

JOSEPH RATZINGER'S CONCEPTION OF REVELATION AND ITS ECUMENICAL IMPLICATIONS (I)

Alin VARA*

ABSTRACT. *Joseph Ratzinger's Conception of Revelation and Its Ecumenical Implications (I).* The article is an exposition of the Joseph Ratzinger's concept on Revelation, from the early analysis in his habilitation thesis to his later, more mature reflections. The works under analysis paint an image of an innovative thinker, who challenged both a Platonizing tendency of bracketing history as a meaningful category for the disclosure of Truth and a radical rationalization of history as a global event of total Revelation. Instead, Ratzinger proposed a concept of Revelation as a personal, concrete event of the self-communication of a personal God, who remains close to his creatures through a mysterious presence in the Church, in a process which simultaneously judges and redeems history itself.

Keywords: Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, Revelation, tradition, ecclesiology, ecumenism

Cuvinte-cheie: Joseph Ratzinger/Papa Benedict XVI, Revelație, tradiție, ecleziologie, ecumenism

* Vicerector al Seminarului Teologic Greco-Catolic „Sfinții Trei Ierarhi Vasile, Grigore și Ioan” din Oradea. Licențiat în istorie al Universității din București și în teologie al Universității Pontificale Laterane (Roma) și studii de masterat în istorie la Universitatea Central-Europeană (Budapesta) și masterat în teologie la Universitatea din Bonn. E-mail: alin.vara@gmail.com.



Introduction

This article is a synthetic presentation of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI's concept of Revelation and its ecumenical and philosophical implications. While analysis of the concept itself has been made already by scholars such as Rudolf Voderholzer, Marianne Schlosser, Tracey Rowland or Peter Hoffman, I will try, in the second half of the text, to link this aspect of his work with his reflection on the relationship between history and ontology, arguing that this latter aspect could be counted as a proposal for a wide range of reevaluations such as the field of ecumenical dialogue, history of culture or the philosophical reflection on modernity.

Following Saint Pope John Paul II which hoped for a new Spring of the human spirit in the third millennium, Pope Benedict XVI added a more cautious tone, suggesting rather the formula of a network of small islands of fervent spirituality, on the model of the communities founded by St. Benedict after the fall of the Western Roman Empire which kept alive the fires of faith and civilization. What united them, however, was a conviction that the history of man cannot be read outside the metaphysical question about the beyond to which individuals and societies subscribe all their efforts. Or, in other words, if history is shaped by culture, culture itself is shaped by a deep, interior drama in which man answers the fundamental questions about what transcends him, his existence and the entire history. The Theo-dramatic struggle within the heart of man is the true "engine" of history, and the crisis of Western culture cannot but be a pathological resolution to this everlasting dialogue.

This dialogue between the "I" and the "Thou", which Martin Buber believed it to be the primary source for the specific historical configuration of each culture, defines this configuration on the basis of the specific concept which man has about the way this "Thou" discloses itself, or, in other words, about Revelation. Intrinsically linked to this question would then be the one about the way in which the contents of Revelation are mediated in history. Which are the exact sources of this Revelation? Who has the authority to interpret them? Which is the ultimate criterion against which all other efforts of knowledge should be judged? Immediately related to this problem is what Ratzinger names as *the* fundamental question and challenge for 20th century theology: the relationship between history and being, or the mediation of

history in the realm of ontology.¹ How does one reconcile traditional metaphysics and salvation history, or salvation history and existential/subjective relation of man with the truth of Revelation? What does it mean to be “human”, anyway? What is substantial and accidental in human existence, or how does one develop a concept which would embrace both the idea of an “essence” of humanity and the infinite variation of unique persons “thrown”, in a Heideggerian sense, in historical existence? And, on top of this, how does one place this into a web of Christian concepts such as “sin”, “nature”, “grace”, “redemption”?

My thesis is that, for Ratzinger, the answer to all these questions and to all other fundamental questions is not a word, sentence or system, but rather a person: Jesus Christ. As I shall show, he does not give or even attempt to give definite, precise answers to this series of questions. And it is not (only) because, in the last part of his life, he had to give up building a theological system of his own in favor of administrative duties, nor because he preferred an easy job of merely criticizing others, but primarily because he had the fundamental conviction that Christianity is an open system, which does not give a ready-made series of information about everything that exists, but ‘merely’ the good news that the loving God has revealed Himself once and for all to us, so that we may be deified, for our eternal happiness and His Glory. That is all, nothing more, nothing less. And at the center of this religion, at the center, in fact of all human knowledge and history, is His self-disclosure in the Person of Jesus Christ, Who, by taking a human nature has become our door towards the infinite.

The structure of this article begins with a presentation of the intellectual background of Joseph Ratzinger, continuing with an outline of this habilitation thesis; I will then connect his reflection on Revelation to some points which Ratzinger felt to be crucial in contemporary debates, with a final emphasis on his proposal for the way to a spiritual and intellectual rebirth in the new millennium.

Context and intellectual roots

To sketch Joseph Ratzinger’s spiritual and theological options would mean to shed a light on some major trends and rifts in Western consciousness. Tracey Rowland, following Ratzinger’s own words from the 1982 book ‘Principles of

¹ Cf. Tracey Rowland, *Benedict XVI: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2010) at 8.

Catholic Theology' affirms that his main concern was how to solve the tension in 20th C. Catholic theology raised from the challenge of mediating history in the realm of ontology. Viewed from this angle, Ratzinger's views quickly appear as representing a sort of "come-back" of history and historical thinking in the realm of theology. But what are the nuances of this characterization? And is he but only one figure in a whole series of intellectual trends with much deeper origins in time?

According to Rowland, one major phenomenon which may anticipate the type of vision represented by the current Pope is Romanticism. By affirming that it is a reaction against Rationalism, we could well describe the common feature among its various manifestations. If, for example, Romantic art challenges what was viewed as the too strict boundaries of Classicism or Academism, or poetry may look for new forms and feelings previously neglected in 18th C. literature, in theology Romanticism may be seen as a reaction against the various trends such a too rationalistic, static, ahistorical way of doing theology, of defining Revelation and the way it is transmitted to human beings. In the works of the representatives of the Catholic Tübingen school (Johann Sebastian Drey, Johann Adam Möhler, Johannes Evangelist von Kuhn) or of Cardinal John Henry Newman (an initial member of the Oxford movement; both him and this movement had similar concerns and solutions when compared to the three men mentioned above) one finds the recurring theme of personal experience as an indispensable moment in the communication of Revelation; also, faith is seen in its historical dimension, in the series of hypostases and developments which it witnesses in the course of time. Cardinal Newman's contributions are worth noting: his definition of papal authority as an objective complement to the fluctuations of natural conscience or his conceptualization of the evolution of doctrine do provide key elements for a future reevaluation of the mediating role of history in the unfolding of Revelation in time.²

Another influence is the personalist thought of Peter Wust or Martin Buber. I have mentioned earlier Buber's main idea that every culture is based on an original relational incident, on the way the 'I' responded to a 'Thou' at this moment. In another context, Karol Wojtyła and his colleagues at the Catholic University in Lublin had reached the conclusion that the century needed a personalist complement to the impersonal and ahistorical character of Neo-Thomism, if it were to respond effectively and credibly to the challenge of existential *Angst* of that time. What

² Rowland, *A Guide*, 9-12.

Ratzinger receives from these literary references devoured by his generation of seminarians immediately after World War II was the idea that an essential aspect of human existence is relationality, that dimension of the human person which comprises all this relations with the exterior, the other and the way he shapes his identity in his own historical context- in short, what really makes a person unique. This was seen as an essential addition to the old definition of man in terms of substantiality, most famously represented by Boethius under the formula: *Naturæ rationalis individua substantia* (an individual substance of a rational nature). The difference is clear: while the latter example, in the Aristotelian, and later Thomist tradition, defines a man in terms of what he has in common with the others, their common substance, the former ask the question “Who a man is?”, addressing exactly the element which distinguishes him from the others, making each person unique. Further, Ratzinger would find here that the *historical*, the particular context, the drama occurring between conscience and what is beyond that person is essential in the spiritual process of *Bildung*, self-development, growth, becoming.³

A major inspirer for Ratzinger is Romano Guardini. His contribution to theological debates is crucial, as it is simple: the essence of Christianity is not a system of thought, but Jesus Christ himself. It is not enough to say that Guardini thus proves to be a major inspirer for Ratzinger’s future Christocentric theological views, but also that a major implication of this idea is the utter infinite superiority of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ to any human way of describing and transmitting it. Not only that the Logos made flesh far supersedes any philosophical system, however ambitious and systematic it might be, but even the traditional view of the Scripture and/or Tradition as primary sources of Revelation (if not representing Revelation itself), is seriously challenged. Revelation is infinitely greater and more complex than the simple tidings of it. As we shall see, this will have a profound impact on Ratzinger’s thought and on the Church as a whole, and would prove a stumbling block for many, albeit from different camps.⁴

As a general point, though this surely does not exhaust the whole problematic of the major trends in Catholic theology or of Ratzinger’s own sources of inspiration, it may be noted that for a series of thinker including the members of the Catholic Tübingen school, Guardini, Maurice Blondel, Henri de Lubac, Erich

³ Rowland, *A Guide*, 13-15.

⁴ Rowland, *A Guide*, 18.

Przywara, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Charles Péguy, Georges Bernanos, François Mauriac, Paul Claudel and Ratzinger himself, the common theme and major concern was ‘an interest in how the human being situated in time and in a specific cultural milieu connects to the divine’.⁵ Here there was a rediscovery of Augustinian themes of inner illumination, of the indispensable role of the purified heart in receiving the Revelation- a radical revolt against Neo-Thomism’s ignoring of the place of history and the human person in the development of faith over time, yet at the same time rejecting the Nietzsche- and Heidegger-inspired nihilism and skepticism about the possibility of man-thrown-in-time to contemplate the mystery of Being; on the contrary, Ratzinger or Balthasar tried to recover the lost belief in the classical values of truth, beauty, goodness and the corresponding theological virtues of faith, hope and love.⁶ In history and within man himself it is possible- and, indeed, vital- to employ all the faculties of the soul in order to apprehend a truth which is equally mediated by Jesus Christ in history.

The Habilitation-thesis

But, of course, one cannot provide an adequate account of Joseph Ratzinger’s thought without mentioning his work on St. Bonaventure’s theology of history. As it was with his previous doctoral work on St. Augustine’s ecclesiology, the new topic was suggested to him by another interesting theologian, Gottlieb Söhngen. It turned out that it anyway suited very well with the spiritual and intellectual inclinations of the young priest, as he shared with countless others in his generation a deep dissatisfaction with the Neo-Thomism which dominated the Roman pontifical universities and the thought of a large number of bishops. As such, his interest in Augustine and Bonaventure fitted very well in a renewal trend within the Church which saw the rebirth of interest in the Fathers of the Church, while at the same time attempting to find new dogmatic and liturgical formulas suited to the modern world. This new form of Thomism which rose to the status of a quasi-official philosophical

⁵ Rowland, *A Guide*, 20.

⁶ Tracey Rowland summarizes this type of project in the following way: Faith works on the intellect to lead it to truth, love works on the will to lead it to goodness, hope works on the memory and fosters its thirst for beauty. Cf. Tracey Rowland, ‘Culture in the Thought of John Paul II and Benedict XVI’, (Houston: University of St. Thomas, The Archbishop J. Michael Miller Lecture, 2010) at 14.

system was seen as, besides being a Baroque distortion of the real Thomas Aquinas, as having made compromises with Kantianism, having ignored the mediation of Revelation in history and, lastly, having acquired an unpleasant, didactic, static form which dominated the process of priestly formation.⁷

Ratzinger then made some crucial discoveries, which were deemed as a 'subjectivization of the Revelation' and as 'a dangerous modernism' by his other supervisor Michael Schmaus and resulted in the initial rejection of his thesis. Inspecting the corrections, the young theologian observed that what bothered Schmaus the most were some vital conclusions reached in the first part of his work: that, for the 13th C. theologians, Revelation did not simply mean 'The Scripture'. It rather meant an act, 'Aktbegriff: 'Das Wort [Revelation] bezeichnet den Akt, in dem Gott sich zeigt, nicht das objektivierte Ergebnis dieses Aktes'⁸. Revelation always needs a receiving subject, and if there is no one, then the Revelation does not really take place. 'Das aber heißt dann, daß Offenbarung immer größer ist als das bloß Geschriebene'⁹. For Schmaus, it was too much to take. Luckily, Ratzinger came with the idea to simply cut the first part of the *Habilitation* and then resubmit the remaining text, which was then accepted as a valid thesis.

On a closer inspection, one can clearly observe the revolutionary potential in the first part of the thesis, which was finally published in 2009. Yet, perhaps, the term 'revolutionary' does not do full justice to the result, as this was, in fact, a presentation of a 13th C. theologian, himself being part of a trend which dates back to Augustine, yet a trend which was somehow increasingly laid aside since the Baroque scholasticism of Suarez and then later in by the fixed boundaries of Neo-Thomism. Essential, affirms Ratzinger about Bonaventure's concept, is that Revelation presupposes a relation between God and man, one in which the very being of man is transformed and lifted through grace. It is God's action in history, and not a sacred doctrine- as the Catholic Church eventually came to affirm, nor an existential-subjective reality- as the Protestant 'orthodoxy' states.

In his opening remarks, Ratzinger states that he began his research in search for answers to some fundamental questions: 'Schließen sich Heilsgeschichte und

⁷ Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith. The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) at 19.

⁸ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Aus meinem Leben. Erinnerungen (1927-1977)* (München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1998) at 84.

⁹ Ratzinger, *Aus meinem Leben*, 84.

Metaphysik, Mystik und Heilsgeschichte in einem strengen Sinne aus?'¹⁰ In other words, how can one reconcile the historical character of Revelation with the absolute transcendence of its character and origin? Or, a more practical question, how can a particular moment of Revelation be recognized as actual by another person in another time? Following Bonaventure, Ratzinger will formulate an answer which will mark his entire life: Revelation, the objective historical act of God's self-disclosure in Christ, becomes actual through the Church and Tradition. 'Die Schrift ist Gottes Offenbarung nur in der lebendigen Kirche Gottes. Das bedeutet: Die Auslegung der Schrift im Sinn der Offenbarungskündigung ist kein Geschäft des Historikers.'¹¹

St. Bonaventure carefully distinguishes between the uses of the term *revelatio*. Even though the same word can be used, he believes that not any illumination of the mind or rational discovery is a revelation, nor can a simple anticipation of the future (*predictio*) be called 'revelation' in the proper sense. This proper sense designates, for the Franciscan friar, a message from God in which the soul of man is radically moved and transformed and in which he feels personally, in his unique individuality, addressed. This is not to be confused with the messages which may come from the angels or saints, or the inspiration of the prophets through the Holy Spirit.¹² 'Revelation ist ein Aus-Sich-Heraustreten Gottes, eine Kundgabe seiner selbst an das, was nicht Gott ist. Eine derartiger Vorgang ist dem antiken Gottesbegriff, dem platonischen gleichermaßen, wie dem aristotelischen, ebenso fremd wie er den biblischen Gottesvorstellung selbstverständlich ist.'¹³

Revelation is thus a concept unique to the monotheistic religions, which would radically challenge the Greek concept of impersonal, transcendent God. Here there was something new, a description of a free act of a personal God in which He communicates Himself to his creation, to a 'what' and a 'who' which ontologically different from Him. 'Von 'Offenbarung' Gottes sprechen wir dann, wenn die göttliche (Selbst-) Erkenntnis kausal wirksam wird nach außen hin und zur Ursache wird für eine Erleuchtung im Menschen.'¹⁴

¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Offenbarungsverständnis und Geschichtstheologie Bonaventuras. Habilitationsschrift und Bonaventura-Studien* [JROG] (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2009) at 65.

¹¹ JROG, 66.

¹² JROG, 85-91.

¹³ JROG, 99.

¹⁴ JROG, 100.

Bonaventure makes a crucial three-fold distinction in the process of Revelation. First there is the *apparitio*, the mere outer manifestation of God in a visible or intelligible form. The most important example is His self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. At this point, man merely witnesses God in His human form and is not yet aware of what is beyond this form. The divine is not yet manifest, and man has only the mere possibility of knowing the God-Person. The necessary step is *revelatio*, the actual process through which the divine manifests itself. In this process, man may truly encounter the eternal Logos-Incarnated. The human hypostasis of Christ reveals his divine hypostasis. Third, the *manifestatio*, the form this revelation takes in the interior of man and in the oral and written tradition of the receiving community. The reproduction of the following passage is better suited to capture Ratzinger's fine nuances than any imprecise translation or summary:

Wenn *revelatio* das Kundwerden des Göttlichen ist, dann ist *manifestatio* dessen Kundsein. So fallen aber die eigentlich religiösen und theologischen Akzente dennoch nicht auf *manifestatio*, sondern auf *revelatio*. Denn wenn *revelatio* Kundgabe von Gott her und damit göttlichen Tun ist, so ist *manifestatio* Kundwerdung im Menschen, das menschliche Innesein der göttlichen Kunde.¹⁵

Thus ‚Revelation’, for Bonaventure, is the *Act* of God with all the dynamic image but also the radical ontological and temporal difference that this term suggests, a gap which separates it from the specific *human* form which this act inspires. This divine intervention in history is manifested through the specific concretization in each human subject and community, in the tidings each human being receives and transmits about this unique divine event. As Ratzinger underlines, it is utterly unknown to Bonaventure to call the Bible “Revelation”, because he clearly distinguished between God’s act of self-disclosure and the Scripture, a human product which transmits information about this first event.

Now all this intricate explanation suits well the apostolic age, when a handful of people could share the Gospel of the Risen Lord based on their first-hand experience. But then comes the big question: how does the uniqueness of the particular moment of Revelation manage to be actualized throughout the ages?

¹⁵ JROG, 102.

Bonaventure operates here some elegant substitutions of terms, while the principle remains unchanged. He says that, first of all, there must be a conceptualization of the way the Word continues to manifest itself in the Church, even though he has incarnated only once in time. On this issue, one can say that the Word manifests itself in two ways: *verbum incarnatum*, this unique manifestation in history, and *verbum inspiratum*, its invisible, permanent work in history, a ‘zusammenwirken von sichtbarer und unsichtbarer Sendung’.¹⁶

This being said, he comes back to the problem of the actualization of Revelation’s content and affirms that for the apostles things may have taken place in the following way: they witnessed the *apparitio* of Jesus Christ, not yet intuiting on his true nature. Naturally, their witnessing employed mainly the visual sense, and yet, in front of their very eyes, Jesus of Nazareth revealed in himself the eternal Logos. So, through *visio*, *revelatio* took place, the vital process through which God, in a free, gratuitous act, reveals himself to humankind. The final result would be *fides*, the inner conviction of the apostles, but, equally important, the faith to be confessed to the next generation and also lived in the Church, around the Body and Blood of Christ. So what happens today? The answer is that the first two terms of this system are replaced. Instead of *apparitio*, man will only find *doctrina*, the more or less fixed body of knowledge about this initial singular event in history, transmitted throughout the generations through Scripture and lived Tradition within the Church. Bonaventure then says that, of course, since there is no apparition, but only a set of words, this apprehension will take place through *auditus*, probably referring here to hearing but also to what might be generally seen as the faculty of understanding. Yet his next vital insight is that the other two terms will remain unchanged. After hearing the word, the subject experiences again revelation, *revelatio*, in a crucial and indispensable step towards apprehending the infinite opening that lies beyond these seemingly lifeless words. *Fides* would be built again and later passed on to the others. One cannot forget here the indispensable contribution of the *verbum inspiratum* and its ‘unsichtbarer Sendung’ in the awakening up of the sense of awe in the soul of man.¹⁷ A summary: ‘Revelatio steht in dem Zweiklang von *apparitio* (*doctrina*)-*revelatio*, in dem sich die offenbarende Zuwendung Gottes and die Menschenwelt vollzieht, als die Innenseite dieses

¹⁶ JROG, 109.

¹⁷ JROG, 109-111.

Vorgangs, ohne welche das äußere historische Ereignis bzw. dessen Verkündigung blind bliebe.¹⁸

Another crucial nuance belongs to the field of anthropology. Bonaventure does not imagine this process as taking place in an abstract, essentially good world, of Aristotelian inspiration, in which man, *the imago Dei*, naturally and effortlessly ascends to divine truths. He does not lose sight of the fallen nature of man and the world, of the struggles and sufferings of history, of the complexities of man's inner being, with its complex array of faculties and its character of battleground between good and evil. The force of sin is something to be reckoned with and the role of grace is essential. The Augustinian and the contemporary Franciscan theology and spirituality imprint their unmistakable mark on this thought. In this sense, revelation can also be understood as *Re-Velatio*, a removal of the veil of sin from the eyes and the soul of man. This is no Pelagian optimism about man's capacity for self-improvement, nor simply an intellectual assent of the *nous* of Greek philosophy towards the Truth, but a supernatural event in which this universal force of sin is conquered by God's act so that man can step with all his being, in the most radically-existential way, into a new mode of existence and relationship with God. The role of grace is indispensable, as man's will is not enough. Notwithstanding his own contribution, Ratzinger would adhere to this conception about the relation between nature and grace for the rest of his life, refusing to believe in an autonomy of human reason outside theological presuppositions or even of valid theological speculations without a deep spirituality.¹⁹

Interestingly, the concept of *manifestatio* acquires, in the eyes of Bonaventure, a potentially wide meaning, even wider than the field of dogmatics. From a fundamental-theological perspective, *manifestatio* can be seen as 'jedwede Spiegelung des göttlichen Urlichtes in der gesamten Schöpfungs- und Heilsordnung'²⁰. So, this is not only about the 'Heilsordnung', the succession of events and teachings which comprise the doctrine of the redemption of man, but it also connects with the *revelatio naturalis*, the difficult area of natural theology which has sparked so much controversy throughout the generations of theologians. *Manifestatio* is thus any reflection of the divine light in the realm of creation, whether in the mysterious

¹⁸ JROG, 118.

¹⁹ JROG, 111-114.

²⁰ JROG, 129.

unfolding of the history of salvation or in the even more mysterious (and deceitful) order of creation.²¹ Ratzinger, influenced from this source but no doubt from others, would affirm time and again the *rationality* of natural order, in virtue of its origin in the divine Logos. Only a few days ago, on the 22nd of September 2011, in a long-awaited speech in the German Bundestag, he affirmed again that a positivistic understanding of law and morality has divorced human understanding of being between the 'Is' and the 'Ought'. This comes after modern science and philosophy has refused to acknowledge any rational design in creation, or even the idea of creation, of something 'being-given', thus canceling the Christian synthesis between faith in the one Creator God and the Ancient Greek belief in the rational Logos behind natural order. This statement is no surprise, as Ratzinger has constantly affirmed the vital importance of keeping this synthesis in any reflection about faith, reason and politics. Important at this point is only to affirm the belief that nature does reflect, in a mysterious way, God's Revelation; the precise form which such thought would take in a systematic attempt is another issue²², but it would at least begin from the stable base of a few presuppositions.

The last important point which should be here highlighted as a root of Ratzinger's conviction is Bonaventure's strong Christocentrism. Ratzinger stresses that a characteristic of the Franciscan friar is 'die Vorstellung von Christus als der Zeiten Mitte, vom Wendepunkt, in dem sich die Zeiten begegnen.'²³ In fact, for him, the eternal Logos fulfills its true nature as Word only in the Incarnation.²⁴ At this point, Ratzinger distances himself slightly from the medieval master, as he asks the question of whether or not he was influenced by the subordinationist Neo-Platonic speculative model of the divine Logos, in which the Word may have a mediating role in the economy of creation and salvation, while being ontologically inferior to the ultimate source of Being. The answer remains uncertain; what is sure is that Bonaventure devises a three-fold model of explaining the instances of the Word: first,

²¹ JROG, 129.

²² And what might be called as a 'comeback' of the concept of Analogia Entis, ever since Erich Przywara's innovative attempts, and now through a new generation of theologians, is perhaps the best example that the famous "No" expressed by Karl Barth to any such attempts are intuited as not only uselessly exaggerated, but altogether damaging for a number of fields like fundamental theology, philosophy of religion, metaphysics and, most visibly, in moral theology.

²³ JROG, 171.

²⁴ JROG, 133.

verbum intelligibile, the Son begotten eternally from the Father; second, *verbum medium*, the Logos-Archetype of the world; third, *verbum sensibile*, the Word incarnated. Ratzinger observes that Bonaventure did seem to have a taste for big symbolic constructions (for example, the model described above is seen also as the way in which human thought and speech work), and with this model he is very different from Augustine and the other scholastics, who preferred a model of two instances: *verbum intelligibile* and *verbum sensibile*.²⁵

In any case, what is more important here is the insight that at the centre of all knowledge, indeed, at the centre of *everything* is Christ: 'die Begriff Christi als der Mitte, der schlechthinnige Mitte von allem'²⁶ In Him and through Him, through his *reductio* (or what *revelatio* really means), His self-emptying, a circle is completed and creation is restored. For Bonaventure, God and the world are not 'zwei gegenüberstehende Wirklichkeiten, sondern der Sinn der Welt erfüllt sich in einer gewaltigen Kreisbewegung, die von Gott ausgeht and zu ihm zurückgeht.'²⁷ Or, in Alexander of Hales superb definition of theology, to which Ratzinger also adheres: '*Theologia est scientia de substantia divina cognoscenda per Christum in opere reparationis*.'²⁸ Finally, on Bonaventure's exhaustive list of attributes, Christ is defined on seven levels: medium essentiae, medium naturae, medium distantiae, medium doctrinae, medium modestiae, medium iustitiae, medium concordiae. He is thus the archetype, the principle and mediation of essence, creation, knowledge and virtue.

As Emery de Gaal shows, this type of thought, even though qualified and refined through other sources, will be dominant in Ratzinger's work. So the central focus of the Pope is not ecclesiological, but Christological. 'Only the God man Jesus Christ, as the eternal Son of God, grants unity, comprehension of the whole, and the world's deepest meaning.'²⁹ It is enough to cast any sort of doubt about the validity

²⁵ JROG, 133; 136-138.

²⁶ JROG, 140. And what a difference from the more famous *de facto* abandonment of Christian dogma on the part of Friedrich Schleiermacher: 'Religion ist das Gefühl schlechthinniger Abhängigkeit!' In almost half a millennium, Christianity had traveled the road from a definition of religion which considered God the Person as the absolute Reality which sustains all Creation and human knowledge, to another one in which the principle is just a vague, subjective, uncertain feeling.

²⁷ JROG, 136.

²⁸ JROG, 142.

²⁹ Emery de Gaal, *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI. The Christocentric Shift* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) at 1.

of this belief or about any single word from the Creed of Nicaea and Constantinople, and the way for deviation is paved. All crises in Christianity come from the question about Christ's divinity and the Incarnation's relationship to the praxis of faith.³⁰

Vatican II

With such a rich array of spiritual and intellectual sources, Joseph Ratzinger was prepared to meet the challenge of being a theological consultant at the Second Vatican Council and, later on, to emerge as a leading voice in the theological circles. In the preliminary discussion concerning the document on God's Revelation, he played a major role both in advising his superior, Cardinal Frings from Cologne, and in the drafting of the document which was to be known later as 'Dei Verbum.' The more conservative cardinals had planned to define revelation in the spirit of the Council of Trent, by saying that the sources of it would be Scripture and Tradition. With Ratzinger's strong support, Frings argued that instead, these two sources should be called *fontes cognoscendi*, source of insight, while on the ontological level only one source would exist: Jesus Christ. These two German representatives, together with a significant number of other theologians and bishops helped draft a document which affirmed the Christocentric nature of Revelation, with tradition and scripture being the means through which the good tidings of this unique historical event are brought to light.³¹

According to Ratzinger, Jesus is not merely the courier of a corpus of teachings, but *is* message. He is the truth in person. Scripture, it should be strongly stressed, is not the Revelation, but only a witness to it. 'That which is attested transcends scripture. Even the most solemn acts of the teaching office and creeds are not full explications of the Word.'³²

³⁰ De Gaal, *The Christocentric Shift*, 3.

³¹ De Gaal, *The Christocentric Shift*, 91.

³² De Gaal, *The Christocentric Shift*, 92.

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