and that it must be read in a fruitful relation with reality.

This, then, is part of the rationale that underlies the methodological approach of J. Ratzinger. We must also point out, however, that the reservations formulated more than two decades ago with regard to the liberation analysis and its reading of Scripture still persist today. Perhaps the most worrying question is whether this approach to the Scriptures, as legitimate and necessary as it may be, does not, if due cautions are not taken, end up producing rather inconsistent readings (with the risk of encouraging fundamentalist interpretations in the name of the dogma of inspiration). Along with that question comes another, more directly referring to J. Ratzinger: to what extent does the magisterium occupy again a position on a level with Scripture or even above it? If such were the case, might we claim that we meet once again the preparatory scheme “*De fontibus revelationis*”, which was rejected by Vatican II Council fathers and finally superseded by the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*? The question is not trivial, because if this is a genuine danger, then we might end up favoring theological and ecclesiological attitudes very close to those that officially prevailed on the eve of the Vatican II. The theological biography of Benedict XVI can help us to clarify these questions, especially the last one.

Two other important reservations need to be mentioned. First, the question

of whether J. Ratzinger’s synthetic presentation of the historical-critical method is sufficiently balanced, or whether it suffers from a certain oversimplification. (The historical factor is indispensable for faith and is essential for keeping theology from becoming an “eisegetic” discourse, that is, a projection into scripture of feelings, desires and expectations that are foreign to it.). Second, the question of whether Ratzinger has duly considered the pluralism that exists within this method in our days. We must recognize that nowadays people talk of the third quest of the historical Jesus and that a majority of important Catholic exegetes have offered a great variety of critical positions concerning points that Ratzinger deals with.

To sum up briefly: Ratzinger’s appeal to the so-called “canonical exegesis” prompts us to trace, in his theological biography, the way he has articulated the relation between revelation and tradition or between theology and the magisterium. These two pairs of fundamental questions are central to all his theological work and to the different Church responsibilities he has held.

### **Theological roots of the Christology**

To come, finally, to a fourth aspect that cannot be lost from sight when studying any theological work, all the more so if the work is that of a Pope who wants to continue to act as a private theologian: every contribution needs to be contextualized, at least within the life context of the author, so that the critical

empathy with which the work is approached is properly founded. This means that we cannot expect much from a reading of this first volume of Christology that just “limits itself to reading” the work in and of itself, while disregarding its ecclesial and cultural diagnoses or ignoring earlier theological reflections of Ratzinger. Quite likely this first part of the Christology has been received precisely in this way among large sectors of the Church. And such an attitude might well be in accord with the excellent reception given to his first encyclical on love of God (*Deus caritas est*). Many people on that occasion were pleasantly surprised by the encyclical’s positive tone, which was almost the opposite of the authoritative, even polemical, tone used by Cardinal Ratzinger during his time as prefect of the CDF. Now even more readers are pleasantly surprised by the tone and features of the new work.

Nevertheless, after the initial surprise has subsided, we must recognize that a study of Ratzinger’s theological and spiritual trajectory may help to clarify the nuances of his thought when dealing with the mystery of God or the situation of Church and society, as well as the reasons for such nuances. An analysis of this kind will allow us to appreciate the degree of continuity that may exist between his theological trajectory and the present work of Christology and to perceive what is truly new in his explanation of the mystery of the crucified and risen God.

Moreover, this observation is particularly important if what some of his critics consider an inevitable conclusion

can be shown to be true, namely, that many of his personal analyses and positions during his time as prefect of the CDF and even before that time have ended up sooner or later becoming doctrinal pronouncements.

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Such is the case with many of Ratzinger’s critical evaluations. Some examples of his criticisms have concerned the following:

– the liturgical renewal of Paul VI (it produced “extremely grave damage”, besides, the Latin mass has been reintroduced);

– the role of theologians during and after the Council (the complaint was that theologians thought they were the only representatives of theological science, over and above the bishops; later they were declared to be diffusers of the magisterium);

– the weak teaching authority of a good number of bishops, especially in the Council (giving strength to the so-called “popular church”); since 1985 the image of the Church as “people of God” has given way to that of the Church as “communion”<sup>10</sup>;

– the dangers of division and fragmentation that threatened the post-conciliar Church in the name of episcopal collegiality and baptismal co-responsibility (subsequently the teaching function of the conferences of Bishops has been downplayed, the synods have been prevented from formulating review petitions about matters reserved to the Holy See, and preference has been given to an exercise of the primacy that is similar to that which existed before the Council, an exercise founded on the division between the “power of orders” and the “power of jurisdiction”);

– the “logical and ontological precedence of the universal Church over the local Church” as a revision of the conciliar decree *Christus Dominus*, n. 11, which maintains that in the diocese “is found and operates truly the Church of Christ, which is one, holy, catholic and apostolic.”;

– the reappearance of “Marxist messianism” and its creeping into the utopian forms of liberation theology;

– the so-called dictatorship of relativism and the need for a concept of truth that prevails over freedom or over human rights in the Church;

– the “*professio fidei*” and the new form of infallible, not defined magisterium with the so-called “definitive truths”

– and the basic question that is particularly at issue in almost all these analyses and later determinations, na-

mely, the relationships that exist among revelation, tradition, scripture and magisterium.

Both the number and the nature of these questions show the importance of contextualizing Ratzinger’s Christology on the basis of his theological biography, with the aim of appreciating a little better what may be at stake theologically and ecclesially.

### **The theological biography of J. Ratzinger**

Three stages can be clearly distinguished in the theological biography of Pope Benedict XVI.

1. The first stage corresponds to the time of his theological training, his work as a Professor of Theology in Munich, Bonn and Münster, and his participation as an expert at Vatican II (1962).

2. The second stage includes the final period of his work as a Professor of Theology (especially in Tübingen), his consecration as bishop, his Episcopal ministry in the dioceses of Munich and Freising (1977), and above all the time that he was Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (1981).

3. The third stage began in the spring of 2005 with his being elected Pope, as Benedict XVI.

# 1. THEOLOGIAN AND COUNCIL EXPERT

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In this first period there are two points which deserve to be noted: Ratzinger's theological training and his interventions in the Council debates on *Dei Verbum*.

## 1. RATZINGER'S THEOLOGICAL TRAINING

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There are four important influences to be taken into account here: Plato's theory of knowledge as a form of recalling; Augustine's personalism and his defense of the knowledge that springs from faith; Saint Bonaventure's conception of history, of the Holy Spirit, of commitment and of revelation; and, finally, natural theology and the ecclesiology of the First Vatican Council.

### 1.1. Platonic influence and knowledge as an act of recalling

The influence of Platonism is decisive in the configuration of Ratzinger's

theology and spirituality. He himself has stated: "Personally, I am somewhat Platonic. By that I mean that I believe there is a type of memory, something like a recollection of God, that is inscribed in man and needs to be awakened in him. Man does not know from the beginning what he has to know, nor has he reached the end he has to reach; he is a man, a human being on the way"<sup>11</sup>.

### 1.2. Augustinian personalism and the knowledge that springs from faith

Ratzinger confesses that during his days as a student he had no sympathy for the

prevailing neo-scholasticism neither with the “transparent logic” of Saint Thomas. He considered such systems “too closed in on themselves, too impersonal and prefabricated<sup>12</sup>, and at the same time far removed from his personal concerns.

He found in Saint Augustine the personalism he was looking for, especially in the passionate and profoundly human *Confessions*. Since then, he admits, “I am decidedly Augustinian. So that as creation is accessible to reason and is reasonable, one could also say that faith is a consequence of Creation and therefore gives access to knowledge; I am convinced of this. Faith opens the way to understanding”<sup>13</sup>.

Thus Augustine showed Ratzinger the direction in which he had to move, since the very act of believing “includes the fact that it proceeds from the One who is reason itself. Because in in so far as I agree to submit myself in belief to the One who is beyond my understanding. I know also that precisely thus I open the door to the possibility of understanding correctly”<sup>14</sup>.

The study of Augustine, along with the influence of Platonism, inclined him toward a theological perspective which is very attentive to the objectivity of revelation and to its logical and ontological priority.

This perspective is more inclined to speak of the mystery of God from its traces in creation and in the human heart, and is more concerned with the incarnation and the kenotic process that such an event unleashes, and is attentive to the disconcerting surprise caused by this divine way of proceeding.

### 1.3. The Master Saint Bonaventure

Although the influence of Augustine on Ratzinger is unquestionable, it was Saint Bonaventure the author who most influenced the formation of his thought and of his theological beliefs.

His doctoral thesis bears witness to that. Like Ratzinger, Saint Bonaventure also had difficulties with the aridity and formality of Aristotelian philosophy.

That type of knowledge would have no space for personal communion with the divinity, nor does it leave any room for Christ.

For that reason Ratzinger was fascinated by the Augustinian philosophy of love and by his notion of the presence of the image of the Trinity in human beings, or, what comes to the same thing, by his doctrine of the luminous radiance and the consequent indwelling of man in the eternal truth.

As Bonaventure asked on one occasion, “What is the value in knowing much and tasting nothing?”<sup>15</sup>.

Ratzinger’s study of Bonaventure yielded four theses that proved central in the following years, both for his own theological trajectory and for Church governance:

- the guiding presence of the Spirit in the Church; the primacy of revelation over scripture;
- tradition as the comprehensive interpretative criterion, not only of scripture but also of revelation;
- and the need of salvation for all, including the most altruistic and utopian projects that might exist.

#### **1.4. The guiding presence of the Spirit in the Church**

Ratzinger's attunement with Bonaventure led him to find out a thesis that has been important in his theology and in his role as an ecclesiastical authority, namely, that there is no determined age in which the Holy Spirit acts in a special way, contrary to what J. de Fiore and his followers claimed. Rather, the Spirit's presence hovers over and traverses the whole of history, from beginning to end, and for that reason "the age of Christ is the age of the Holy Spirit"<sup>16</sup>.

#### **1.5. The primacy of revelation over scripture**

He also received from Bonaventure a conception of revelation that is for the most part uncontested: revelation is not simply "the communication of certain truths to human reason," but it is "God's historical action, in which truth is gradually revealed"<sup>17</sup>. This means that revelation precedes the scriptures and is reflected in them, but is not simply identical with them. To state it another way: "revelation is always greater than scripture. Revelation, that is, God's communication to human beings, his coming out to meet them, is always greater than anything that can be expressed in human words, even greater than the words of Scripture themselves"<sup>18</sup>.

#### **1.6. Tradition: criterion for interpreting Scripture and revelation**

Nobody will question that the Scriptures are the essential testimony of reve-

lation, but neither can it be denied that "revelation is something alive, something greater, which must reach its goal and be perceived in order to be revelation; otherwise we would have no revelation"<sup>19</sup>. There is consequently no need to have appeal to the criterion of "*sola scriptura*", since the Scriptures are intimately linked to the Church as the subject who understands them: this is how the essential meaning of tradition is given. The concept of "tradition" is thus formed and brought to light: "it is that aspect of revelation that springs from the Scriptures and therefore cannot be expressed in a code of formulae"<sup>20</sup>.

#### **1.7. Solidarity also needs to be visited by grace**

Fraternity and solidarity also need to be redeemed. Nothing human, as admirable and utopian as it may be, is exempt from the need for salvation: "fraternity also needs to be redeemed, and therefore we must bring it near the Cross, so that it can assume there its authentic form"<sup>21</sup>.

#### **1.8. In synthesis**

The importance of Plato, Augustine and Bonaventure is unquestionable. It is also clear that Ratzinger's perspective is legitimate but does not give due consideration to many other perspectives that it passes over, such as Aristotle ("concrete universal" and induction), Saint Irenaeus (dignifying of the person as a consequence of the incarnation) and Saint Thomas (the connatural knowledge proper to every creature)<sup>22</sup>.

## 2. CONTRIBUTION TO THE COUNCIL DEBATES ON *DEI VERBUM*

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J. Ratzinger was asked by Cardinal Frings of Cologne to participate as an expert in the Second Vatican Council. He is responsible for the intervention by the cardinal in which he invited the Church to open itself to the world and to recover its genuinely Christian roots. Years later, Ratzinger gave much more importance (and rightly so) to his contribution to the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*. According to him, it was an intervention that was hardly taken notice of and besides it was wrongly considered to be one of the open, progressive contributions.

Behind this important intervention of Ratzinger were to be found, besides the deep seated ideas coming from his theological formation, two facts that were greatly important for the shaping of his perspective and for the future of Church government: the rejection of the dogma of the Assumption by some professors (who argued that it did not form part of the “apostolic tradition”) and the debate opened by J. R. Geiselmann about the relation between scripture and tradition in the acts of the Council of Trent. This debate (closed in the wrong way, according to Ratzinger) was known as the debate on the “*partim ... partim*”, and it had great importance for the final version of *Dei Verbum*.

### 2.1. The dogma of the Assumption of Mary

As a young man Ratzinger was extremely concerned that some theo-

logy professors did not accept the dogma of Mary’s Assumption in body and soul into heaven since, they said, it was a doctrine unknown before the fifth century and so did not form part of the “apostolic tradition”. Ratzinger held that these professors had too strict a concept of “tradition”, understanding it as something that was already fixed. They held that any subsequent “recalling” could do no more than discover what at first was not visible, but “was still given in the original word”<sup>23</sup>.

This was the conception that the German theological world had of “tradition” in the time immediately following the end of World War II and prior to Vatican II, and it conditioned the formulation of *Dei Verbum*. There was no concept of a “living” tradition, and therefore it was difficult to understand that tradition is the living channel by which revelation reaches us with the help of the Scriptures, but is at the same time much more than Scripture, thanks to the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Failure to grasp this capital point hindered any conception of tradition as open and creative.

### 2.2. The debate on the “*partim ... partim*”

This already limited conception of the relations among revelation, Scripture and tradition was aggravated in the course of Vatican II by J. R. Geiselmann’s study on the acts of the

Council of Trent, which included the various contributions to the decree on tradition.

According to Geiselmann's study, at the Council of Trent there had been proposed at first a formula, according to which revelation would be "partly" in the holy Scriptures and "partly" in tradition. In the final text, however, the terminology "partly ... partly" was avoided, and was substituted by the word "and": sacred scriptures and tradition together transmit revelation to us. Geiselmann deduced from this that Trent had wanted to teach us that the contents of faith were not divided between the scriptures and tradition, but that both contained the whole, each in its own right; that is to say, they were in themselves complete. As a consequence of that, it began "to be held that the Church could not teach anything that was not expressly traceable to the sacred scriptures, since they contain exactly and completely all that belongs to faith. And since there was an identification of scriptural interpretation and historical-critical exegesis, that meant that the Church could not teach anything that did not meet the standards of the historical-critical method"<sup>24</sup>.

The debate was thus going much further than Trent; "it was being argued that in the Church exegesis should be the final court of appeal, and given the diversity of interpretations among exegetes, this would be equivalent to

consigning the faith to a state of indeterminacy and to the continuous variations of historical hypotheses (or what appear to be such). In the end, "believing" would mean something like "opining", having an opinion subject to constant revision"<sup>25</sup>.

The drama of the post-councilar time has been broadly determined by this debate and by its "logical consequences"<sup>26</sup>. It is clear that the historical-critical method "cannot recognize any evidence other than historical argument"<sup>27</sup> and that "it does not tolerate any delimitation by an authoritative magisterium"<sup>28</sup>. The consequence is that it makes the concept of tradition problematic, for the historical-critical method "does not allow any understanding of an oral tradition which, flowing alongside the sacred scriptures and going back to the Apostles, represents a source of historical knowledge together with the Bible"<sup>29</sup>.

We should not be surprised that the young Ratzinger thought that the method of liberal theology (Harnack and his school) was arbitrary and trivializing and that he proposed that "it be put on the right path by means of obedience to dogma"<sup>30</sup>.

In Ratzinger's opinion, the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* "has still not been fully accepted"<sup>31</sup>, its authentic affirmations have yet to be communicated to the ecclesial consciousness, so that it can be shaped by it.

## 2. THEOLOGIAN, BISHOP, AND PREFECT OF THE CDF

Ratzinger's second stage encompasses the final period of his career as a theology professor (especially in Tübingen), his consecration as bishop, his episcopal ministry in the dioceses of Munich and Freising (1977), and above all the time when he was at the Prefect of the CDF (1981).

It is true that Ratzinger at an earlier stage had denounced the fact that the Church “holds the reins too tightly: there are too many laws, and many of them have in this century contributed to a lack of faith, instead of contributing to salvation”<sup>32</sup>. And it is true that when years later –now as Prefect of the CDF– he was asked about this remark, he claimed that he did not remember it, and he reinterpreted it as meaning that scholastic theology was not a good toll for the possible dialogue between faith and our modern times<sup>33</sup>.

Nevertheless, this first diagnosis is mostly by way of anecdote. Shortly after

the Episcopal assembly ended, he began to speak of a *Konzils-Ungeist*, a false Council spirit, and he asserted the need to redirect the way Vatican II was being implemented, especially in dealing with those who thought that reform consisted in releasing ballast, in making history something more bearable, and in lightening things up in such a way that it appears in the end to be “not a strengthening, but rather a dissolution, of faith”<sup>34</sup>.

Being more precise, with regard to certain Christian adaptations of Marxism, he observed in Tübingen that the Church had been infiltrated by

tendencies that were making use of Christianity for ideological purposes, something that he felt was truly insidious. He became convinced that people's wholehearted desire to serve the faith was being destroyed and replaced by an instrumentalization that was at the service of a tyrannical ideology with brutally cruel orientations: "I then understood perfectly that, if we were to persevere in the will of the Council, we had resolutely to resist all those abuses"<sup>35</sup>.

In his book *Introduction to Christianity* he offered the first conclusion of the diagnosis that he was developing: the dream of freedom offered by modernity makes a Christian named Hans exchange some gold nuggets he possesses, first for a horse, then for a cow, afterwards for a goose, and finally for grindstone that he ends up throwing into the sea. When Hans finally wakes up from the dream of freedom offered by modernity, he finds himself in a difficult situation, because he has nothing left. The decay and the destruction

of his heritage in the name of freedom have been total<sup>36</sup>.

The diagnosis that Ratzinger developed during his final stage as professor reached a well-reasoned formulation in the years when he was bishop of Munich, and especially when he was Prefect of the CDF. The result was a cultural, spiritual, and ecclesiastical judgment denouncing the post-councilar tendency to overlap –with the pretext of modernization– the mystery of God and the need for church mediation. A diagnosis that was as rich and nuanced as it was polemical. It would be impossible to explain it adequately in a short space, but there are three points that should be highlighted, since they help to give a theological context for the first volume of the *Christology*: Ratzinger's relation to K. Rahner and H. Urs von Balthasar, his reconsideration of the theologian's role in the Church, and especially his option for the so-called "definitive truths".

## 1. DETACHMENT FROM K. RAHNER AND CLOSENESS TO H. U. VON BALTHASAR

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In his first years as a professor, Ratzinger published jointly with K. Rahner some of the most emblematic theological works of the time: *The Episcopate and the Primacy and Revelation and Tradition*.<sup>37</sup> During those years he

also wrote what can be considered his first great book: *The New People of God*. This fruitful relationship with Rahner gradually weakened, and there was confrontation between the two theologians in the first years of the

International Theological Commission because of their differing conceptions regarding the role of the theologian and of the Commission itself in the governance of the Church (should the theologian help to formulate the magisterium or limit himself to disseminating it?). Years later he confessed that “my theology differed from that of Rahner in the important role played by the Scriptures, the Fathers and the historical dimension of revelation”<sup>38</sup>. A relevant anecdote tells that it was H. U. von Balthasar who proposed to Ratzinger that he join the team that founded the journal *Communio*, which set out to be an alternative to *Concilium*.

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Ratzinger was in agreement  
with some of the arguments,  
with the style and  
with the underlying criticism  
that made up von Balthasar’s  
diagnosis

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At the time that his relationship with Rahner was cooling off, Ratzinger’s analyses began to resemble those formulated by von Balthasar, one of the first theologians to champion an “involute” reading of Vatican II, both during the Council itself and during the long pontificate of Paul VI. The Swiss theologian criticized the naïve optimism evident in *Gaudium et Spes*, and accused the Council fathers of being blind to the extent to which sin was deeply

lodged in the bosom of the world to which they gave such centrality in the mystery of salvation.

According to the theologian from Basel, salvation would be brought to the world not by “anonymous Christians” (persons who do not explicitly accept Jesus as Savior, but still are committed to the liberation of people, especially the most poor). Rather, the world would be saved by the martyrs, that is, those persons who offer their lives because they know by experience that they must freely give what they have freely received. Von Balthasar reminded the faithful that, when the grace of salvation is not cultivated and cared for and when commitment is not properly accompanied by mysticism and by an explicitly recognized and assumed identity, the risk of falling into what he called “Christian atheism” increases to unsuspected levels. For him this was one of the greatest risks in the way the Council was being understood and received.

With some personal modifications, Ratzinger was in agreement with some of the arguments, with the style and with the underlying criticism that made up von Balthasar’s diagnosis.<sup>39</sup> The “secularization” of the Church and the eclipsing of the mystery of God can only be fought by Christians who have the kind of evangelical courage that has been demonstrated by the saints and martyrs in the course of the church’s history. “Of itself the institutional guarantee is of little worth if there are not persons who sustain it with their own personal convictions”<sup>40</sup>.

## 2. ANTI-ROMAN FEELING AND THE ROLE OF THEOLOGIANS

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Ratzinger declared that there had been a tacit consensus that the Church had to be the principal theme of the Second Vatican Council, which would take up again and complete the path traced by the First Vatican Council, prematurely interrupted by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. Accompanying this great question was the relationship between the Church and the world<sup>41</sup>. Shortly before the Council ended, however, he began to realize – as he would recount years later – that there was a growing sensation that nothing in the Church was stable, that everything could be up for revision. “The Council seems to be like a great Church parliament, which could change and revolutionize everything in its own way. It was quite evident that there was a growing resentment against Rome and the Curia, which appeared as the true enemy of any renewal and progress”<sup>42</sup>.

While the divisions and confrontations were growing, the issue was also broadening: if the bishops could change the Church and even the faith itself, why could only they do it and not the rest of the people of God? Furthermore, everybody knew that the new arguments of the bishops had been learned from the theologians. As a result of such influence, bishops who had been till then conservative now were making their dioceses progressive.

The role played by theologians in the Council created in them “a new self-consciousness: they began to feel that

they were the true representatives of the knowledge, and for that very reason they could no longer appear to be subject to the bishops”<sup>43</sup>. In the Church, at least as far as public opinion went, “everything appeared to be subject to revision; even the profession of faith no longer seemed untouchable, but was now subject to the verifications of the scholars. Behind this tendency of the specialists to dominate, another factor appeared, namely, the idea of popular ecclesial sovereignty, according to which the people themselves would establish what should be understood by the term ‘Church’, which was now clearly defined as the people of God. The ideas of a ‘Church from below’ or a ‘Church of the people’ were being propagated, and such ideas would later, especially in the context of liberation theology, become the very aim of reform”<sup>44</sup>.

### 2.1. The “Declaration of Cologne”

As a result of the publication of these diagnoses and the corresponding magisterial decisions which were then appearing, a sizeable group of German, Central European and Southern European theologians was moved to denounce in 1989 the “authoritarian and exclusivist” actions of Ratzinger and to recommend that more attention be paid to the opinion of all Christians (“*sensus fidelium*”), both in what the magisterium promulgated and in how the

Church had to be governed. The theologians' document was known as the "Declaration of Cologne".

This denunciation and recommendation were interpreted by the majority in the Vatican Curia as an unacceptable recommendation that the Church capitulate in the face of the modern mentality and as a justification for all kinds of "resistance" to and criticism of the Catholic magisterium. One of the consequences of the "Declaration of Cologne" was the birth of the movement called "We are Church", which the same majority sector of the Vatican curia claimed was dedicated to denigrating the image of John Paul II and of his prefect in the CDF. From then on, there were further accusations against the Curia for proposing a magisterium that showed no mercy as regards sexual morality and for turning a blind eye in the face of the alarming spread of AIDS.

The reaction came quickly, and it came in several forms: an instruction on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian (*Donum veritatis*, 1990), an encyclical on the primacy of truth (*Veritatis splendor*, 1993) and above all the revision of the profession of faith in the apostolic letter "*Ad tuendam fidem*" (1998), which contained the formal exposition of the so-called "definitive truths".

## **2.2. The instruction *Donum veritatis* on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian (1990)**

The rapid dissemination of the "Declaration of Cologne" and the strength of the resulting movement caused a whole series of alarms to be set off about the

urgency of preserving Church unity and truth. Such a concern would require recovering the centrality of episcopal ministry as a magisterial authority and the secondary function of the theologian with relation to that ministry. All this was spelled out in the instruction *Donum veritatis*<sup>45</sup>. While recognizing the important role theologians played in the preparation and realization of the Second Vatican Council, the instruction states such recognition did not mean that theologians should not partly be blamed for the crisis that the Church suffered after the Council.

The instruction indicates that the magisterium is not a ministry extrinsic to Christian truth or something imposed on faith. Rather, it is born from faith itself, it consists in service to God's word, and it is an institution positively desired by Christ as a constitutive element of the Church. The magisterium has the assistance of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus, and that assistance enables the Church to propose "in a definite fashion" statements on questions which, "although not contained in the truths of faith, are still found to be intimately linked to them, in such a way that the definitive character of those affirmations derives, in the last analysis, from Revelation itself." Such truths "can be taught infallibly by the magisterium"<sup>46</sup>. For their part, theologians should "achieve, in communion with the magisterium, an ever deeper understanding of the Word of God contained in the inspired scriptures and transmitted by the living tradition of the Church"<sup>47</sup>.

According to the instruction, the magisterium is aware that doctrinal

development takes place in the course of time. However, this does not justify relativistic attitudes and claims about matters of faith, nor does it allow theological discourse to set itself up as “an autonomous, exclusive instance for judging a doctrine’s truth”<sup>48</sup>. For that reason, it is necessary to clarify the dissent of some theologians in relation to the magisterium, first by showing the inappropriateness of their setting their own discourse up as a kind of “parallel magisterium”<sup>49</sup> and second by pointing out the incoherence of invoking the respect due to human rights in doctrinal matters. Over and above any such claim is “the strength of truth itself”<sup>50</sup> and the respect that is due to it. When a theologian does not agree with the ecclesial sense, his appeal to human rights is irrelevant since he is contradicting “the very commitment that he freely and consciously assumed by teaching in the name of the Church”<sup>51</sup>. Therefore, he is completely free to stop exercising that role in the name of and in communion with the magisterium.

The final point made is that is not appropriate to appeal to one’s own conscience either. The instruction holds that such a recourse is valid only in the case of making a decision, but is not valid when the truth of a doctrinal pronouncement is at stake. To appeal to one’s own conscience to justify a conflict with the Church’s magisterium is incompatible with the economy of revelation and with its transmission in the Church. “The pronouncements of faith constitute an ecclesial heritage; they are not the result of purely individual research and of a free critique of the

Word of God. Separating oneself from the pastors who work to keep the apostolic tradition alive is to compromise irreparably the very bond with Christ”<sup>52</sup>.

For that it is not possible to apply within the Church those criteria of conduct that have their *raison d’être* in civil society, in the operating rules of a democracy or in the prevailing social mentality. When recourse is made to such instances, with arguments and actions becoming absolute, it is because “the sense of truth and the sense of the Church have been seriously weakened”<sup>53</sup>.

### **2.3. The objectivity of truth: *Veritatis splendor* (1993)**

The encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (1993) extended further the analysis put forth in the *Instruction on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian* (1990). It is an important magisterial text because it emphasizes the influence of social and cultural sensitivity in the life of the Church and especially among theologians, and it marks the path the Church will follow in relating to the world during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

With the publication of this encyclical, official status is given to what had till then been a minority position in how the Church’s relation with the world was understood and practiced. This perspective is obviously quite far removed from the one implemented –to be sure, with a certain dose of *naïveté*– by the members of Vatican II when they debated and approved the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* on the relation of the Church to the world.

### 3. THE APPEAL TO “DEFINITIVE” TRUTHS: THE APOSTOLIC LETTER *AD TUENDAM FIDEM* (1998)

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A revision of the *professio fidei* and the oath of fidelity for theologians and for candidates to ecclesial ministries was published in 1998.

#### 3.1. The *professio fidei*

This profession of faith adds to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed three paragraphs:

I also believe with firm faith all that is contained in the word of God as written or as transmitted by tradition, and which the Church proposes as something to be believed as divinely revealed, by means of a solemn judgment or by means of the ordinary or universal magisterium.

I accept and firmly hold, furthermore, each and every matter that the Church proposes in definitive fashion about the doctrine of faith and customs.

I adhere also with religious deference of will and understanding to the doctrines pronounced by the Roman pontiff or by the college of bishops when they exercise authentic teaching authority, even when they do not have the intention of proclaiming the doctrines in a definitive act<sup>54</sup>.

The present Code of canon law contemplates “just sanctions” for those who dissent as regards the first and third categories, but there is no mention of the

second category, definitive doctrines. The apostolic letter fills in this space.

#### 3.2. The commentary of J. Ratzinger and T. Bertone

There are three principal ways in which the magisterium has traditionally been presented, in the light of both Vatican Councils: extraordinary (infallible), ordinary and universal (equally infallible), and authentic (fallible).

According to the commentary of Ratzinger and Bertone on the apostolic letter, it is necessary to add to these traditional forms of magisterium the “definitive” truths, that is, those truths proposed as universal and unreformable, but not defined. Such truths are based on the Holy Spirit’s assistance to the magisterium and therefore on the infallibility which is proper to it, and they are proclaimed with the object of maintaining ecclesial unity around a disputed truth or practice that is difficult to accede to, but which must be religiously admitted to be definitive (“*tamquam definitive tenenda*”) because of its direct connection with the deposit of faith or by a “logical” or “historical bond”<sup>55</sup>.

Ratzinger and Bertone hold that the infallibility of the magisterium is effective both in a solemn definition and in a definitive declaration. Therefore, a solemn definition is not required in order

for infallibility to enter into effect<sup>56</sup>. In this way recourse is had to a new and surprising form of magisterium to settle disputed questions, bestowing on “definitive” truths a position which is unusual in the life of the Church<sup>57</sup>.

Finally, the commentary of Ratzinger and Bertone points out that the definitive doctrines taught with the charism of infallibility include those referring to the illicit nature of prostitution and fornication, the condemnation of euthanasia, the reservation of priestly ordination to men, and the declaration of Leo XIII stating that Anglican ordinations were null and void.

The explanations given by Ratzinger and Bertone provoked a sense of generalized perplexity in the theological world. Furthermore, they had important implications for relations to other Christian confessions (especially in what touches on the priesthood of women), for the bishops themselves, and of course for the faithful, since any rejection of these doctrines or any refusal to give them “a firm and definitive assent” implies the loss of full communion with the Catholic Church. That is to say, any such rejection would constitute heresy or at least would justify a withdrawal of the authorization to teach, as was the case with R. Nugent for his not accepting as definitive certain positions of the magisterium regarding homosexuality<sup>58</sup>.

### **3.3. Critical reaction of the German Bishops conference**

We should not be surprised that the German Bishops conference offered many objections to the application of

the *motu proprio*. Concretely, the conference pointed out that the first paragraph of the oath violates the unity of scripture and tradition, something that was expressly taught by Vatican II, in favor of two separate realities: “the word of God as written or as transmitted by tradition.” Scripture and tradition end up juxtaposed in the proposed definition through the Latin word “vel” (“or”). Such was precisely the position defended at Vatican II by those who favored a restrictive conception of revelation, a position which in the end did not prosper<sup>59</sup>.

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After the Council, Ratzinger had denounced the fact that dogma was viewed as “an external bond” and not as a “vital source” that makes “new knowledge” possible<sup>60</sup>.

Furthermore, the second paragraph of the oath affirms, contrary to the teachings of both Vatican I and Vatican II, the Pope’s infallibility in secondary matters of faith, without taking into account that the paragraph concerns only an opinion which is theologically well argued, but whose application is quite contested.

Finally, the German Bishops criticized the oath's third paragraph for rigidly requiring the so-called *obsequium religiosum* for matters belonging to the authentic magisterium. As can be seen, the German Episcopal conference had great reservations about accepting and applying this oath of fidelity. For that reason it did not require it of the faithful.

In 1999 the Vatican curia urgently insisted that the German bishops put the oath into effect, something that they finally decided to do in the episcopal assembly of the spring of 2000. They accompanied it, however, with an explanation written by the faith commission, which recalled that the Pope's competency for judging definitively in the field of secondary teachings of faith is in fact a well argued theological opinion and that its application is strongly contested. With respect to the request for *obsequium religiosum*, the bishops expressly stated that loyal disagreement on the part of theologians would be possible under certain conditions.

However, the consequences of the *motu proprio* do not end here. They also affect the bishops, the successors of the apostles. For example, if a prelate publicly expresses his disagreement with the Pope on any of the so-called "definitive" truths, he can be "punished with a just penalty", which would not entail excommunication but might deprive him of his office if he were to maintain his position after being duly warned. How far we are from the voice of the Second Vatican Council, which proclaimed that Bishops should "not be considered vicars of the Roman Pontiffs"! (*Lumen Gentium* n. 27).

With the publication of the apostolic letter *Ad tuendam fidem*, we find ourselves before a doctrinal development as important as the very definition of the pope's infallibility by Vatican I in 1870.

What is more, adding that oath to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed does nothing to contribute to ecumenical unity. What has been done and the way it has been done constitute something completely new –there is no precedent for it in the whole history of Christianity.

Not surprisingly, then, J. Moingt raised the question of how a debate generally considered to be open to further investigation can be "definitively" closed on the basis of faith<sup>61</sup>. He has been joined by other theologians who understand that this form of governing by relying on so-called "definitive" truths is one more step in the involution of a Church that prefers to impose a doctrine not so much by the strength of its theological arguments as by the threat of sanctions.

These theologians argue further, paraphrasing J. I. González Faus, that in recent years there has been a transition from the authority of faith to faith in authority, from the theological grounding of doctrine to the authority of position, from dialogue to doctrinal uniformity<sup>62</sup>.

And this is happening not only in the Vatican curia's relation to the local churches, but also within many dioceses, since an autocratic form of governing is being adopted that at best listens, but does not pay heed, to what others manifest.

### 3. THE PAPACY OF BENEDICT XVI (2005)

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The third stage began in the spring of 2005, with the election of J. Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI. In the years he has been in such high office, the language and authoritative ways of the preceding phase seem to have receded, and a much more positive style has taken the stage.

The Pope has taken positive positions on ecumenism, the lay nature of the state, and the need for the Church to adapt to the new political situation. However, his commentaries on Islam and violence, his views on the conquest of Latin America, his apparent failure in trying to renew the Curia, his denunciation of the “prostitution” of theologians<sup>63</sup> and the *Notificatio* regarding Jon Sobrino are some of the signs that, at least for the moment, contradict the hoped-for change that had been predicted by some cardinals and even by some theologians.

The publication by the Pope of this first volume of his Christology as a pri-

vate theologian shows him to be more concerned with encouraging people and giving a testimony of faith than in cutting and curing. However, this objective is not fully attained since at many points, despite his unquestionable good will, there reemerges the fundamental theologian who has not forgotten or has not been able to leave aside some of the questions raised in the course of his career, especially those that concern the relation between revelation and tradition and between the scriptures and the magisterium. This is something that can be seen especially in the centrality he concedes to his particular interpretation of the evangelist John, which opens the

way to many of the polemical questions that were treated during his times as prefect of the CDF.

### 3.1. The centrality of John

To be sure, in the first volume of the Christology there are many references to the synoptic gospels, but it is also true that they are not given pride of place; this is in the end granted to John's gospel. The fourth gospel highlights recalling and memory, which are of capital importance for a Platonist and an Augustinian. Benedict XVI maintains that, when John speaks of recalling, this is not the result of a simple psychological or intellectual process in the private sphere; rather, it is a Church event which, since it is guided by the Holy Spirit, transcends the properly human sphere of knowledge and understanding; it shows the cohesion between scripture and reality and guides us to the totality of truth.

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Consequently the fourth evangelist, thanks to his comprehending in recalling, opens himself up to every epoch and generation a better and more profound way of understanding that

truth. It is a way that goes beyond the historicity of the events and the words and introduces us “into that profundity that proceeds from God and leads us to God”, that is, “it truly shows us the person of Jesus just as he was, and it therefore shows us the One who not only was, but is; the One who at every time can say in the present tense, ‘I am’, ‘Before Abraham was, I am’ (John 8,58). This gospel shows us the true Jesus, and we can use it quite peacefully as a source of Jesus”<sup>64</sup>.

As can be noted, the reference to the history of Jesus has only a secondary importance, since it is articulated from the primacy of the living “memory” by which he reaches us. In this regard Ratzinger coincides with his teachers Augustine and Bonaventure and with his friend von Balthasar, even though he occasionally points out—correctly, to be sure—that any faith that forgets about the historical dimension becomes “gnosticism” because it gives up the flesh, incarnation, and true history<sup>65</sup>.

This preference for the fourth gospel refers back to important aspects of the theological biography of Ratzinger, such as the connections between knowing and recalling, history and faith, Holy Spirit and magisterium, and revelation and tradition. Not only that, but it also justifies, among other points, his conception of “the” truth and his position in favor of the so-called canonical exegesis.

### 3.2. Truth and evidence

There is a theme that runs through all of Ratzinger's theological biography and

characterizes his Christology from beginning to end: his passion for showing the seductive capacity of Jesus, “the” truth par excellence.

Benedict XVI has always been especially interested in arguing for the relation that exists between truth and evidence. This helps explain the antipathy he felt toward neo-scholasticism and his preference for Augustinian thought. It is not surprising, then, that he now should emphasize the spiritual side of Him who presents himself –to the scandal of Jews and outsiders– not only as “the way and the life”, but above all as “the” truth. Nor is there anything surprising in his doing so by claiming for himself the evidence that is proper to all beauty and the corresponding capacity for seduction and fascination.

This is a legitimate procedure that has a rich and fruitful tradition in the history of theology, but it is only one perspective among many others that are also deeply rooted in the Christian tradition.

There exist, for example, other perspectives that are more attentive to show that “the” truth of God consists precisely in his love, and especially in his association with the crucified peoples of this world. These are Christologies that show abundantly that the following of Jesus is “veri-fied” (that is, “made true”) in those blessed persons with whom he is associated in a preferential way out of pure love; and that as a result of such an association, acceptable and comprehensible only by faith, the following of Jesus is a consolation for some and a spur for others.

Benedict XVI’s conception of truth explains why in his references to the Fathers he does not stress as he should a truth that was unquestionable for them: that the poor are the vicars of Christ and that that truth contains a capacity of seduction capable of moving all kinds of people, starting with the same Greek and Latin Fathers, and passing to nearly all the saints and mystics, and continuing through all persons of goodwill in all the ages.

It is true that this way of understanding truth runs the risk of “Christian atheism,” but it is no less true that the perceptibly Platonic and Augustinian perspective adopted by Ratzinger must strive hard to avoid the risks of Docetism, intellectualism or a blind and disembodied spiritualism, that is to say, the “gnosticism” that he quite correctly denounces in his Christology.

It is generally agreed that Matthew 25,31 and 1 John 4,8 are two undoubtedly forceful texts that have influenced the theology of every age. Such has always been the case, with the dramatic exception of the 19th century and part of the 20th, a time when the Church was busy healing from the wounds left by the loss of the papal states and was striving to free itself from the interference of the world’s powerful figures. As a result of such concerns, however, it ended up neglecting the centrality of the poor and allowed Marxism to appropriate that truth in a violent fashion.

Since then, not a few in the Catholic Church have had enormous difficulty in distinguishing the unacceptably violent and authoritarian claims of Marxism

from the radically evangelical spirit that comes out in defense of the proletariat, and, by extension, of the poor. As a consequence of that, this group has also had great difficulty in overcoming an overprotective or merely assistance-oriented conception of poverty and in opening themselves to a consideration of its structural causes. This is something quite evident in the theological biography of Ratzinger: what had been a legitimate, well-argued position with respect to the Marxism that prevailed during his time as professor and bishop seems to have become, after Marxism was ideologically defeated following the fall of the Berlin wall, a prejudice quite difficult to overcome.

It is certainly desirable to continue offering opportune criticisms regarding contemporary manifestations of Pelagianism, but such criticisms should also be accompanied by similar warnings regarding the present-day varieties of Docetism (which consists basically in a confession with words, but without any coherence of life or without mystical experience). This is without a doubt the most widespread and harmful error and a true threat to the Christian faith. However, there is hardly any critical consideration of this in Ratzinger's Christology or in his preceding theological biography, certainly nothing as insistent and decisive as the critique that he launches on Pelagianism or "Christian atheism".

Only in this way will "the" truth manifested in Jesus be shown to its full extent and with all its consequences, and only in this way will its unques-

tionable ability to seduce, and also to scandalize, be made evident.

### **3.3. Suspicion of historical-critical exegesis**

Benedict XVI states that in the 1930s gospel exegesis presented Jesus Christ in such a way that God became visible through the man Jesus and the image of the authentic human being could be discerned in its relation to God. In the 1950s, however, there emerged the debate about the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, and the two were separated. This was done with the help of historical-critical study. What could be the meaning of faith in Christ if the man Jesus was really so different from the way the evangelists presented him and the way the Church announced him on the basis of the gospels?<sup>66</sup> There thus began a process of reconstructing the historical Jesus that had more to do with the history of the different authors than with that of Jesus himself.

Ratzinger concludes that the consequence of all this was a historical Jesus ever more distant from us, because in reality we can know very little about him. This was the predicament of R. Schackenburg, according to whom we are left with only the tradition and redaction history.

For Benedict XVI such a turn of events is "dramatic for faith" because it leaves faith without a clear reference and the relation with Jesus runs the risk of being suspended in a vacuum or made dependent on whatever the latest exegete opines<sup>67</sup>. The Bible is left unable to speak about the living God,

and the conviction becomes widespread that when we approach scripture and comment on it, we are in reality just talking about ourselves. Worse still, we are deciding what God can do and what we want to do or should do ourselves<sup>68</sup>.

This manner of approaching Scripture ends up abandoning the communion Jesus had with the Father. The singular quality of the historical Jesus consists in this communion, and without it we cannot understand anything. Only on the basis of such a communion can everything be understood, even in our days<sup>69</sup>.

### 3.4. The “Catholic” logic

Ratzinger’s definitive evaluation of historical-critical exegesis (and what derives from it) makes us recall, once again, the great importance of giving the so-called “Catholic” logic priority over other readings of scripture that are excessively influenced by personal biographies or by legitimate, but frequently limited, personal emphases.

Since the times of Pseudo-Dionysius we know that all theology worthy of the name must pay heed both to the incarnation of the Son and to the resurrection of the Crucified One. We also know that the richness of the mystery which is given us in Jesus Christ can be expressed only if we manage to maintain, in the unstable balance proper to all “Catholic” thought, truths which a narrow, rational way of thinking perceive to be contradictory or incapable of expression: Jesus and Christ, transcendence and immanence, revelation and history, scrip-

ture and tradition. Likewise, we know that the great variety of theological discourses that exists is due to our approaching a mystery that exceeds our intellectual capacities, and also to our adopting different starting points; for an approach in search of truth is not the same as one in search of beauty or in search of love. In any case, every approach, in order to be effectively “Catholic”, should integrate in itself those truths that are meaningful for other perspectives and should at the same time be very conscious of the risks implicit in its own chosen perspective.

With his preference for “canonical exegesis”, Ratzinger, in true Augustinian fashion, starts off from the Christ of faith and from there proceeds to the historical Jesus. “Going beyond simple historical-critical interpretations, I am only seeking to apply new methodological criteria that allow us a properly theological interpretation of the Bible and that also nurture faith, without thereby wanting or being able to renounce in any way to historical seriousness”<sup>70</sup>. This is a legitimate theological and spiritual perspective, which is attentive to the inner illumination that comes from on high and which is eager to contemplate with fascination the divine mystery. The Christ of faith is the axiomatic starting point of Ratzinger’s theology and spirituality: “either Christ is taken to be a fool, or you follow him like a fool.” The true Christian is the person who has been seduced by the contemplation of a mystery that is capable of illuminating all the dimensions of existence. When that happens, the Cartesian “*cogito ergo*

*sum*” becomes a “Catholic” “*cogitor ergo sum*” (“I think myself, therefore I exist.”) This is the commendable concern that lies behind his option for “canonical exegesis”. “Only from the viewpoint of God is it possible to understand man, and only by living in relation with God is man’s life made just. God is not a distant unknown. He shows us his face in Jesus; in his actions and in his will we recognize the thoughts and the will of God himself”<sup>71</sup>.

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Christian identity

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### 3.5. Risk of subjectivism

Like every option, however, this one, if analyzed in the light of the history of spirituality, presents undeniable limitations. Not the least of these is its proclivity to favor “eisegetic” interpretations, that is, interpretations that project onto the historical Jesus desires and meanings that are foreign to him or even contrary to his reality. In order to prevent our recourse to Christ from turning into a search for an analgesic or a placebo, or becoming a search for a fascinating hippy, a duly self-centered post-modern one, or a believer more docile to church authority than to the

Master’s words, we need a decided reference to the Crucified, to the historical Jesus. Thanks to the historical Jesus, for example, we know that our self is “ec-centric”, that is, it extends outside us and beyond our subjectivity, our desires, our aspirations, our hopes, and it becomes real in the crucified people of this world.

For this reason, we should remember that, along with this perspective to which Ratzinger grants priority, there exists another perspective: one which approaches the Christ starting from the historical Jesus. And such an approach avoids the masochist risk that is run by every follower who stays solely with the contemplation of the Crucified One. It is the perspective adopted, from the time of E. Käsemann, by a good number of Catholic exegetes and scholars who, like Benedict XVI, are convinced that the Jesus of the kerygma is more than the historical Jesus, but who also hold that the historical Jesus must continue to be the ultimate criterion of Christian identity and of every Christology –as he was for Paul, the evangelists, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, and the author of the Apocalypse.

This circularity between Christ and Jesus on the basis of the priority of history is, as these theologians and exegetes remind us, something that has persisted through the whole history of the Church, even though Christian tradition has never considered it proper to canonize the history of Jesus (O. Tuñí).

And in case this argument for the priority of the historical Jesus over the

Christ of faith were not thought to be sufficient, we should recall that this is a criterion affirmed by the declaration *Dominus Iesus* in its interesting critical dialogue with those who would claim that “Jesus separates, the Spirit unites,” and would find here the constitutive axiom of their perspective. With good reason John Paul II recalls that the Spirit of which we speak and to which we refer is the Spirit of Jesus, the one risen from the dead, that is, the historical Jesus.

Therefore, the process of going “beyond” the historical datum, which Benedict XVI legitimately affirms when he appeals to “canonical exegesis”, must sooner or later pass through the test of the historical Jesus, the Crucified One who becomes real in the crucified peoples of this world. That is the test that makes it possible to avoid falling into the risk of “eisegesis” which is found in the spiritualisms, subjectivisms and manipulations against which the saints and mystics, including Saint Teresa and Saint Ignatius, untiringly warned the faithful. The Basque saint says in his autobiography that he learned to renounce “great news and spiritual consolations” and “new understandings of spiritual things and new

spiritual delights”, especially those which came to him when he should have been sleeping or working, because they made it impossible for him to do what he had to do<sup>72</sup>.

Likewise, the mystic saint from Avila writes that “it is a lack of humility to want to be given what you have never deserved,” in that way “one is quite certain to be deceived or placed in danger,” nobody is certain that this is the road one should take, and “imagination itself, when there is great desire, sees whatever it likes”<sup>73</sup>.

It is therefore proper to recall, citing now Jon Sobrino, that the cross of Jesus is the definitive datum that calls into question all absolutes (and theological methods) because it is not an absolute, nor can it be one.

This is the task that is incumbent on the “canonical exegesis” that Ratzinger uses in the first volume of his *Christology*. Even though he makes frequent references to the dramatic situation in the African continent, these references do not quite structure his theological perspective; they are almost always analyzed from a religious or cultural perspective rather than from a political or economic one.

1. J. RATZINGER - BENEDICT XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret*, Città del Vaticano - Milano, 2007, p. 20.
2. RATZINGER - BENEDICT XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret*, p. 12.
3. BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting with the members of the Bishops' Conference of Switzerland. Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI*, Tuesday, 7 november 2006.
4. BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting...*
5. G. GUTIÉRREZ, *La fuerza histórica de los pobres*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1982, p. 14.
6. G. GUTIÉRREZ, *Dios o el oro en las Indias (s.XVI)*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1990, p. 130.
7. G. GUTIÉRREZ, *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente. Una reflexión sobre el libro de Job*, Lima, CEP, 1986, p. 24.
8. GUTIÉRREZ, *La fuerza histórica...*, p. 14.
9. J. RATZINGER, *Mi vida. Autobiografía*, Madrid, Encuentro, 2006, p. 177.
10. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 159-160: The consequence is an insertion into the Church's consciousness of the idea of a sovereign popular Church, where the faithful themselves establish what is to be understood by the term "Church", which is already defined as the people of God. It is an anticipation of the idea of the "Church from below" or of the "Church of the people".
11. J. RATZINGER, *Sal de la tierra. Cristianismo e Iglesia católica ante el nuevo milenio. Una conversación con P. Seewald*, Madrid, Palabra, 1997, p. 45.
12. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 89.
13. RATZINGER, *Sal de la tierra...* p. 36. Cf. Ibid. p. 72: «My theology has a certain biblical, even patristic, or especially Augustinian, character».
14. RATZINGER, *Sal de la tierra...* p. 37.
15. S. BUENAVENTURA, *Hexaemeron*, 22. 21.
16. RATZINGER, *Sal de la tierra...* p. 69.
17. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 120-121.
18. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 150.
19. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 150.
20. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 150.
21. RATZINGER, *Sal de la tierra...* p. 207.
22. Even if it is true –as Aquinas holds– that revelation confirms some of the truths attained with the means of natural reason, it is also true that other truths exist that need to be made more precise, and still others that presuppose faith. Revelation is a light for reason, and reason always preserves its functions, even when dealing with a question of faith.
23. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 107-108.
24. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 148.
25. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 148.
26. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 148.
27. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 146.
28. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 146.
29. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 148.
30. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 99.
31. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 153.
32. RATZINGER, *Sal de la tierra...* p. 79.
33. RATZINGER, *Sal de la tierra...* p. 80.
34. RATZINGER, *Sal de la tierra...* p. 81.
35. RATZINGER, *Sal de la tierra...* p. 83.
36. J. RATZINGER, *Introducción al cristianismo*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1972, p. 17.
37. K. RAHNER - J. RATZINGER, *Revelación y tradición*, Barcelona, Herder, 1970.
38. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 152.
39. H. URS VON BALTHASAR - J. RATZINGER, *¿Por qué soy todavía cristiano? ¿Por qué permanezco en la Iglesia?*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 2005. Original title: *Zwei Plädoyers*.
40. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 52.

41. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 144.
42. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 158.
43. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 159.
44. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 159-160.
45. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF FAITH, *Instruction* “«*Donum veritatis*», on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian”, AAS 82 (1990).
46. CONGREGATION, *Instruction...*, n. 16.
47. CONGREGATION, *Instruction...*, n. 6.
48. CONGREGATION, *Instruction...*, n. 28.
49. CONGREGATION, *Instruction...*, n. 34.
50. CONGREGATION, *Instruction...*, n. 36.
51. CONGREGATION, *Instruction...*, n. 37.
52. CONGREGATION, *Instruction...*, n. 38.
53. CONGREGATION, *Instruction...*, n. 39. JOHN PAUL II, *Teología y Magisterio. Discurso de S.S Juan Pablo II a la Asamblea plenaria de la Congregación para la Doctrina de la Fe*. 24 de noviembre de 1995.
54. JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Letter given in the form of “Motu Proprio” «Ad tuendam fidem», by which some norms are introduced into the Code of Canon Law and the Code of Canons of the Oriental Churches*, Vatican City, 1998.
55. J. M. ROVIRA BELLOSO, *Introducción a la teología*, Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2003; R. G. GAILLARDETZ, «The ordinary universal magisterium: unresolved questions», *Theological Studies*, 63 (2002), p. 447-471.
56. J. RATZINGER - T. BERTONE, «Nota doctrinal ilustrativa de la fórmula conclusiva de la «*professio fidei*»», ns. 6, 7, 8, 9.
57. JOHN PAUL II, «Instrucción de la congregación para la doctrina de la fe», *Donum veritatis*, 1990, ns. 16, 23, 24, DzH, 4874, 4877, 4878.
58. Cf. a summary of the R. Nugent affair in *Selecciones de teología*, 171 (2004), p. 174-175.
59. L. A. SCHÖKEL, «El dinamismo de la tradición»: L. A. SCHÖKEL - A. M. ARTOLA (Ed), *La palabra de Dios en la historia de los hombres. Comentario temático a la constitución Dei Verbum*, Bilbao, Mensajero, 1991, p. 243-283.
60. RATZINGER, *Mi vida...*, p. 106.
61. J. MOINGT, «Sur un débat clos», *RSR*, 82/3 (1994), p. 322.
62. J. I. GONZÁLEZ FAUS, *La autoridad de la verdad. Momentos oscuros del magisterio eclesialístico*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 1996.
63. J. M. LAHIDALGA AGUIRRE, «La “prostitución del teólogo” según Benedicto XVI, y la crítica en la Iglesia (I)», *Surge*, 640 (2007), p. 161-173.
64. RATZINGER - BENEDICT XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret*, p. 275.
65. RATZINGER - BENEDICT XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret*, p. 268.
66. RATZINGER - BENEDICT XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret*, p. 7.
67. RATZINGER - BENEDICT XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret*, p. 8.
68. RATZINGER - BENEDICT XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret*, p. 58.
69. RATZINGER - BENEDICT XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret*, p. 10.
70. RATZINGER - BENEDICT XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret*, p. 19.
71. RATZINGER - BENEDICT XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret*, p. 157.
72. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, *Autobiografía*, n. 26, 54, 82 ff.
73. SAINT TERESA, *Moradas*, 6, c. 9.16.