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REVELATION : DIALOGUE AND CHRISTOCENTRISM

A NOTION OF DIVINE REVELATION IN JOSEPH RATZINGER

Dissertação de Mestrado em Teologia

Orientador: Prof. Dr. César Andrade Alves

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Dissertação apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Teologia da Faculdade Jesuíta de Filosofia e Teologia, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre em Teologia.

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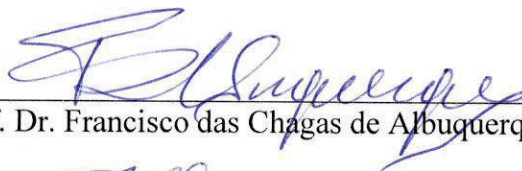
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Resumo: A revelação divina ocupa um lugar central na teologia cristã porque diz respeito à autorrevelação de Deus e à resposta da fé da humanidade. Esta dissertação examina a teologia da revelação divina em Joseph Ratzinger, posteriormente Papa Bento XVI, com atenção especial à sua natureza dialógica e ao cumprimento cristológico. Investiga como Ratzinger entende a revelação não como a comunicação de doutrinas abstratas, mas como o dom pessoal de Deus na história, culminando em Jesus Cristo. Empregando uma metodologia teológico-histórica, o estudo analisa os principais escritos de Ratzinger juntamente com literatura acadêmica relevante para examinar o desenvolvimento, a coerência e a importância de sua teologia da revelação. A pesquisa demonstra que a compreensão de Ratzinger está profundamente enraizada nas Escrituras, nos Padres da Igreja, Agostinho, Boaventura e na renovação teológica do Concílio Vaticano II, especialmente *Dei Verbum*. Argumenta que a revelação é fundamentalmente dialógica; envolvendo tanto a iniciativa de Deus quanto a resposta humana de fé, enquanto as Escrituras, a Tradição e a Igreja formam dimensões inseparáveis da contínua autocomunicação de Deus. O estudo mostra ainda que Jesus Cristo é a plenitude e a expressão definitiva da revelação, fornecendo a chave para entender a unidade da visão teológica de Ratzinger. Ao apresentar a revelação como um encontro vivo entre Deus e a humanidade, em vez de apenas um conjunto de doutrinas, Ratzinger oferece um arcabouço teológico coerente que permanece relevante para a teologia fundamental contemporânea. Este estudo conclui que sua teologia da revelação oferece uma resposta significativa aos desafios teológicos modernos ao enfatizar a comunhão com o Deus Trino por meio de Cristo dentro da vida da Igreja.

Palavras-chave: Revelação Divina. Joseph Ratzinger. Diálogo. Jesus Cristo. Teologia Fundamental.

Abstract: Divine revelation occupies a central place in Christian theology because it concerns God's self-disclosure and humanity's response of faith. This dissertation examines the theology of divine revelation in Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, with particular attention to its dialogical nature and Christological fulfillment. It investigates how Ratzinger understands revelation not as the communication of abstract doctrines but as God's personal self-gift in history, culminating in Jesus Christ. Employing a theological-historical methodology, the study analyzes Ratzinger's principal writings together with relevant scholarly literature to examine the development, coherence, and significance of his theology of revelation. The research demonstrates that Ratzinger's understanding is deeply rooted in Scripture, the Church Fathers, Augustine, Bonaventure, and the theological renewal of the Second Vatican Council, especially *Dei Verbum*. It argues that revelation is fundamentally dialogical; involving both God's initiative and the human response of faith, while Scripture, Tradition, and the Church form inseparable dimensions of God's ongoing self-communication. The study further shows that Jesus Christ is the fullness and definitive expression of revelation, providing the key to understanding the unity of Ratzinger's theological vision. By presenting revelation as a living encounter between God and humanity rather than merely a body of doctrines, Ratzinger offers a coherent theological framework that remains relevant for contemporary fundamental theology. This study concludes that his theology of revelation provides a meaningful response to modern theological challenges by emphasizing communion with the Triune God through Christ within the life of the Church.

Keywords: Divine Revelation. Joseph Ratzinger. Dialogue. Jesus Christ. Fundamental Theology.

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INTRODUCTION

Why does divine revelation still matter? Because the question of divine revelation occupies a central place in Christian theology, because it concerns the very possibility of a relationship between God and humanity. Throughout the history of the Church, theologians have sought to understand how God makes Himself known and how this self-disclosure is received, interpreted, and lived within the community of faith. In the twentieth century, this question acquired renewed significance as theology confronted the challenges of modernity, historical consciousness, secularization, and the need for a deeper engagement with the sources of the Christian tradition. Within this context, the theology of Joseph Ratzinger emerges as one of the most influential and comprehensive attempts to articulate the meaning of revelation for the contemporary Church.

This study examines the theology of revelation in Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, with particular attention to its dialogical and Christocentric dimensions. For Ratzinger, revelation cannot be reduced to the transmission of doctrinal propositions or religious information. Rather, it is the living event of God's self-disclosure, a personal encounter in which God freely communicates Himself to humanity and invites human beings into communion with Him. Revelation is therefore not merely something that God says; it is fundamentally what God does in history through His saving presence, culminating in the person of Jesus Christ. Such a perspective places revelation at the center of theological reflection and provides a key for understanding the unity of Ratzinger's theological vision.

The present research belongs primarily to the field of fundamental theology, while also engaging questions of biblical theology, ecclesiology, and Christology. Its importance lies in the fact that contemporary theological discussions continue to grapple with the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, the role of the Church in transmitting revelation, and the place of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic and rapidly changing world. Ratzinger's reflections offer valuable insights into these questions by presenting revelation as a dynamic dialogue between God and humanity that remains rooted in the life of the Church while addressing the concerns of modern culture. At a time when faith is often understood either as a private sentiment or as adherence to abstract doctrines, Ratzinger proposes a vision in which revelation is understood as a living encounter with the God who speaks and acts in history.

Against this background, the present study asks: How does Joseph Ratzinger understand divine revelation as a dialogical event fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and what theological significance does this understanding hold for the life and mission of the Church?

The theology of revelation in Joseph Ratzinger has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention. Researchers have highlighted the influence of Augustine, Bonaventure, the Church Fathers, and the theological renewal movement known as *ressourcement* on the development of his thought. Particular attention has been given to his participation in the Second Vatican Council and his contribution to the drafting and interpretation of *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Scholars generally agree that revelation serves as one of the foundational themes unifying Ratzinger's theological work and that his understanding of revelation extends beyond a purely propositional model toward a more personal and historical conception centered on God's self-communication.

At the same time, various aspects of his theology continue to invite further investigation. While considerable attention has been devoted to his ecclesiology, Christology, and interpretation of Vatican II, fewer studies have explored in a systematic manner the intrinsic relationship between the dialogical structure of revelation and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Likewise, the connections between Ratzinger's early intellectual formation, his understanding of Scripture and Tradition, and his mature Christological vision are often treated separately rather than as dimensions of a coherent theological synthesis. These areas reveal the need for a more integrated examination of revelation as the organizing principle of his theology.

The present work seeks to contribute to this discussion by examining revelation as the central thread running through Ratzinger's theological vision. It argues that his understanding of revelation can only be fully appreciated when its historical foundations, dialogical character, and Christological fulfillment are considered together. Such an approach allows for a deeper appreciation of the coherence of his thought and its continuing relevance for contemporary theology.

The principal objective of this study is to analyze Joseph Ratzinger's theology of revelation, highlighting its dialogical nature and its culmination in the person of Jesus Christ. More specifically, the research aims to examine the formative influences that shaped his understanding of revelation, to explore the relationship between revelation, Scripture, Tradition, and the Church, and to demonstrate how Christ stands at the center and fulfillment of God's self-disclosure in history.

This research employs a theological and historical method based primarily on the analysis of Ratzinger's major writings, together with relevant scholarly studies that illuminate the development and significance of his thought. The scope of the study is limited to selected aspects of Ratzinger's theology of revelation, particularly those related to its historical formation, dialogical structure, and Christological fulfillment.

The work is organized into three chapters. The first chapter examines the formative years of Joseph Ratzinger, exploring the historical, intellectual, and ecclesial influences that shaped his theological understanding of revelation. Special attention is given to his engagement with Augustine and Bonaventure, as well as to his participation in the Second Vatican Council. The second chapter analyzes the dialogical nature of revelation in Ratzinger's thought, focusing on revelation as God's personal self-disclosure and on the relationship between Scripture, Tradition, and the life of the Church. The third chapter investigates the Christocentric dimension of revelation, demonstrating how Jesus Christ constitutes the fullness and definitive expression of God's self-communication to humanity. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the principal findings of the study and reflects on the enduring significance of Ratzinger's theology of revelation for contemporary theological reflection and ecclesial life.

CHAPTER 1: THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF JOSEPH RATZINGER: LIFE, THOUGHT, AND THE NOTION OF REVELATION

This chapter traces the early stages of Joseph Ratzinger's/Benedict XVI's¹ life and intellectual formation to situate the emergence of his theology of revelation within the concrete historical, cultural, and ecclesial conditions that shaped it. Any systematic engagement with Ratzinger's theological project must begin from the recognition that his thought did not arise from abstract doctrinal construction but was forged within lived ecclesial experience, rigorous academic formation, and the profound political and cultural upheavals of twentieth-century Europe. These formative contexts constitute not merely biographical background but essential coordinates for understanding the internal coherence, methodological commitments, and doctrinal emphases of his theology.

The chapter examines how Ratzinger's early immersion in the liturgical life of the Church, his sustained engagement with classical and patristic sources, and his firsthand encounter with totalitarianism contributed to the development of a theological approach centered on revelation. Far from conceiving revelation as a static deposit of propositional truths, Ratzinger consistently articulated it as a personal and dialogical event: God's self-disclosure in history, culminating in Jesus Christ, and received and transmitted through Sacred Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church. This understanding of revelation becomes a structural principle of his systematic theology, shaping his approach to doctrine, ecclesiology, and theological method.

The chapter begins by considering the theological significance of Ratzinger's early life in rural Bavaria, where the rhythms of the liturgical year and the stability of Catholic family life stood in marked contrast to the surrounding political instability. It then explores how his academic formation, particularly his engagement with Augustine and Bonaventure, deepened his conviction that revelation is not merely monological divine communication, but a reality received within the Church's memory, worship, and communal life. These influences fostered a retrieval of the patristic and medieval tradition that would later characterize his contribution to twentieth-century *ressourcement*² theology.

¹ The names "*Ratzinger*" and "*Benedict XVI*" will be used interchangeably throughout this work, depending on context. Generally, Ratzinger refers to writings and ideas developed prior to his election as pope, while Benedict XVI is used for works published during or after his papacy.

² *Ressourcement* theology designates a mid-twentieth-century Catholic theological movement, largely French in origin, that sought the renewal of theology and ecclesial life through a return to the primary sources of the Christian tradition—especially Sacred Scripture, the Church Fathers, and the liturgy—rather than reliance on later neo-

As the chapter unfolds, particular attention is given to Ratzinger's formative role at the Second Vatican Council, especially his service as a *peritus* and his involvement in the drafting of *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. His conciliar work represents a decisive moment in the maturation of his theological vision, wherein his commitment to doctrinal continuity was brought into critical dialogue with the Church's need for authentic renewal. The tensions navigated during this period would leave a lasting imprint on his understanding of the relationship between Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium.

Ultimately, this chapter seeks to show how Joseph Ratzinger's early life and intellectual formation laid the foundations for a Christocentric and dialogical theology of revelation—one that understands revelation as God's self-gift in Christ, received and lived within the Church. This theological vision is at once intellectually rigorous and pastorally oriented, deeply rooted in the Church's Tradition while remaining attentively responsive to the questions and challenges of the modern world.

1.1 Early Life in Bavaria: Faith Amidst Crises³

Joseph Aloysius Ratzinger was born at 4:15 a.m. on Holy Saturday, April 16, 1927, in the small Bavarian village of Marktl am Inn, into a modest, lower-middle-class Catholic family. Baptized later that same day with the newly blessed Easter water, making him the first person baptized that year in the new Easter liturgical order. Ratzinger would later reflect on the timing of his birth as deeply symbolic—an image of humanity's longing for resurrection, born as he

scholastic manuals. Marked by a historically conscious method, it emphasized reading doctrinal and theological figures (including St. Thomas Aquinas) within their original contexts and engaging modernity through critical dialogue rather than accommodation or rejection. Associated with theologians such as Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and Marie-Dominique Chenu, *ressourcement* decisively influenced the theology of the Second Vatican Council, particularly documents such as *Dei Verbum* and *Lumen Gentium*. See also Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. See also FÉDOU, Michel. *The Fathers of the Church in Christian Theology*, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019, chaps. 2–3.

³ Much of the background here is drawn from *Milestones: Memoirs 1927–1977*, Joseph Ratzinger's reflective account of his early life. More than a typical autobiography, it offers personal insights into the spiritual, cultural, and historical forces that shaped his vocation. Ratzinger recounts his Catholic upbringing during the rise of Nazism, his forced involvement in the Hitler Youth, his desertion from the army, and his path to the priesthood. The memoir also highlights his early theological work and key role at Vatican II, shedding light on the foundations of his understanding of divine revelation. See RATZINGER, Joseph, *Milestones: 1927–1977*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998. Aside from this book, his *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium* is an extended interview with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, conducted by German journalist Peter Seewald. In the book's early chapters, Ratzinger offers candid reflections on his family, childhood, and early life in Bavaria. He speaks openly about the cultural and political challenges of his youth, the roots of his faith, and the influences that shaped his vocation—providing rare personal context to the thought of one of the most significant theologians of the 20th century. See Joseph Ratzinger and Peter Seewald, *Salt of the Earth: Christianity and the Catholic Church at the End of the Millennium*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997.

put it, “not-quite of Easter”⁴, between the sorrow of Good Friday and the joy of Easter Sunday. According to biographer John Allen Jr., “it is difficult not to read some kind of sacred meaning into the scene”⁵, and Ratzinger himself saw it as a reflection of the human condition: always living in that tension between suffering and hope, “we are not yet standing in the full light but walking toward it full of trust”⁶. And “perhaps it was fate the Ratzinger was born on Holy Saturday, and his parents were named Joseph and Mary. Like another child of another Joseph and Mary, Ratzinger grew up to become a sign of contradiction, a scandal to some and a sort of savior to others”⁷.

Amid the gathering political and ideological darkness of early twentieth-century Germany, the young Joseph Ratzinger found both spiritual refuge and intellectual awakening in the Catholic liturgy. His earliest memories were shaped by the sensory and symbolic world of worship like the scent of incense, the cadence of chant, and the steady rhythm of feasts and fasts, so that the liturgy was experienced not as a mere obligation but as an encounter with the sacred, a living participation in the drama of salvation history that formed not only his beliefs but also his imagination. This liturgical formation extended beyond the walls of the church into the fabric of family life, where faith was practiced with quiet fidelity and deep reverence. A central symbol of this domestic piety was the *Schott*⁸ missal given to his parents as a wedding gift in 1920; as Ratzinger later recalled, “A progressive pastor had given my parents their *Schott* as a gift on their wedding day in 1920, and so this was my family’s prayerbook from the beginning. Our parents helped us from early on to understand the liturgy”⁹. This early immersion soon became increasingly personal as he was gradually initiated into the liturgy through his own missals: “I was then given a *Schott* for children, in which the liturgy’s basic texts themselves were printed. Then I got a *Schott* for Sundays, which contained the complete

⁴ ALLEN, John L., Jr. *Cardinal Ratzinger: The Vatican's Enforcer of the Faith*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000, p. 2.

⁵ ALLEN, *Cardinal Ratzinger*, 2000, p. 2.

⁶ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 8.

⁷ ALLEN, *Cardinal Ratzinger*, 2000, p. 2.

⁸ In Germany, the name *Schott* (or *Der Schott*) became synonymous with a widely used Catholic lay missal. This prayer book presented the texts of the Latin Mass alongside a German translation and explanatory notes, enabling the laity to follow and participate more actively in the celebration of the Eucharist even prior to the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. As Ratzinger explains, toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Benedictine monk Anselm Schott of Beuron Abbey translated the Church’s missal into German. Various editions were produced: some entirely in German, others providing portions of the texts in both Latin and German, and still others presenting the complete Latin text alongside a parallel German translation. For Ratzinger, these Missals were not merely instructional aids but formative instruments that introduced him, from an early age to the structure, rhythm, and theological richness of the liturgy. See, RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 19.

⁹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p.19.

liturgy for Sundays and feast days”¹⁰. More than devotional aids, these books functioned as formative instruments in his spiritual and intellectual development, this is an opening for him a theological world in which prayer, doctrine and mystery are inseparably intertwined. From an early age, Ratzinger absorbed the structure and rhythm of the Church’s liturgical life not through formal catechesis but through habitual participation and attentive observation; as he later reflected, “the Church year gave time its rhythm, and I experienced that with great gratitude and joy already as a child”¹¹. The cycle of feasts and fasts decisively shaped the atmosphere of his childhood: Advent, marked by early morning Masses celebrated by candlelight amid darkness, cultivated a sense of joyful expectation, while domestic practices such as preparing the family nativity—gathering moss and pine branches with his father—deepened this liturgical consciousness. The austerity of Lent and the dramatic emergence of light at the Easter Vigil were not merely symbolic observances but deeply theological experiences that left a lasting impression upon him. Through these encounters, Ratzinger came to recognize liturgy as a reality received rather than constructed:

It was becoming more and more clear to me that here I was encountering a reality that no one had simply thought up, a reality that no official authority or great individual had created; this mysterious fabric of texts and actions had grown from the faith of the Church over the centuries¹².

For this reason, he would later affirm that “the inexhaustible reality of the Catholic liturgy has accompanied me through all phases of life, and so I shall have to speak of it time and again”¹³. Rooted in the sacramental worldview of Bavarian Catholicism, these formative experiences cultivated a faith that was at once affective and reflective—instinctive yet intellectually grounded—internalized through the organic integration of family, community, and tradition, and providing a durable foundation for the spiritual and theological resilience that would characterize Ratzinger’s engagement with the ideological and ecclesial challenges of the twentieth century.¹⁴

As previously noted, Ratzinger repeatedly returns to these early liturgical experiences, not as nostalgic reminiscences but as the wellspring of his theological vision. The persistent evocation of candlelit Advent Masses, family devotions, and the sensory richness of Holy Week

¹⁰ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p.19.

¹¹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p.18.

¹² RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 20.

¹³ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 20.

¹⁴ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 18-20. See also RATZINGER, Joseph. *O sal da terra: O cristianismo e a Igreja Católica no limiar do terceiro milênio*. Tradução de Inês M. de Andrade. Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1997, p. 41-42.

underscores the formative influence these moments had on his understanding of the Church and its worship. Reflecting on this period, he acknowledged the partial and intuitive nature of a child's comprehension:

Not everything was logical. Naturally, the child I then was did not grasp every aspect of this, but I started down the road of the liturgy, and this became a continuous process of growth into a grand reality transcending all particular individuals and generations, a reality that became an occasion for me of ever-new amazement and discovery¹⁵.

Notably, his memoirs say little about the chapters of his life defined by academic achievement and church leadership. His theological work, his role in the Second Vatican Council, and his time leading the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are largely left unexamined. Instead, his narrative repeatedly returns to the small Bavarian towns of Marktl, Tittmoning, Aschau, and Traunstein, suggesting that the core convictions of his thought were already forged within the liturgical life of his youth. For Ratzinger, theology was never just an academic exercise. It grew out of an encounter with God's beauty and mystery as experienced in the Church's worship. His theological vision—rooted in tradition, centered on Christ, and committed to holding faith and reason together—took shape not in theory but in lived experience. Through the rhythms of the liturgical year, shaped by family and parish life, he came to know the enduring truths that would guide his work.¹⁶

These early encounters fostered an enduring interest in the liturgy, which would develop into a lifelong theological preoccupation. In his later writings, particularly in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*¹⁷, Ratzinger builds upon these formative experiences to offer a profound and richly detailed exploration of the Church's worship. This work, arguably his most important on the subject, presents the liturgy as the very center of Christian life, emphasizing its hidden spiritual wealth and transcendent grandeur. In the foreword, Ratzinger explicitly acknowledges his debt to Romano Guardini, noting that Guardini's *The Spirit of the Liturgy*¹⁸ was the book that "opened the door to the understanding of the liturgy"¹⁹ for him personally, which is why he deliberately retained Guardini's title for his own work. Throughout the book, Ratzinger takes up a range of theological and pastoral questions, many of them prompted by confusion surrounding the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. He reflects on concrete matters such as the direction of prayer during the Eucharistic sacrifice, the placement of the

¹⁵ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 20.

¹⁶ See RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 18-20.

¹⁷ RATZINGER, Joseph. *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. Translated by John Sawar. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000.

¹⁸ GUARDINI, Romano. *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. Translated by Ada Lane. London: Sheed & Ward, 1930.

¹⁹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 16.

tabernacle, and the meaning of kneeling. At the same time, he probes deeper questions about what Christian worship truly is: its roots in Jewish prayer, the newness introduced by Christ, the meaning of sacred times and places, and the way the liturgy draws together history, the cosmos, and the everyday experience of time and space. He also gives careful attention to art and music, to the participation of the faithful, and to the language of gesture, posture, and vesture. Taken together, these reflections show that Ratzinger's engagement with the liturgy was neither accidental nor merely aesthetic, but a sustained theological inquiry shaped by a lifelong, lived immersion in worship that began in childhood.

1.1.1 Formed in the Shadow of Tyranny

Joseph Ratzinger's formative years unfolded under the oppressive shadow of Nazi totalitarianism. This regime sought not only political control but the ideological subjugation of every sphere of life, including faith, family, and education. Ratzinger witnessed firsthand how National Socialism threatened the moral and spiritual foundations of Christian civilization. His father, Joseph Ratzinger Sr., a principled police officer and early critic of Hitler, recognized Nazism not merely as a political danger but as a spiritual deception. "A victory of Hitler would not be a victory for Germany," he warned, "but rather a victory of the Antichrist."²⁰ This conviction was not abstract; it shaped the Ratzinger family's daily resistance to the regime. Refusing to join Nazi organizations, remaining faithful to the Church, and quietly supporting persecuted clergy, the family embodied a form of moral resistance that, while subtle, was deeply courageous. Young Joseph, though still a boy, absorbed this tension between faith and tyranny. He observed the dismantling of parochial schools, the monitoring of clergy, and the replacement of Christian formation with the Hitler Youth's ideological indoctrination. Although technically enrolled, as required by law, his participation was minimal and waived due to his seminary studies. Still, these experiences left a lasting impression, awakening in him a keen awareness of how political power, when severed from truth, becomes a destructive force.²¹

These early encounters with totalitarianism profoundly shaped Ratzinger's theological and moral vision. He came to recognize that regimes such as Nazism did not merely persecute the Church but sought to supplant it, constructing pseudo-religions with their own symbols, rituals, and narratives of redemption.²² Yet this formation took place amid a striking interior

²⁰ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 27.

²¹ See RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 27-29.

²² In 1937, Pope Pius XI issued a decisive condemnation of National Socialism in the encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* ("With Burning Anxiety"), a document made all the more striking by its composition in German rather than the customary Latin. Because of its explosive content, the encyclical had to be smuggled into Germany, secretly

vitality. Despite the grim historical circumstances, Ratzinger later recalled experiencing a particularly fruitful year at home and at the gymnasium in Traunstein, where the Greek and Latin classics filled him with enthusiasm, mathematics captured his interest, and literature opened before him as a new intellectual horizon. During this period, he began writing with great zeal and returned with renewed joy to the liturgical texts, translating them from the original languages in what he described as a more vital and living way. He would remember these years as “a time of interior exaltation, full of hope for the great things that were gradually opening up to me in the boundless realm of the spirit”²³. From the tension between external oppression and inner awakening emerged a lifelong resistance to any ideology—secular or religious—that relativizes truth or subordinates human dignity to political ends. The theological vision forged in these years was marked by an unwavering conviction that truth and freedom are inseparable, that faith has an essential public dimension, and that the gravest threat to the Church lies not in overt violence but in the subtle erosion of truth through propaganda, relativism, and the seduction of illusory freedoms.

1.1.2 The Early Theological Awakening of Joseph Ratzinger

Joseph Ratzinger began his seminary formation in 1939, the same year Nazi Germany invaded Poland and unleashed the devastation of World War II. At just twelve years old, he entered the minor seminary in Traunstein, drawn by a sincere desire to serve God—an aspiration rooted in his family’s devout Catholic faith and his own early liturgical formation. The quiet rhythms of seminary life, however, were soon disrupted by the encroaching demands of the Nazi regime. The war reached into every corner of German society, including the Church, intertwining spiritual formation with political indoctrination. “So it was, Ratzinger later

printed, and distributed under cover of night; between March 13 and the early hours of March 14, copies were delivered by hand to priests, who read it aloud during Masses on Passion Sunday. By that same evening, German police had confiscated nearly every copy. Yet the message had already been proclaimed: *Mit Brennender Sorge* rejected Nazi ideology at its core, denouncing the regime’s attempt to revive paganism and to elevate the state to divine status, and calling on Germany’s bishops to defend faith in God against political idolatry. As Pius XI warned, “None but superficial minds could stumble into concepts of a national God or a national religion.” The young Joseph Ratzinger, then living in Germany, almost certainly witnessed this dramatic episode, which stands as a powerful historical refutation of claims that the Catholic Church was complicit with Nazism. See. PIUS XI, *Mit Brennender Sorge* (“With Burning Anxiety”), encyclical on the Church and the German Reich, addressed to the archbishops and bishops of Germany and other ordinaries in peace and communion with the Apostolic See, March 14, 1937, available in, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_14031937_mit-brennender-sorge.html. Accessed January 29, 2026. See also CLARK, John. *The Amazing Story of the Most Daring Papal Encyclical Ever Delivered*, National Catholic Register, blog post, May 15, 2017, available in, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/the-amazing-story-of-the-most-daring-papal-encyclical-ever-delivered>. Accessed January 29, 2026. See also Catholic Textbook Project, “*The Pope’s Anti-Nazi Encyclical: March 14, 1937*,” March 12, 2021, available in, <https://www.catholictextbookproject.com/post/the-pope-s-anti-nazi-encyclical-march-14-1937>. Accessed January 29, 2026.

²³ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 29.

recalled, “that the small group of seminarians from my class (those born in 1926 and 1927) were now drafted, and we had to go to the Flak in Munich”²⁴. By 1943, Ratzinger, then only sixteen, was conscripted into the *Luftwaffenhelfer* (air force assistants), serving in an anti-aircraft unit initially stationed at *Ludwigsfeld*, north of Munich, where they were assigned to protect a branch of Bavarian Motor Works (BMW) producing aircraft engines.²⁵ When air attacks there subsided, the unit was transferred to *Gilching*, a posting Ratzinger remembered with particular fondness. Assigned to telephone communications, he benefited from a noncommissioned officer who “defended the autonomy of our group with tooth and nail,” exempting them from military drills and shielding their small circle from intrusion. Outside his hours of service, Ratzinger recalled, he could “do whatever I wanted and cultivate my interests without any hindrance”²⁶ and he noted with gratitude the presence of an active Catholic community that organized religious instruction and occasional church visits.

On September 10, 1944, having reached official military age, Ratzinger was released from the Flak—where he had served essentially as a student—only to find that “the draft notice of the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* already lay on the table” upon his return home.²⁷ Assigned to labor service under an officer who was openly critical of Hitler and the war, Ratzinger experienced a measure of humane understanding. The officer sought to make each assignment as bearable as possible. After basic training in mid-January, Ratzinger was repeatedly relocated around Traunstein, though illness meant that he was “largely exempt from military duty”²⁸. Hitler’s death briefly strengthened hopes that the war would soon end, but the slow advance of American forces postponed the moment of liberation.²⁹ Toward the end of April or the beginning of May 1945, Ratzinger decided to return home, fully aware that soldiers had orders to shoot deserters on sight. Because his arm was in a sling, however, he was waved through with the words, “Comrade, you are wounded. Move on!”—and thus, as he later wrote, “I came home unhurt”³⁰.

Shortly thereafter, American troops arrived in the village. Identified as a soldier, Ratzinger was required to put his uniform back on, raise his hands, and join the growing line of prisoners of war assembled in a meadow. Expecting a long captivity, his parents hastily prepared supplies, while Ratzinger himself slipped a large empty notebook and a pencil into his pocket—

²⁴ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 30.

²⁵ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 30-31.

²⁶ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 31-32.

²⁷ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 32.

²⁸ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 35.

²⁹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 35-36.

³⁰ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 36.

an apparently impractical choice that became, he later reflected, a wonderful companion, allowing him to record thoughts and reflections of all kinds day by day.³¹ In early June, releases gradually began, each departure a sign of hope. Finally, on June 19, 1945, after a series of inspections and interrogations, Ratzinger received the certificate of release that made “the end of the war a reality for me, too”³². He arrived home before sunset, a moment he described with profound emotion: “The heavenly Jerusalem itself could not have appeared more beautiful to me at the moment”³³. Hearing prayer and singing from the church—it was the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus—he refrained from entering so as not to cause a disturbance and instead hurried home. Reflecting on those days, Ratzinger noted soberly that “many had fallen in the war,” and that those who returned were “all the more grateful for the gift of life and for the hope that again rose high above all destruction”³⁴.

It was in this shattered postwar landscape that Joseph Ratzinger resumed his path toward priesthood. Returning to the seminary in Freising in late 1945, he found buildings in disrepair, books scarce, and resources minimal. Yet, despite the physical ruin, the intellectual and spiritual hunger of the seminarians was profound. As Ratzinger later recalled:

Together with this came a hunger for knowledge that had grown in the years of famine, in the years when we had been delivered up to the Moloch of power, so far from the realm of the spirit. Books were, I repeat, a rarity in a Germany that was destroyed and cut off from the rest of the world. Nevertheless, despite the bomb damage that had taken place here too, a rather good reference library had been preserved that could, so to speak, take the edge off our hunger³⁵.

For Ratzinger, study had taken on existential significance; theology was no longer a purely academic exercise but a means of reconstructing meaning in a world devastated by the collapse of secular ideologies. Immersed in Scripture, the Church Fathers, and classical philosophy, he came to believe that authentic theology must unite faith and reason while resisting every attempt to reduce truth to ideology—whether imposed by political regimes or arising within the Church itself. Books became his trusted companions, often borrowed or shared, and wise mentors helped him shape a theological vision rooted not in utopian ideals, but in the enduring wisdom of Christian tradition. These were not merely years of preparation, but a crucible in which his theological identity was forged. In the aftermath of modernity’s ruins, Ratzinger encountered the Church not simply as a guardian of doctrine but as a living

³¹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 37.

³² RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 38-39.

³³ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 39.

³⁴ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 40.

³⁵ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 42.

witness to transcendent truth—capable of surviving even history’s darkest hours. As he later reflected, “No one doubted that the Church was the locus of all our hopes. Despite many human failings, the Church was the alternative to the destructive ideology of the brown rulers; in the inferno that had swallowed up the powerful, she had stood firm with a force coming to her from eternity”³⁶.

1.2 Forming a Theological Mind: Influences on the Young Ratzinger

After the disruption of World War II, Joseph Ratzinger resumed his philosophical and theological education with a determination that would shape the rest of his intellectual and spiritual life. In 1945, following the end of the war and his release from brief American captivity, Ratzinger completed his studies at the minor seminary. On September 1, 1947, he entered the Herzogliches Georgianum, the theological faculty affiliated with the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. This was not a typical diocesan seminary; instead, it catered to seminarians who demonstrated academic promise and aimed to pursue careers in theology and higher education. The post-war setting deeply influenced this stage of Ratzinger’s formation. Due to wartime destruction in Munich, the institute had been temporarily relocated to Fürstenried, an old royal hunting lodge just outside the city that the Archdiocese of Munich had acquired for retreats. While the facilities were cramped and the library resources limited, Ratzinger would later speak of Fürstenried with affection. He described it as the place where “all his early life decisions took shape”³⁷. Including his commitment to the priesthood and academic theology.

When Ratzinger began his theological studies, the academic world he entered was still bearing the scars—both visible and intellectual—left by the Nazi regime. In 1938 the Nazis had closed the Georgianum after Cardinal Faulhaber refused to appoint a professor aligned with National Socialism. After the war, the faculty had to be pieced together again, drawing largely on professors who had been forced out of universities in Germany’s eastern regions, territories that became part of Poland after the borders were redrawn along the Oder–Neisse line. These displaced scholars carried with them not only intellectual discipline and a cautious theological outlook, but also the lived experience of exile and loss. Their presence spoke quietly but powerfully to Ratzinger’s own attentiveness to history, tradition, and the fragile ties between place, memory, and identity.

³⁶ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 42.

³⁷ ALLEN, *Cardinal Ratzinger*, 2000, p. 34.

1.2.1 Liturgy

During his years of theological study in postwar Munich, Joseph Ratzinger underwent not only an intellectual maturation but also a profound spiritual awakening that would decisively shape his theological vision. While his love for the sacred liturgy had deep roots in the rich Catholic culture of his Bavarian childhood—symbolized by the treasured missal given to his parents at their wedding—his academic formation gradually deepened this affection into a sustained theological commitment.

In Munich, Ratzinger studied under several influential scholars who broadened his theological horizons and helped him integrate diverse disciplines into a unified vision. As Christopher S. Collins observes in *The Word Made Love*, Ratzinger came under the influence of figures such as Michael Schmaus, Gottlieb Söhngen, Josef Pascher, and Klaus Mörsdorf, each of whom directed him toward deeper sources within their respective fields.³⁸ Ratzinger later recalled, “From Münster came Michael Schmaus, a priest of the Archdiocese of Munich, who had become renowned throughout Germany on account of his novel textbook of dogmatic theology.” Schmaus, he noted, “had parted ways with neo-Scholastic schemas and composed a living presentation of Catholic doctrine in the spirit of the Liturgical Movement and the recent return to Scripture and the Fathers”³⁹. Schmaus also brought with him two other important scholars: Josef Pascher, a pastoral theologian, and Klaus Mörsdorf, a young professor of canon law. Pascher, according to Ratzinger, had undertaken an “interesting intellectual pilgrimage,” moving from mathematics and Oriental languages through pedagogy, comparative religion, and the study of the mysticism of Philo of Alexandria, before finally arriving—by way of pastoral theology—at the systematic study of the liturgy.⁴⁰

1.2.1.1 Encounter with the Liturgical Movement and Eucharistic Formation

Pascher’s influence on Ratzinger was not only academic but deeply personal and spiritual. Ratzinger recalls that Pascher “often struck our hearts directly in his lively spiritual conferences, in which he spoke to us very personally and without any of the usual clichés, out of his own rich spiritual experience”⁴¹. At the center of Pascher’s pedagogical vision stood the daily celebration of the Eucharist, which he regarded as the foundation of theological formation.

³⁸ COLLINS, Christopher S. *The Word Made Love: The Dialogical Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013, p. 8-9.

³⁹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 49–50.

⁴⁰ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 50.

⁴¹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 56-57.

This emphasis proved decisive for Ratzinger, particularly in light of his earlier ambivalence toward the Liturgical Movement. He candidly admits that, until this point, he had harbored certain reservations, sensing in many of the movement's representatives "a one-sided rationalism and historicism that concentrated too much on forms and historical origins and exhibited a remarkable coldness when it came to those dispositions of mind and heart that allow us to experience the Church as the place where the soul is at home"⁴².

Yet, Ratzinger's own encounter with Pascher's spirituality profoundly shifted his perspective. As he confesses, "In Pascher's conferences, and the reverential manner in which he taught us to celebrate the liturgy in keeping with its deepest nature, made me a follower of the Liturgical Movement"⁴³. This turning point marked the beginning of Ratzinger's deepening appreciation for liturgy not merely as a formal expression of doctrine but as an incarnate act of divine encounter. Ratzinger recognized that the liturgy, when celebrated with reverence and understanding, became a space where the faithful are drawn into the mystery of Christ, bridging intellectual and spiritual dimensions.

At the same time, Ratzinger acknowledged the genuine achievements of the Liturgical Movement. His *Schott* missal, he notes, was "a precious possession, indeed something irreplaceable"⁴⁴, and he readily acknowledged that one of the liturgical movement's genuine achievements was enabling ordinary believers to participate more fully in the liturgy and to encounter forms of celebration that respected its inner meaning, for he had come to see the liturgy itself as "a living element, without which it would necessarily shrivel up"⁴⁵. He grew uneasy with a tendency among some of its proponents to absolutize a single liturgical form, sensing even then that authentic renewal could not be reduced to external uniformity or ideological rigidity. For Ratzinger, true liturgical reform had to occur both inwardly and historically, rooted in the recognition that "the uniqueness of the Eucharistic liturgy lies precisely in the fact that God himself is acting and that we are drawn into that action of God; everything else is therefore secondary"⁴⁶. Because the liturgy is, at its core, the deed of God, it necessarily extends beyond the cultic act itself, shaping everyday life, which must become liturgical as a service for the transformation of the world.⁴⁷ The liturgical movement, properly understood, was thus "a movement toward the liturgy and toward the right way of celebrating

⁴² RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 57.

⁴³ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 57.

⁴⁴ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 56.

⁴⁵ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 57.

⁴⁶ See RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 188.

⁴⁷ RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 189.

the liturgy, inwardly and outwardly”⁴⁸. As Collins observes, these convictions—so central to early twentieth-century liturgical renewal—emerged from a retrieval of more ancient Christian sensibilities, a recovery that decisively shaped Ratzinger’s own theological vision.⁴⁹

1.2.1.2 Liturgy as the Living Core of Theology and Ecclesial Life

This intellectual and spiritual environment enabled Ratzinger to move beyond a compartmentalized approach to theology and toward a more organic synthesis in which Scripture and liturgy function as the living core of theological reflection. Scripture, as Collins notes, became for Ratzinger not merely a foundational text for exegesis, but the “soul” of all theology—dogmatic, fundamental, and moral alike. Correspondingly, the liturgy emerged not as a peripheral aspect of Christian life, but as a primary theological source in which the unity of doctrinal truth is both manifested and enacted.⁵⁰ As Ratzinger would later claim, “I came to see the liturgy as being its living element, without which it would necessarily shrivel up... the Church came to life for us above all in the liturgy and in the great richness of the theological tradition”⁵¹. For Ratzinger, liturgy was not just a ritual practice but the vital force of the Church’s life, the point at which the divine mystery is both revealed and lived.

Ratzinger’s encounter with the Liturgical Movement—now mediated through figures such as Pascher, Guardini, and Casel—thus matured into a balanced and critically receptive appropriation. Rather than embracing the movement uncritically or rejecting it outright, he came to understand the liturgy as the privileged locus in which theology becomes incarnate, where faith is not only articulated but celebrated and lived. He would later write that the liturgy is not about “doing something” but about “being drawn into something greater”: into the mystery of Christ and the drama of salvation. In the Eucharist in particular, he discerned the integration of Scripture, Tradition, Christology, ecclesiology, and the Trinitarian life of God. For Ratzinger, the liturgy was not one theological topic among others; it was theology in act, revealing the Church most fully as herself—a community formed not by ideology or program, but by worship, memory, and sacramental participation in divine life.⁵²

⁴⁸ RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 23.

⁴⁹ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 9.

⁵⁰ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 7-9.

⁵¹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 57.

⁵² For further insight, see Cardinal Ratzinger’s interview on the subject of liturgy, featured on the YouTube channel *Reverence Restoration*: “Cardinal Ratzinger on the Liturgy” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IrUTyBK4kE&t=186s>).

1.2.1.3 Liturgical Crisis, Revelation, and the Call for Renewal

However, Ratzinger also became increasingly aware of the crisis within the Church⁵³, which he connected directly to the disintegration of the liturgy. Reflecting on this, he explained that “when liturgy is self-made, however, then it can no longer give us what its proper gift should be: the encounter with the mystery that is not our own product but rather our origin and source of our life”⁵⁴. He further elaborated, “A renewal of liturgical awareness, a liturgical reconciliation that again recognizes the unity of the history of the liturgy and that understands Vatican II, not as a breach, but as a stage of development: these things are urgently needed for the life of the Church”⁵⁵. For Ratzinger, the crisis in the Church was, in part, due to the disintegration of the liturgy, which had come to be seen as irrelevant or disconnected from God’s self-revelation. He claimed,

I am convinced that the crisis in the Church that we are experiencing today is to a large extent due to the disintegration of the liturgy, which at times has even come to be conceived of *etsi Deus non daretur*—as if it were a matter of indifference whether or not God exists and whether or not he speaks to us and hears us⁵⁶.

He poignantly asked, “When the community of faith, the worldwide unity of the Church and her history, and the mystery of the living Christ are no longer visible in the liturgy, where else, then, is the Church to become visible in her spiritual essence? Then the community is celebrating only itself, an activity that is utterly fruitless”⁵⁷. For Ratzinger, when the liturgy loses its grounding in God’s mystery, the Church’s unity and spiritual essence become obscured, leading to division and fragmentation. Then the community is celebrating the ecclesial community; but it cannot have its origin from itself, he emphasized. “It emerges as a unity only from the Lord, through faith... Such circumstances will inexorably result in a disintegration into sectarian parties of all kinds, partisan opposition within a Church tearing herself apart”⁵⁸. This

⁵³ In his assessment, Uwe Michael Lang observes that it would fail to do justice to Ratzinger’s liturgical writings to interpret them merely within the framework of contemporary liturgical controversies. Although not a liturgist by formal training—a fact some of his critics noted with disapproval—Ratzinger’s concern lay elsewhere. His interest was “not in the specific problems of liturgical studies, but always in anchoring the liturgy in the foundational act of our faith and, consequently, in its place within the whole of human existence. Ratzinger’s reflections on the liturgy are therefore best understood not as technical interventions in specialized debates, but as theological inquiries into the very heart of Christian worship and its role in shaping the Church and the human person. See BENEDICT XVI, *On the Inaugural Volume of My Collected Works*, In: RATZINGER, Joseph. *Collected Works*, vol. II, xv–xviii, at xvi; see also LANG, Uwe Michael. *Liturgy*, In: CARDÓ, Daniel; LANG, Uwe Michael, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Ratzinger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, p. 211.

⁵⁴ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 148.

⁵⁵ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 148.

⁵⁶ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 148–149.

⁵⁷ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 149.

⁵⁸ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 149.

is why, he argued, “we need a new Liturgical Movement, which will call to life the real heritage of the Second Vatican Council”⁵⁹.

Ratzinger's theological approach to the liturgy also took a deep anthropological turn, reflecting his conviction that the liturgy reveals the essence of human relationship to God. He believed that human faith has the capacity to confront the fullness of truth and stand against the spirit of the times. “A faith that investigates bravely the full breadth of truth and can therefore fearlessly oppose the spirit of the times”⁶⁰. Ratzinger saw liturgy as a deeply human act, one that helps believers to “rediscover the liturgy in all its beauty”⁶¹. This act of rediscovery was for him a play, a divine drama in which humanity participates in the mystery of God. He writes, “We are all children, or should be children, in relation to that true life toward which we yearn to go. Liturgy would be a kind of anticipation”⁶². Ratzinger emphasized that only when human beings’ relationship with God is rightly ordered can all other relationships—whether with fellow humans or creation—be in harmony. “It is only, therefore, when man’s relationship with God is right that all of his other relationships... can be in good order. Man himself cannot simply ‘make’ worship. If God does not reveal himself, man is clutching empty space”⁶³.

This brings us to the heart of Ratzinger’s understanding of revelation: liturgy is not a human creation but a dialogue—a Christocentric exchange between God and humanity. “Real liturgy implies that God responds and reveals how we can worship him... Liturgy implies a real relationship with Another, who reveals himself to us and gives our existence a new direction”⁶⁴. For Ratzinger, the ultimate goal of creation is the covenant, which is fundamentally a relationship of love between God and man. “The goal of creation is the covenant, the love story of God and man... Everything is directed to the covenant, and it is important to see that the covenant is a relationship”⁶⁵.

Liturgy, in Ratzinger’s view, anticipates the ultimate union between man and God, a union that can only come about through surrender and self-giving. “True surrender to God... is the union of man and creation in God. Losing oneself is the only possible way of finding oneself”⁶⁶. In this dynamic, creation itself becomes history, the unfolding of God’s plan for

⁵⁹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 149.

⁶⁰ RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 15.

⁶¹ RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 21.

⁶² RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 28.

⁶³ RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 35.

⁶⁴ RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 36.

⁶⁵ RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 40.

⁶⁶ RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 42.

salvation. Drawing on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Ratzinger elucidates that “the transubstantiated Host is the anticipation of the transformation and divinization of Matter in the Christological ‘fullness’⁶⁷. In this movement of *exitus* and *reditus* (departure and return), humanity is liberated from finitude through Christ, culminating in the redemption of the entire cosmos.⁶⁸

The essence of the liturgy, for Ratzinger, is found in the love dialogue between God and humanity. The sacrifice of Abraham and the sacrifice of Christ echo one another, with Christ as the ultimate Logos, the eternal Word who rescues humanity.⁶⁹ As Ratzinger explains, the only real gift man can give to God is himself—his whole being offered in worship. “The Christian Theology of worship—beginning with St. John the Baptist—sees in Christ the Lamb given by God”⁷⁰. This profound vision of liturgy as the encounter with the living God, a space of dialogue and self-surrender, underscores the transformative power of worship in the life of the Church.

In this context, Cardinal Robert Sarah, in his Foreword to Ratzinger’s *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, acknowledges the profound influence of Ratzinger’s work on the liturgical renewal:

How much we owe Cardinal Ratzinger for what has come to be known as 'the new Liturgical Movement'... How much the English-speaking world, and beyond, owes Ignatius Press for making Cardinal Ratzinger's writings on the sacred liturgy available, writings that have truly become beacons lighting the path for the 'movement toward the liturgy and toward the right way of celebrating the liturgy, inwardly and outwardly, which I believe is growing and steadily advancing even today.⁷¹

Cardinal Sarah continues with deep gratitude: “I wish to take this opportunity once again to express my deep gratitude to His Holiness (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) for his precious contributions, which have, I believe, only just begun to shower forth their blessings upon Holy Mother Church, both for her life of prayer and for faith. For indeed, *lex orandi, lex credendi*”⁷²!

Ratzinger’s vision of the liturgy as both a divine encounter and a lived ecclesial reality continues to resonate throughout the Church, inviting the faithful into ever deeper participation in the mystery of God. It is worth noting that his liturgical writings are unmistakably centered on the Eucharist and are frequently concerned with the celebration of the Holy Mass; at the same time, the theological principles he articulates extend to the entirety of the Church’s divine

⁶⁷ RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 43.

⁶⁸ See RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 44.

⁶⁹ See RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 47-48.

⁷⁰ RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 52.

⁷¹ RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 10-11.

⁷² RATZINGER, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, 2000, p. 14.

worship.⁷³ His contribution to liturgical renewal thus remains foundational, insisting that the liturgy is not merely a matter of ritual performance or inherited custom, but the living heart of the Church's existence, where faith and worship are inseparably united. By calling for a renewed Liturgical Movement, Ratzinger did not simply influence the manner in which the liturgy is celebrated; he illuminated the theological depths that sustain it, offering the Church a renewed horizon for encountering the living God in the sacred acts of worship.

1.2.2 Word and Exegesis

1.2.2.1. Academic Formation and the Challenge of Modern Exegesis Academic Formation

Among the newly assembled faculty at Munich, Friedrich Wilhelm Maier stood out vividly in Joseph Ratzinger's memory. As Ratzinger later recalled, "At that time the star of our faculty was beyond a doubt Friedrich Wilhelm Maier, professor of New Testament exegesis"⁷⁴. A respected and accomplished biblical scholar, Friedrich Wilhelm Maier was widely known for his pioneering work on the interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels. As a young academic, he was entrusted with composing the Synoptic Gospel section of a major biblical commentary then in preparation. In that contribution, he argued with clarity and conviction for what would later become the widely accepted "two-source theory" (*Zweiquellentheorie*). According to this hypothesis, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were composed on the basis of the Gospel of Mark together with a now-lost collection of Jesus' sayings known as the Q source (from the German *Quelle*, meaning "source"). Through this work—first articulated in his 1912 Gospel commentary—Maier helped shape the trajectory of modern Synoptic studies and laid foundations that would strongly influence subsequent biblical scholarship.⁷⁵ By advancing this position, Maier found himself squarely in the midst of the Modernist controversy, whose focal point was precisely the historical credibility of the Gospels. Against this backdrop, Maier's thesis was perceived as a dangerous concession to liberal exegesis and thus as a threat to the foundations of faith—a problem that, as Ratzinger later observed, "is far from having been resolved today"⁷⁶.

⁷³ See LANG, Uwe Michael. *Liturgy*: In: CARDÓ, Daniel; LANG, Uwe Michael, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Ratzinger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, p. 212. See also the relevant observations of BILINIEWICZ, Mariusz. *The Liturgical Vision of Pope Benedict XVI: A Theological Inquiry*. New York: Peter Lang, 2013, p. 7.

⁷⁴ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 50.

⁷⁵ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 50–51.

⁷⁶ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 51.

As a result, Maier's work was judged to be a surrender to liberalism, and he was forced to leave academic teaching. Ratzinger recalls that Maier more than once referred to the Roman decree *Recedat a cathedra* (Let him leave his chair) that ended his university career. He subsequently served as a military chaplain during the First World War and later as a prison chaplain, an experience he remembered with particular warmth because of the human depth it demanded. Only in the changed ecclesial and intellectual climate of the 1920s was he able to return to academic life. In 1924, he was appointed to teach New Testament at Breslau and later in Munich, where he quickly won the respect and affection of his students.⁷⁷

Despite this rehabilitation, Maier never fully recovered from the trauma of his dismissal. Ratzinger notes that he harbored a certain bitterness toward Rome, a resentment that extended also to the Archbishop of Munich, whom Maier felt had treated him with insufficient collegiality. Yet these tensions never compromised his faith or priestly commitment. On the contrary, Ratzinger consistently emphasizes that Maier was a man of "deep faith" who took with utmost seriousness his responsibility for the formation of future priests. This combination of intellectual rigor, pastoral dedication, and spiritual resilience left a lasting impression on Ratzinger.⁷⁸

1.2.2.2 Scripture as the Center of Theological Formation

Ratzinger's personal engagement with Maier's teaching was both sustained and formative. He recounts, "for the six semesters of my theological studies, I listened to and assimilated all of Maier's lectures with the greatest attention"⁷⁹. Indeed, Maier's influence extended far beyond specific exegetical conclusions. "Exegesis has always remained for me the center of my theological work," Ratzinger later wrote, adding that Maier deserves credit for ensuring that "Sacred Scripture was 'the soul of our theological studies,' as the Second Vatican Council would later require"⁸⁰. Through Maier, Ratzinger learned not only methods of historical-critical analysis but also a fundamental orientation toward Scripture as the living heart of theology.

Alongside Maier, Ratzinger also benefited from the contrasting yet complementary influence of Friedrich Stummer, professor of Old Testament. In contrast to Maier's striking personality, Stummer was, as Ratzinger describes, "a quiet and reserved man whose strength

⁷⁷ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 51.

⁷⁸ See ALLEN, *Cardinal Ratzinger*, 2000, p. 34.

⁷⁹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 52.

⁸⁰ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 52-53.

was strictly historical and philological work; he would hint at theological themes only with the greatest restraint”⁸¹. Ratzinger nonetheless greatly appreciated this scholarly carefulness. He was not only an attentive listener at Stummer’s lectures but also an active participant in his seminars. Through this disciplined engagement, “the Old Testament was opened up and became precious for me”⁸².

This encounter proved decisive for Ratzinger’s growing understanding of the unity of Scripture. “More and more,” he writes, “I came to understand why the New Testament is not a different book of a different religion that, for some reason or other, had appropriated the Holy Scriptures of the Jews as a kind of preliminary structure”⁸³. Rather, he came to see that Judaism—strictly speaking, as it took shape after the formation of the canon in the first century after Christ—and the Christian faith articulated in the New Testament represent “two ways of appropriating Israel’s Scriptures,” both ultimately determined by one’s position with regard to Jesus of Nazareth.⁸⁴ The Scriptures themselves, Ratzinger emphasizes, remain open to both interpretations. Indeed, he notes that it was largely only after the Second World War that Christian theology began to recognize that post-biblical Jewish interpretation “possesses a theological mission of its own”⁸⁵.

1.2.2.3 Toward A Theologically Integrated Exegesis

At the same time, Ratzinger’s appreciation of Maier was not uncritical. He later acknowledged that he gradually became aware of “the weaknesses in Maier’s approach,” particularly its inability “to see the full depth of the figure of Christ”⁸⁶. Nevertheless, he insists that “everything I heard from him and learned by way of method remains fundamental”⁸⁷. This balanced judgment—marked by gratitude without idealization—prefigures Ratzinger’s own lifelong effort to integrate historical-critical exegesis within a broader theological and Christological horizon.

At the same time, these formative encounters with his professors of Sacred Scripture—especially their methodological rigor—also laid the groundwork for Ratzinger’s later critical engagement with certain forms of historical exegesis. While he never rejected historical-critical

⁸¹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 52-53.

⁸² RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 53.

⁸³ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 53.

⁸⁴ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 53-54.

⁸⁵ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 54.

⁸⁶ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 53.

⁸⁷ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 53.

methods as such, he became increasingly aware of their limitations when practiced in a narrowly positivistic or reductively analytical manner. As Christopher S. Collins observes, Ratzinger came to recognize that an approach to exegesis that seeks to be rigorously objective by situating the Gospels exclusively within their historical contexts often “is not in a position to see the full depth of the figure of Christ”⁸⁸. This insight did not lead Ratzinger away from exegesis, but rather toward a more theologically integrated use of it. As Collins notes, from this early period of seminary study onward, Ratzinger would consistently affirm that biblical exegesis remained “the center of my theological work”⁸⁹.

This conviction profoundly shaped Ratzinger’s understanding of his own theological method throughout his entire career. In a later extended interview, Ratzinger reflected explicitly on this point, explaining: “I have never tried to create a system of my own, an individual theology. I simply want to think in communion with the faith of the Church—and that means above all, to think with the great thinkers of the faith”⁹⁰. For this reason, he continued, exegesis was always indispensable to his work: “I couldn’t imagine a purely philosophical theology. The point of departure is first of all the Word”⁹¹.

This theme, fidelity to scholarly rigor amid ecclesial tension, would later become central to Ratzinger’s own reflections on theology and Church reform. While he never underestimated the personal suffering such conflicts can cause, he resisted drawing merely political or structural conclusions from them. Instead, he approached these tensions theologically and spiritually, emphasizing continuity rather than rupture, communion rather than opposition, and fidelity to the Church’s living tradition rather than ideological polarization.

Ratzinger completed his doctoral dissertation in July 1953, earning a doctorate in theology from the University of Munich. Although he held all of his professors in high regard, it is clear from his autobiographical reflections that no one exercised a singular or dominating influence on his thought. Rather, his intellectual formation during this period was shaped more decisively by sustained personal study than by formal lectures alone. He immersed himself deeply in the writings of the Church Fathers—especially Augustine—as well as in the scholastically rigorous yet spiritually rich theology of Bonaventure. These two voices, one patristic and the other medieval, would give lasting direction to Ratzinger’s theology, rooting it

⁸⁸ RATZINGER, Joseph. *On the Way of Jesus Christ*. Translated by Michael J. Miller. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, p. 37.

⁸⁹ RATZINGER, *On the Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 52-53. See also COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 5.

⁹⁰ RATZINGER; SEEWALD, *Salt of the Earth*, 1997, p. 283.

⁹¹ RATZINGER; SEEWALD, *Salt of the Earth*, 1997, p. 283.

in historical awareness, spiritual intensity, and a steady concern for holding Scripture, tradition, and the faith of the Church together.

1.2.3 Encountering Personalism

1.2.3.1 Postwar Context and the Turn to the Human Person

The postwar years of Joseph Ratzinger's academic formation were marked not merely by intellectual reconstruction but by a renewed discovery of theology as a lived and spiritually grounded discipline. In the aftermath of war and cultural disintegration, Ratzinger encountered a constellation of thinkers who decisively shaped his theological imagination. Reflecting on this formative period, he recalled that "in the domain of theology and philosophy, the voices that moved us most directly were those of Romano Guardini, Josef Pieper, Theodor Haecker, and Peter Wust"⁹². Through these figures, Ratzinger was introduced to an approach to theology that resisted abstraction and instead attended to the concrete reality of the human person—an approach concerned not only with conceptual clarity but with conscience, freedom, and lived experience.

It was within this broader intellectual and spiritual awakening that Ratzinger encountered the philosophy of personalism, an encounter he later described as leaving an enduring spiritual mark. He noted that he and his contemporaries "then found the philosophy of personalism reiterated with renewed conviction in the great Jewish thinker Martin Buber"⁹³.

1.2.3.2 Dialogue, Revelation, and Personal Encounter

Buber's *I and Thou* offered a powerful account of human existence as fundamentally dialogical, structured by the distinction between "I-It" and "I-Thou" relationships. At the heart of this vision stands the conviction that language itself is dialogical in origin and meaning: "The initial reflection of I and Thou presents the word as dialogue. The primordial category of the dialogical nature of the word is the 'between'"⁹⁴.

For Ratzinger, this insight resonated deeply with his emerging understanding of Christian revelation. Faith, he came to see, is not the reception of impersonal truths but an encounter with a living God who addresses the human person and elicits a response. Buber's

⁹² RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 43.

⁹³ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 44.

⁹⁴ BUBER, Martin. *Eu e Tu*. Tradução, introdução e notas de Newton Aquiles Von Zuben. São Paulo: Cortez e Moraes, 1977, XLI. "A reflexão inicial de EU E TU apresenta a palavra como sendo diálogo. A categoria primordial da dialogicidade da palavra é o 'entre'."

emphasis on response as constitutive of relationship articulated this dynamic with particular clarity: “The phenomenon of response is essential to the relationship. Who listens if not in order to respond? The experience of receiving the word and responding to it is the core of the ‘between,’ or the lived revelation brought about by reciprocity”⁹⁵. Revelation, understood in this way, unfolds not as unilateral transmission but as a reciprocal event, a lived encounter that transforms both speaker and hearer.

1.2.3.3 From Personalism to Ecclesial and Theological Integration

Ratzinger experienced this encounter with personalism not merely as an intellectual stimulus but as a spiritual experience. He later recalled that it left “an essential mark,” particularly because he “spontaneously associated such personalism with the thought of Saint Augustine,” whose *Confessions* had already impressed him with their intensity, passion, and depth of personal engagement with God.⁹⁶ In Augustine, Ratzinger recognized a theological anticipation of Buber’s dialogical insight: a vision of faith grounded in address and response, memory and desire, restlessness and grace.

Buber’s account of dialogue further reinforced Ratzinger’s growing conviction that relationality lies at the heart of reality itself. As Buber famously insisted:

Relation is reciprocity. My Thou acts upon me just as I act upon it. Our students form us; our works build us up. The ‘evil’ becomes revelatory at the moment it is touched by the sacred primary word. How much we learn from children and from animals! We live in the torrential flow of universal reciprocity, irrevocably enclosed within it⁹⁷.

This vision of reality as constituted by reciprocal encounter resonated with Ratzinger’s theological intuition that creation, history, and salvation are all structured by relational openness to God.

By contrast, the neo-Scholastic framework that dominated Ratzinger’s seminary and early university education, though marked by analytical rigor and conceptual precision, appeared to him spiritually thin and existentially detached. While he never rejected its concern for clarity or its Thomistic inheritance, he found its abstract and impersonal idiom insufficient to express the depth of the Christian mystery. Theology, he became convinced, must reflect the

⁹⁵ BUBER, *Eu e Tu*, 1977, p. LX. “O fenômeno da resposta é essencial à relação. Quem ouve se não é para responder? A experiência de receber a palavra e respondê-la é o âmago do ‘entre’ ou a revelação vivida pela reciprocidade.”

⁹⁶ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 44.

⁹⁷ BUBER, *Eu e Tu*, 1977, p. 18. “Relação é reciprocidade. Meu “TU” atua sobre mim assim como eu atuo sobre ele. Nossos alunos nos formam, nossas obras nos edificam. O ‘mau’ se torna revelador no momento em que a palavra-princípio sagrada o atinge. Quanto aprendemos com as crianças e com os animais! Nós vivemos no fluxo torrencial da reciprocidade universal, irremediavelmente encerrados nela.”

dialogical structure of faith itself; it must arise from listening and response rather than from objectification alone.

As Christopher S. Collins observes, the new horizon of a “metaphysics of dialogue” suggested by Buber provided Ratzinger with a contemporary philosophical grounding that enabled him to appropriate the Christian vision of biblical and patristic sources while engaging modern culture on its own terms.⁹⁸ Dialogical philosophy, Collins adds, offered a basis not only for the renewal of ethics, politics, and hermeneutics, but also for a deeper understanding of authentic religious experience. Central to this renewal was Buber’s insistence that God cannot be reduced to an object of possession: “God, the eternal Presence, does not permit himself to be held. Woe to the man so possessed that he thinks he possesses God”⁹⁹!

These insights were crucial in shaping what Ratzinger came to see as the inner logic of the Christian mystery. As Collins observes, worship is where this exchange comes fully alive: it is the moment when the human person speaks to a personal God and, just as importantly, learns to listen to a God who is not an object to be analyzed but a subject who speaks.¹⁰⁰ Ratzinger would later insist that this kind of worship is not optional. Without it, modern reason splinters, and faith is reduced either to ideology or to a set of moral demands, stripped of its living center.

These dialogical intuitions would find authoritative ecclesial expression at the Second Vatican Council. Reflecting on *Dei Verbum*, Ratzinger later noted that the Council articulated “an understanding of revelation that is seen basically as dialogue”¹⁰¹, an understanding shaped in no small part by the personalist currents that had influenced theology and philosophy on the eve of the Council. Revelation came to be understood not as the mere communication of propositions, but as God’s self-communication in history, inviting a free and loving human response.

1.2.4 Encountering Augustine and the Church

Joseph Ratzinger developed his theology in deep conversation with the early Church Fathers, and above all, with St. Augustine of Hippo. Among the many towering figures in

⁹⁸ COLLINS, *The Word made love*, 2013, p. 13.

⁹⁹ BUBER, Martin. *I and Thou*, New York: Scribner, 1958, p. 106, as cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 15.

¹⁰⁰ COLLINS, *The Word made love*, 2013, p. 15.

¹⁰¹ VORGRIMLER, Herebert. ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1967, 3: 171, as cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 15.

Christian tradition, Augustine stood out to Ratzinger not simply as a historical authority but as a lifelong companion in faith and thought. In 1969, Ratzinger reflected, “Augustine has kept me company for more than twenty years. I have developed my theology in a dialogue with Augustine, though naturally I have tried to conduct this dialogue as a man of today”¹⁰². This was more than admiration; it was a formative relationship that shaped the very foundations of his ecclesiology and theological anthropology. His bond with Augustine was so profound that he once remarked that, if stranded on a desert island, the two books he would want with him were the Bible and Augustine’s *Confessions*¹⁰³. For Ratzinger, Augustine offered more than ready-made answers. He provided a way of thinking that helped him face the questions of the modern world, linking the experience of the early Church with the concerns of the present.

1.2.4.1 Augustine and the Foundations of Ratzinger’s Ecclesiology

Ratzinger’s academic engagement with Augustine reached an early culmination in his 1953 doctoral dissertation, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* (The People and the House of God in Augustine’s Doctrine of the Church), written under the supervision of Gottlieb Söhngen at the University of Munich. Recalling the origins of the project, Ratzinger noted that Söhngen informed him that “this year he was responsible for determining the theme and that he was counting on my willingness to enter the competition,” a request to which he felt “duty-bound,” even as he “looked forward with excitement to the moment when the theme would be publicly announced”¹⁰⁴. Confident in his preparation—“since in recent years I had been zealously reading the Fathers and had also taken Gottlieb Söhngen’s seminar on Augustine”—Ratzinger undertook what he described as an intellectual adventure.¹⁰⁵ In this foundational work, he examined Augustine’s understanding of the Church through two biblical images central to his ecclesiology: *populus Dei* (the people of God) and *domus Dei* (the house of God). Deeply embedded in Augustine’s theological vision, these metaphors articulate a conception of the Church that is simultaneously spiritual and institutional, historical and eschatological, sacramental and communal. For Ratzinger, they express the Church’s profound mystery as both the visible Body of Christ and the dwelling place of divine truth within the

¹⁰² RATZINGER, Joseph. ‘Glaube, Geschichte und Philosophie Zum Echo auf Einführung in das Christentum’, *Hochland* 61, 1969, p. 543. Cited in NICHOLS, Aidan. *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007. See also. ALLEN, *Cardinal Ratzinger*, 2000. p. 35.

¹⁰³ ALLEN, *Cardinal Ratzinger*, 2000. p. 35.

¹⁰⁴ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 97.

¹⁰⁵ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 97.

unfolding of history. This interpretive framework is situated explicitly, as Ratzinger himself explains,

within the dialogue with Augustine and within the theological debate on the concept of the Church. With regard to the latter, my book has acquired, I believe, an unexpected relevance in the situation that emerged after Vatican II. The Council, in fact, took up and repeatedly emphasized the concept of the People of God. Although the entirety of the first two chapters of *Lumen Gentium* constitutes a carefully balanced synthesis of the fundamental elements of ecclesiology—one that I find fully consonant with my convictions at that time—the indispensable and intimate relationship between the concept of the People of God and that of the Body of Christ was already not brought sufficiently to light there¹⁰⁶.

Deeply embedded in Augustine's theological vision, these metaphors articulate a conception of the Church that is at once spiritual and institutional, historical and eschatological, sacramental and communal, expressing for Ratzinger the Church's profound mystery as both the visible Body of Christ and the dwelling place of divine truth within the unfolding of history.

1.2.4.2 Hermeneutics, History, and Ecclesial Belonging

What distinguished Ratzinger's Augustinian project was, above all, its hermeneutical orientation. He did not approach Augustine merely as a historical figure or as a repository of settled doctrinal positions, but as a theological interlocutor engaged in a living dialogue shaped by the crises of the twentieth century—war, totalitarianism, secularization, and the fragmentation of modern belief. Ratzinger reads what he calls “St. Augustine's path in his restless search for truth” as paradigmatic for understanding Christian truth itself, the nature of the Church, and the meaning of worship.¹⁰⁷ In this way, ancient wisdom is brought into conversation with modern questions concerning belonging, grace, and faith's endurance amid cultural upheaval.

Central to this engagement is Ratzinger's interpretation of Augustine's twofold conversion. Augustine's first conversion begins with his rejection of Manichaeism, which promised certainty through rational proofs confined to the visible world—an approach Ratzinger interprets as an early form of modern empiricism. Augustine's encounter with skepticism exposed the fragility of such certainty, while Neoplatonism opened him to a spiritual

¹⁰⁶ RATZINGER, Joseph. *Popolo e casa di Dio in Sant'Agostino*. Milano: Jaca Book, 2005, XV. “Che si inseriscono nel dialogo con Agostino e nel dibattito teologico sul concetto di chiesa. Per quel che riguarda quest'ultimo il mio libro ha acquistato, credo, un'inaspettata attualità nella situazione venutasi a creare dopo il Vaticano II. Il concilio, difatti, ha ripreso e ripetutamente sottolineato il concetto di popolo di Dio. Benché l'insieme dei primi due capitoli della *Lumen Gentium* costituiscano una sintesi accuratamente equilibrata dei fondamentali elementi ecclesiologici, che io trovo pienamente responsive alle mie convinzioni di allora, già lì non è stato sufficientemente messo in luce l'imprescindibile, intimo rapporto del concetto di popolo di Dio con quello di corpo di Cristo.”

¹⁰⁷ RATZINGER, *Popolo e casa di Dio in Sant'Agostino*, 2005, p.1-5.

reality beyond matter. Yet even Neoplatonism, grounded as it was in human intellectual ascent, proved insufficient. From this experience Augustine learned that “our journey to truth can only be successful if God first moves us toward him”¹⁰⁸. Truth, therefore, is not conquered by human effort but received as gift. This realization leads Augustine—and for Ratzinger, Christianity itself—to the heart of the faith: God becomes flesh in Christ in order to lead humanity to truth. True wisdom is thus reached not through intellectual pride but through humility, embodied above all in the Eucharist, which Augustine famously calls “the bread of the weak,” and mirrored in the simplicity of Scripture’s language, through which God addresses all.

Augustine’s second conversion, which Ratzinger associates with his ordination, marks a decisive shift from an individual intellectual quest to responsibility for the whole Church. Augustine comes to understand that truth is not privately possessed but encountered within the life of the Church: “the truth of God can only be known within the Church”¹⁰⁹. Charity, rather than elite knowledge, becomes the decisive path to truth. This insight leads Augustine to reject any separation between the learned and the simple and to emphasize the communal and sacramental dimension of truth, later developed in *The City of God*. For Ratzinger, this ecclesial grounding of truth also determines how the Church relates to political power—not through domination, but through communion.

Ratzinger’s reading of Augustine’s confrontation with Roman religion further highlights Christianity’s originality. Against both mythological religion and emperor worship, Augustine shows that Christianity uniquely unites philosophy, public religion, and worship by proclaiming that the true God sought by reason has become flesh and can be personally known. Christianity thus binds truth and worship together, confessing one personal Logos and offering a faith accessible to all. Eucharistic worship becomes the concrete form of this unity: a rational and total offering of life to God. Here Ratzinger’s insight reaches a decisive formulation:

The primacy of truth has to do with the communion structure of the Church and with the charity that animates her. The truth of Christianity is rooted in the form of Christian worship, which is the form of Christian love... the primacy of truth is a consequence, according to Ratzinger, of the visible sacramental form proper to the communion of the Church¹¹⁰.

This vision also shapes Ratzinger’s interpretation of *The City of God*. He rejects both the idea of a purely invisible Church and that of a Church seeking political domination. The

¹⁰⁸ GRANADOS, José. *The Fathers of the Church*, In: CARDÓ; LANG, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Ratzinger*, 2024, p. 117.

¹⁰⁹ GRANADOS, *The Fathers of the Church*, 2024, p. 117.

¹¹⁰ GRANADOS, *The Fathers of the Church*, 2024, p. 119-120.

City of God is the visible, sacramental Church, distinct from yet coexisting with civil society. While political orders may achieve a measure of justice, history remains marked by sin. The Church therefore emerges as a new historical community rooted in Christ, oriented toward worship rather than power. Deeply historical in character, she is linked to Israel as the people of God, whose vocation prefigures the Church's own. Through the Eucharist, history itself is gathered into unity and directed toward its final fulfillment, revealing that Christian truth is inseparable from charity and hope alike. Ratzinger argues that the primacy of truth in Christianity is grounded in the Church's visible, sacramental communion in the body of Christ. The Church bears witness to truth only through this communion, which also provides the criterion for her ongoing self-understanding and renewal. Engagement with Augustine and the Fathers, therefore, is not nostalgia but a vital resource for confronting modern challenges and discerning authentic reform within the life of the Church. Ratzinger sought genuine reform not through novelty, but through a deeper fidelity to Revelation and the Church Fathers.¹¹¹

A central question in Ratzinger's engagement with Augustine concerns the nature of ecclesial belonging: Is the Church primarily a spiritual and invisible communion of believers, or a structured, sacramental, and visible institution? Augustine's answer, Ratzinger argues, transcends this opposition, presenting the Church as both mystery and structure, spiritual communion and sacramental body. In *Volk und Haus Gottes* (People and House of God), Ratzinger traces Augustine's movement from philosophical individualism toward concrete ecclesial communion, emphasizing that Augustine's conversion in 386 was not merely an interior awakening but a decisive entry into the historical, visible, and sacramental life of the Church. Through this transition, Augustine moved from a Neoplatonic search for truth in the solitude of the soul to the recognition that truth is mediated through the community of faith—through Scripture, the sacraments, and the lived reality of ecclesial life. In this context, Ratzinger maintains that Augustine presents the Church community as appropriating and deepening the Platonic tradition's concerns about the relationship between the material and the spiritual and the semiotic character of material existence, arguing that Christianity affirms an intelligible created order oriented toward the revealing presence of the Word and, at the same time, takes up the central aims of philosophy—knowledge of the intelligible and the purification of the soul—and renders them universally accessible through the Church's faith in God's redemptive action drawing humanity toward eternal life.¹¹²

¹¹¹ See RATZINGER, *Popolo e casa di Dio in Sant'Agostino*, 2005, p. 57.

¹¹² See AYRES; KELLY; HUMPHRIES, *Benedict XVI: A Ressourcement Theologian?*, 2012, p. 426.

This transition was catalyzed by Augustine's recognition of the limits of reason unaided by grace. Like Ratzinger, he came to see that philosophical wisdom alone was insufficient for the journey to truth. In *Volk und Haus Gottes* (People and House of God), Ratzinger writes approvingly of Augustine's discovery that the wisdom he had once sought in classical authors like Cicero was ultimately hollow. True wisdom, Augustine realized, comes only in Christ, and it is mediated through the life and authority of the Church.¹¹³ This insight formed the basis of two foundational principles in Augustine's early ecclesiology, which Ratzinger called *Ansätze* (starting-points): first, that faith (*fides*) is a form of mediated knowledge, grounded in community and tradition; and second, that love (*caritas*) and unity (*unitas*) define the Church as the *house of God*. Although the term "*domus Dei*" does not appear explicitly in Augustine's early works, Ratzinger discovered its theological roots in Augustine's treatment of prayer, sacrifice, and Christian worship.

1.2.4.3 Patristic Communion and the Church as *Domus Dei*

As Augustine's role in the Church deepened — particularly after his ordination in 391 — his ecclesiology became increasingly shaped by the North African tradition. Ratzinger traced his intellectual lineage through Tertullian, Cyprian, and Optatus of Milevis. Tertullian had offered a vision of the Church as a disciplined and sacramental community, opposing the spiritual elitism of Gnosticism. His metaphor of the *house of God* spanned the individual body, the Church, and the cosmos. Ratzinger saw in this image a powerful foundation for understanding the Church's visible and cosmic dimensions. Cyprian, with his emphasis on episcopal unity and sacramental life, reinforced the bond between baptism, communion, and authority. Ratzinger valued this tradition but also warned of its limitations — especially when ecclesiology is reduced to a sociological model that loses sight of mystery and grace. Most decisive for Ratzinger, however, was Optatus of Milevis, whose writings against the *Donatist schism* articulated a vision of the Church as a universal communion grounded in unity with Rome. Optatus's argument that communion with the See of Peter was a mark of Catholic authenticity deeply influenced both Augustine and Ratzinger. It provided a foundation for the vision of the Church as a historical, global, and apostolic communion — a Church that is catholic not merely in name, but in its essence and mission. This ecclesiology, forged in the crucible of schism, would later echo in Ratzinger's own critiques of ecclesial fragmentation and his insistence on communion with Rome as the center of unity.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ ALLEN, *Cardinal Ratzinger*, 2000. p. 36.

¹¹⁴ See. NICHOLS, Aidan. *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2007, p. 23-27.

Drawing deeply from the well of patristic tradition, Joseph Ratzinger developed a theology that neither surrendered to the simplifications of modern thought nor clung to a nostalgic view of the past. His engagement with Augustine was not about rejecting Thomas Aquinas but about shifting the balance. While Aquinas trusted in the power of reason and the natural harmony between creation and grace, Augustine — in Ratzinger's eyes — exposed the vulnerability of the human condition and the absolute need for grace. For Ratzinger, Augustine offered a more honest account of human limits, one that resonated powerfully in a century scarred by ideological tyranny and technological dehumanization. "Scholasticism has its greatness", Ratzinger once observed, "but it is all very impersonal. It takes some time to understand and appreciate its inner tension. In Saint Augustine, on the other hand, the passionate man — who suffers, who questions — is always present, and every person can identify with him"¹¹⁵. That deep sense of personal struggle, of theology born in the midst of real life, made Augustine not just a source of intellectual insight but a companion in faith. In him, Ratzinger found a voice capable of speaking to the brokenness of the modern world with both truth and compassion.

Ultimately, Augustine offered Ratzinger a vision of the Church not as a sociological construct or a political power, but as a sacrament of communion—the visible presence of divine truth within history. Ratzinger's theological formation thus unfolded not in opposition to tradition, but in profound continuity with it, above all through the voices of the Church Fathers. In Augustine, he found a teacher who affirmed that truth is mediated through the Church, that faith is intrinsically communal, and that the Church is at once mystery and home—the *domus Dei* in which God dwells among His people. As Ratzinger explains, "The Church belongs to Christ only insofar as it is a fraternal communion in reciprocal communication. This fraternal community, in turn, is Church only to the extent that the content and the center of its communion is Christ"¹¹⁶. In this light, the Church of love is the organism of Jesus, united in the body of this love in a juridical-sacramental manner. And this organism of Jesus Christ is, in turn, the sacred sign of the true Body of Jesus Christ, which is built up within the structure of love toward the unity of the one new man¹¹⁷.

¹¹⁵ RATZINGER, *O Sal da Terra*, 1997. p. 50.

¹¹⁶ RATZINGER, *Popolo e casa di Dio in Sant'Agostino*, 2005, p. 315. "La Chiesa appartiene a Cristo solo quale comunione fraterna in comunicazione reciproca... Questa comunità fraterna nuovamente è Chiesa solo in quanto il contenuto e il centro della sua comunione è Cristo."

¹¹⁷ RATZINGER, *Popolo e casa di Dio in Sant'Agostino*, 2005, p. 316. "La Chiesa dell'amore è "L'organismo di Gesù" unito nel corpo di questo amore in modo giuridico-sacramentale. ...E questo organismo di Gesù Cristo è a sua volta il segno sacro per il vero corpo di Gesù Cristo che vien edificato nella "struttura dell'amore", verso l'unità dell'unico uomo nuovo".

Read through Augustine and taken up within Ratzinger's own theological vision, the Church emerges not merely as an institution defined by visible structures, but as a living body bound together by love. As José Granados emphasizes in his synthesis of Ratzinger's 1967 Tübingen lecture, the Church Fathers are not simply later interpreters of revelation but belong to the original revelatory event itself, providing the Church's indispensable "first response" (*Erst-Antwort*) to the Word of God. This insight is rooted in Ratzinger's earlier reflection on revelation developed in his Habilitation thesis on St. Bonaventure: following the Seraphic Doctor, revelation is not complete with the mere communication of the divine message, for revelation truly occurs only when the Word (*Wort*) is received and answered (*Antwort*). Revelation is therefore not a static deposit but a dynamic, historical process that unfolds as the Church's reception of the Word matures over time.¹¹⁸ Within this dialogical *Wort–Antwort* structure—revealing God as communion and calling forth a communion of persons—the Fathers occupy a constitutive place by shaping the Church's first and normative reception of Scripture through the formation of the biblical canon, the rule of faith, the liturgical and Eucharistic structure of the Church, and the integration of faith and reason.¹¹⁹

Ratzinger's sustained engagement with the Church Fathers, and with St. Augustine in particular, led him to articulate a vision of revelation that is at once dialogical and profoundly Christocentric. Revelation, in this perspective, is not exhausted by the utterance of the divine Word, but unfolds within the space opened for faith's response, so that revelation truly occurs only where the Word is received and answered. The Church's response to God's self-revelation thus grows throughout history, and the "Fathers themselves belong to this original revelatory"¹²⁰ event insofar as they shape the Church's first, normative reception of Christ. Their insistence on truth as the heart of the Christian religion enables the integration of reason into faith's response to the divine Word, safeguarding Christianity from both irrationalism and relativism. Because the person and work of Christ are binding for all times, "the Church is continually called to become contemporary with Him"¹²¹, living as His Body through the unity of Eucharistic worship. In this sense, the Eucharist reveals the truth of love: the communion of the Church becomes the place where truth is disclosed and the path by which humanity encounters the fullness of truth. These patristic convictions form the essential backdrop for Ratzinger's

¹¹⁸ See GRANADOS, *The Fathers of the Church*, 2024, p. 120-121.

¹¹⁹ See RATZINGER, *Importance of the Fathers for the Structure of the Faith*, cited in GRANADOS, *The Fathers of the Church*, 2024, p. 121.

¹²⁰ RATZINGER, Joseph. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*: Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation, cited in GRANADOS, *The Fathers of the Church*, 2024, p.121.

¹²¹ GRANADOS, *The Fathers of the Church*, 2024, p.121

theological development and provide the immediate horizon for his decisive turn to St. Bonaventure in his early academic work.

1.2.5 Joseph Ratzinger's Dissertation on St. Bonaventure

Joseph Ratzinger's early academic work, particularly his doctoral dissertation on St. Bonaventure¹²², marked a decisive moment in the development of his theology of revelation and can be seen as a natural continuation of the Augustinian concerns already present in his first dissertation. Through his close study of Bonaventure, whom Ratzinger regarded as thoroughly shaped by Augustine, he came to see revelation not as a fixed collection of ideas or a sealed body of teachings, but as something alive. Revelation, in this view, is God making himself known in history, unfolding over time, and addressing human beings personally. For Bonaventure, and here Ratzinger explicitly notes his Augustinian inheritance, the unity of history is found in God's action within the created order.¹²³ Revelation is therefore not merely the transmission of information from the divine to the human intellect, but an encounter with God that transforms the whole person and unfolds within history itself. Ratzinger underscores this point by calling attention to Bonaventure's strong sense of historical continuity, according to which "the whole of history develops in one unbroken line of meaning"¹²⁴, such that what is to come can be understood in the present on the basis of the past.¹²⁵ Ratzinger would appropriate this historically grounded and relational understanding of revelation and place it at the center of his own theological vision, thereby challenging dominant post-Enlightenment models that had reduced revelation to abstract, rational content and reinforcing the deep coherence between his early Augustinian and Bonaventurian research.¹²⁶

1.2.5.1 Revelation as Historical and Dialogical

Joseph Ratzinger's study of St. Bonaventure uncovered a theology of revelation that is dynamic, historical, and inseparable from the life of the Church, yet this insight did not emerge in a vacuum. As Ratzinger recounts in *Milestones*, his theological path began with the Church

¹²² RATZINGER, Joseph. *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*. Trans. Z. Hayes, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971.

¹²³ AYRES; KELLY; HUMPHRIES, *Benedict XVI: A Ressourcement Theologian?*, 2012, p. 429.

¹²⁴ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 8.

¹²⁵ See AYRES; KELLY; HUMPHRIES, *Benedict XVI: A Ressourcement Theologian?*, 2012, p. 429.

¹²⁶ The focus on a unified theology of history was not unique to Ratzinger's study of Augustine and Bonaventure; it had also been a key concern for the Tübingen theologians of the early nineteenth century and later for the Munich School in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. J. von Dollinger's early work on the organic growth of tradition, O. Bardenhewer's work on the Fathers, and M. Gramann's scholarship on scholasticism were particularly influential in Ratzinger's formation; See. NICHOLS, *Bonaventure and Saving History*. In: *Thought*, 22-24; Cited in AYRES; KELLY; HUMPHRIES, *Benedict XVI: A Ressourcement Theologian?*, 2012, p. 429.

Fathers and soon moved into the medieval tradition under the guidance of his mentor, Professor Gottlieb Söhngen. Having completed a dissertation on the theology of history in St. Augustine, Ratzinger was encouraged to undertake a postdoctoral habilitation on a central theme of fundamental theology. Söhngen proposed revelation, a suggestion Ratzinger accepted, with Bonaventure emerging as the natural subject. This project marked not merely a change in historical period but a decisive reorientation in theological method, as Ratzinger came to see that “revelation was no longer simply a communication of truths to the intellect, but God’s historical action through which truth gradually unfolds”¹²⁷. Working, as he later noted, “with both zeal and joy”¹²⁸, Ratzinger set out to determine whether Bonaventure possessed a concept analogous to salvation history and how this motif might be intrinsically related to revelation itself.

1.2.5.2 Methodological Reorientation and Salvation History

This methodological shift coincided with broader developments in postwar Catholic theology, particularly in the German-speaking world, where a renewed emphasis on *Heilsgeschichte* was reshaping theological accounts of revelation. Against purely propositional or ahistorical approaches, salvation-history theology understood revelation as something that unfolds in time—through creation, covenant, incarnation, and the continuing life of the Church. Ratzinger recognized in Bonaventure a theologian who had anticipated this perspective centuries earlier. In *Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura*, Ratzinger brings out a vision of history—most clearly in the unfinished *Collationes in Hexaemeron* (Collations on the Hexaemeron), that is shaped from beginning to end by an eschatological outlook. History, in this view, is not a patchwork of disconnected periods, but a single story moving toward its fulfillment in God. Ratzinger captures this succinctly when he writes, “There is only one, indivisible history, and it is characterized as a whole; it stands beneath the merciful love of God, who constantly surrounds and supports this history”¹²⁹. For Bonaventure, history makes sense only when it is understood in light of where it comes from and where it is going. Far from dissolving history into abstraction, this approach holds together attentiveness to concrete events with a deeper vision of reality. Revelation, then, is not confined to a distant past, but unfolds

¹²⁷ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 104.

¹²⁸ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 104.

¹²⁹ RATZINGER, Joseph. *What it Means to Be a Christian: Three Sermons*. Translated by Henry Taylor. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006, p. 35.

within history itself—finding its center in Christ and continuing through the life of the Church.¹³⁰

This vision emerged in critical dialogue with the Joachimite movement, which had gained influence among Franciscans inspired by the apocalyptic speculations of Joachim of Fiore. Joachim proposed that history unfolds in three ages and believed that the Church was entering a new, unmediated “Age of the Spirit”¹³¹. Because Joachim’s timeline coincided with the life of St. Francis of Assisi, many identified Francis as the herald of this Third Age. While Joachim’s followers often interpreted this development as a rupture with established ecclesial structures, Bonaventure offered a decisive corrective. He reinterpreted Joachim’s insights within the bounds of orthodoxy, affirming the Spirit’s ongoing work in history while insisting that this work remains inseparably tied to the Church’s sacramental and hierarchical life. In the *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, Bonaventure articulated a theology of history in which revelation unfolds through distinct stages, not by abandoning tradition, but by interiorly deepening it. Ratzinger admired this approach, seeing in Bonaventure a model for addressing theological crises not through rejection or suppression, but through retrieval and reformulation within the living tradition.

1.2.5.3 Scripture, Tradition, and the Living Event of Revelation

Revelation, on this account, is not merely information about God but an event of encounter—God acting in history and drawing humanity into communion. It is eschatological in orientation, always pointing toward fulfillment, yet ecclesial in its mediation, always rooted in the Church. In Bonaventure, Ratzinger found a way forward that avoided two opposite dead ends. Against a purely rational approach, Bonaventure insisted that revelation cannot be reduced to timeless ideas; against more anti-institutional impulses, he showed that revelation never stands apart from the life of the Church. Revelation, instead, is God giving himself—personally, in history, and within a community—first in the life of Christ and then in the Church that carries that life forward. This understanding left a lasting mark on Ratzinger’s own

¹³⁰ Ratzinger notes that in his doctoral dissertation, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, he set out to show that early Christianity understood history as a single, continuous story rather than as a series of neatly separated stages. The division we often take for granted today—between “before Christ” and “after Christ,” or between redeemed and unredeemed time—did not shape Christian thought in the first millennium as strongly as it later would. This way of carving history into distinct periods took hold only in the thirteenth century, under the influence of Joachim of Fiore. Although Joachim’s scheme of three historical ages was rejected, his habit of treating the Christ-event as a turning point that divides history into different phases was widely taken up. Ratzinger sees this development as one of the most far-reaching shifts in how Christianity came to understand itself, and he argues that coming to terms with it remains an important task for theology today. See. RATZINGER, *What it Means to Be a Christian*, 2006, p. 35-36.

¹³¹ RATZINGER, *O sal da terra*, 1997. p. 51.

theology. Repeatedly, he would return to the claim that revelation is not a bundle of supernatural facts, but God's self-giving in Christ, received and handed on within the Church's living tradition. He further clarifies this point with a striking image:

Revelation is not a meteor fallen to earth that now lies around somewhere as a rock mass from which samples can be taken and submitted to laboratory analysis. Revelation has instruments, but it is inseparable from the living God, and it always requires a living person to whom it is communicated. Its goal is always to gather and unite human beings, and this is why the Church is a necessary aspect of revelation¹³².

This insight, drawn from Bonaventure, opens onto a more fully sacramental and ecclesial way of seeing revelation. Revelation is not simply something to be heard or grasped intellectually; it is celebrated and lived. It is met in the liturgy, in the sacraments, and within the shared life of the saints. The following chapter will return to these themes and explore more fully what this understanding of revelation means for the life of the Church.

Ratzinger's reflections on Bonaventure would go on to influence his role at the Second Vatican Council, particularly in shaping *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. There, as a theological advisor (*peritus*), he helped advance a vision of revelation that began not with texts or teachings, but with the person of Jesus Christ. The opening words of *Dei Verbum*, "It pleased God in His goodness and wisdom to reveal Himself..."¹³³, embody this shift. Revelation, properly understood, is God revealing Himself, not just truths about Himself. It is an event, an encounter, a divine initiative to draw humanity into communion.

This perspective also shaped Ratzinger's understanding of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition. He rejected the *sola scriptura* model not as a denial of Scripture's authority, but as a critique of its abstraction from the living context of the Church. As he explained, "Revelation precedes Scripture and becomes deposited in it, but is not simply identical with it"¹³⁴. Revelation, he further insisted, "is always something greater than what is merely written down, which means that there can be no such thing as pure *sola scriptura* ('by Scripture alone'), because an essential element of Scripture is the Church as the understanding subject, and with this the fundamental sense of tradition is already given"¹³⁵. Scripture, therefore, belongs within the broader event of revelation, an event that encompasses the Church's living memory, liturgical worship, and ongoing witness to Christ.

¹³² RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 127.

¹³³ VATICAN II COUNCIL. *Dei Verbum*: dogmatic constitution on divine revelation. Paragraph 2, Rome, 1965. Available in: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html. Accessed September 19, 2025.

¹³⁴ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 109.

¹³⁵ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 109.

Despite the theological richness of the *Collationes*, Ratzinger also recognized the challenges posed by Bonaventure's text. The lectures, unfinished and transcribed by others, are often opaque and speculative, particularly in their apocalyptic sections. Yet Ratzinger believed they contained a profound structure. Bonaventure's use of the six days of creation (the *Hexaemeron*) as a framework for salvation history and human knowledge reflected a deep conviction: that reality itself unfolds in stages of revelation, and that understanding the past is key to interpreting both present and future. Central to this vision is Bonaventure's multi-layered reading of Scripture. He distinguished three levels of meaning: the literal, the symbolic, and the eschatological. These were not abstract interpretive tools, but ways of entering into the mystery of God's unfolding Word. Bonaventure even added a fourth dimension: *figurae sacramentales*—images through which Scripture speaks not only of Christ but of the Antichrist, not only of past events but of future hope. For Ratzinger,

Scripture points to the future. But only he who has understood the past can grasp the interpretation of the future. This is so because the whole of history unfolds in a continuous line of meaning, such that what is to come can be understood in the present through the light of what has already been. Thus, the exegesis of Scripture becomes a theology of history: the clarification of the past opens the way to a prophetic understanding of the future¹³⁶.

In Bonaventure, Ratzinger found a way of doing theology that neither flattened the faith to fit modern categories nor escaped into an idealized past. It took history seriously without turning it into an end in itself, spoke about God without drifting into abstraction, and understood the Church as a living body rather than a system of control. Revelation, on this account, always begins with God's initiative and always asks for an answer—an invitation into the shared life of the Church, the Body of Christ. This sense of faith as something both personal and communal would remain central for Ratzinger: faith is not first of all agreement with an idea, but a response to a living Person.

In the end, Ratzinger's early work on Bonaventure mattered for far more than scholarly reasons. It helped form the way he understood theology itself. Theology, for him, was never thinking for its own sake, but a response to God's self-giving—a way of attending to how God acts in history and draws human beings into communion. At its heart is the event of the Word made flesh, dwelling among us and inviting us into the life of God.

¹³⁶ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971. p. 8-9. See also NICHOLS, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI*, p. 37-38.

1.3 The Second Vatican Council and Joseph Ratzinger

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) marked a decisive turning point in the life of the Catholic Church, inaugurating a renewed engagement with the modern world and a fresh articulation of the Church’s theological self-understanding. As Joseph Ratzinger himself later recalled, the announcement of the Council by Pope John XXIII “reanimated and, for many, intensified even to the point of euphoria the atmosphere of renewal and hope that had reigned in the Church and in theology since the end of the First World War, despite the perils of the National Socialist era”¹³⁷. This atmosphere of expectation and openness provided the backdrop against which Ratzinger’s theological vocation would take on a decisive public and ecclesial dimension.

1.3.1 Role in the Council

At the time of the Council, Ratzinger was still a relatively young professor of theology, yet he was already recognized for his intellectual clarity and theological depth. He was appointed *peritus* (theological advisor) to Cardinal Joseph Frings, Archbishop of Cologne, a leading figure within the German episcopate. Ratzinger later described the relationship between himself and Frings as marked by “a very straightforward and even affectionate understanding”¹³⁸. This close collaboration proved significant, as Frings relied heavily on Ratzinger’s theological judgment throughout the conciliar process.

Through Frings’s position, Ratzinger gained early and sustained access to the Council’s preparatory work. As Ratzinger recounts,

as a member of the Central Preparatory Commission, the Cardinal was sent the drafts of texts (*schemata*) that were to be presented to the Council Fathers for their discussion and vote after the assembly had convened. He now began to send me these texts regularly in order to have my criticism and suggestions for improvement¹³⁹.

This arrangement placed Ratzinger at the heart of the Council’s theological development even before the formal sessions began.

Once the Council was underway, Ratzinger’s role expanded further. As DeClue notes, “once the council began, Ratzinger continued to act as an advisor to Cardinal Frings. Ratzinger’s role was expanded as he was also named an official *peritus* (theological expert) of

¹³⁷ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 120.

¹³⁸ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 120.

¹³⁹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 120-121.

the council itself through Frings's influence"¹⁴⁰. In this dual capacity, Ratzinger was able to contribute not only indirectly through Frings but also directly as a recognized theological expert of the Council.

1.3.2 Theological Vision and Influence

Scholars widely acknowledge the significance of Ratzinger's conciliar involvement. Christopher Ruddy observes that "Joseph Ratzinger is one of the few figures who helped prepare, shape, interpret, and implement the Second Vatican Council"¹⁴¹. Jared Wicks further specifies the scope of his contributions, noting that Ratzinger worked directly on *Lumen Gentium*, *Dei Verbum*, *Ad Gentes*, and *Gaudium et Spes*.¹⁴² Although influence at the Council cannot be measured with precision, it is fair to say that Ratzinger, still a young professor at the time, belonged among the small group of the most important theological advisors, likely within the top twenty, and perhaps even the top ten.¹⁴³

Theologically, Ratzinger stood close to the theologians associated with the *ressourcement* and *nouvelle théologie* movements, who sought renewal not through novelty but through a renewed engagement with the Church's deepest sources—Sacred Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and the Church's liturgical life. Reflecting on this theological current, Ratzinger later explained that its aim was to nourish the faith "not only of the last hundred years, but on the stream of tradition as a whole"¹⁴⁴. Although this approach was sometimes eclipsed by more pragmatic or programmatic interpretations of the Council, Ratzinger insisted that its impulse was neither marginal nor short-lived but continued to exert a formative influence on the Church's theological renewal.

¹⁴⁰ DECLUE, Richard G. Jr. *The Mind of Benedict XVI: A theology of communion*. Washington D.C.: Word on Fire, 2024, p. 35.

¹⁴¹ RUDDY, Christopher. *The Second Vatican Council and the Third Millennium*. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Ratzinger*, ed. Daniel Cardó and Uwe Michael Lang, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, p. 39.

¹⁴² In a note, Christopher Ruddy draws on the work of Jared Wicks, S.J., a leading scholar of the Second Vatican Council, who describes Joseph Ratzinger as a central and active theological advisor (*peritus*) in the Council's work. According to Wicks, Ratzinger played a direct role in shaping several of the Council's key documents. He was among those who pushed back against the early drafts produced by the Roman curia, arguing instead for an approach more deeply rooted in Scripture, the Church Fathers, and pastoral concern—especially in the development of *Lumen Gentium*, *Dei Verbum*, and *Ad Gentes*. See RATZINGER, Joseph; Wicks, Jared. *Six Texts by Prof. Joseph Ratzinger as Peritus Before and During Vatican Council II*. *Gregorianum* 89, no. 2, 2008, 233–311. See RUDDY, *The Second Vatican Council and the Third Millennium*, 2024, p. 39–40.

¹⁴³ See de GAÁL, Emery. *O Lord, I Seek your countenance: Explorations and Discoveries in Pope Benedict XVI's theology*. Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Academic, 2018, p. 29.

¹⁴⁴ RATZINGER, *Dogma and Preaching*, cited in DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek your countenance*, 2018, p. 25.

1.3.3 Ratzinger's Contribution to Scripture and Tradition

This theological vision was not confined to abstract reflection; it found concrete expression in Ratzinger's extensive conciliar activity, particularly through his collaboration with Cardinal Frings. Of particular importance were several speeches written by Ratzinger but delivered by Frings during oral interventions at the Council. As DeClue notes, at least ten such speeches were directly shaped by Ratzinger, allowing him, through Frings, to exercise broad and sustained influence on the Council's deliberations.¹⁴⁵ *Dei Verbum* did not emerge quickly or without difficulty. Its formulation required sustained theological labor, careful redaction, and prolonged debate among the bishops (*patres*) and theological experts (*periti*). Formal discussion of the text began on 14 November 1962, while its solemn promulgation took place only on 18 November 1965, near the conclusion of the Council. This extended gestation—spanning almost the entire conciliar period—reveals the depth of the difficulties involved in reaching a shared understanding of divine revelation, Scripture, and Tradition.

Between the first and second conciliar periods, in the spring of 1963, twelve new schemata were circulated among the Council Fathers. Cardinal Frings once again entrusted these texts to Joseph Ratzinger, who responded with extensive handwritten marginal notes that Frings carried back to Rome.¹⁴⁶ As Ratzinger later recalled, at Frings's request he even drafted a brief alternative schema expressing his theological position, which he presented—together with the Cardinal—to several prominent cardinals. While they found the proposal compelling, they were not yet prepared to issue a formal judgment. Ratzinger himself acknowledged the provisional character of this initial effort, noting that it had been composed in great haste and therefore could not rival the solidity and thoroughness of the official schema, which had undergone a lengthy process of revision by competent scholars. It soon became clear, he added, that the text required further reworking and deepening, calling for “other eyes and hands”. Consequently, it was agreed that Karl Rahner and Ratzinger would collaborate on a second, more developed version.¹⁴⁷ This second draft, which came to be known as the *Rahner–Ratzinger schema*, was, as Ratzinger himself candidly noted, “much more Rahner's work than my own”¹⁴⁸ Once circulated among the Council Fathers, it elicited a number of sharply critical reactions, underscoring both its theological boldness and the depth of division surrounding the question of revelation.

¹⁴⁵ DECLUE, *The Mind of Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 36.

¹⁴⁶ See DECLUE, *The Mind of Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 36-37.

¹⁴⁷ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 128.

¹⁴⁸ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 128.

As Francesco Testaferri has shown, the resulting *Rahner–Ratzinger schema* moved decisively beyond the narrow apologetic framework of *De fontibus revelationis*. Rather than speaking of multiple sources of revelation, it approached revelation itself as a single source, structured around a Christological center grounded in the logic of the Incarnation. By carefully holding together the divine and human dimensions revealed in Christ, the schema affirmed the fullness of God’s self-manifestation in Jesus Christ and avoided the rigid, dualistic externalism characteristic of traditional apologetics. Moreover, by presenting history as the very fabric of revelation, the text overcame scholastic formalism and emphasized the historical-salvific and dialogical character of revelation, granting history an indispensable role in articulating the complexity of the saving process from its origins. Finally, the entire proposal was shaped by a fundamental openness oriented toward a clearly pastoral presentation, in harmony with the vision articulated by Pope John XXIII at the opening of the Second Vatican Council.¹⁴⁹

Ratzinger’s influence was especially evident in the drafting and reception of *Dei Verbum*, where his theological background proved particularly decisive. Having written his *Habilitationsschrift* on Bonaventure’s theology of revelation and salvation history and having served as professor of fundamental theology at Bonn from 1959 to 1963, he was uniquely prepared to contribute to both the formulation of the constitution and its later interpretation.¹⁵⁰ His understanding of revelation as a dynamic, historical event—rather than a static collection of propositions—shaped *Dei Verbum*’s Christocentric focus. The constitution’s affirmation of Christ as the “mediator and the fullness of all revelation”, who speaks to humanity “as friends” (DV 2), would become, as Ruddy observes, a cornerstone of Ratzinger’s theological and magisterial work.¹⁵¹

This long-standing commitment to the “fullness” of Christ also explains Ratzinger’s later theological and pastoral warnings against reducing Christ to a moral example, a social reformer, or a mere bearer of a message or cause. For Ratzinger, such reductions inevitably weakened the integrity of Christian faith, which rests on the encounter with the living Christ who reveals the Father. *Dei Verbum* thus not only shaped his understanding of revelation but also informed his broader Christological concerns.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ See TESTAFERRI, Francesco, *Lo schema Rahner-Ratzinger*. *Lateranum* v. 80, n.1, 2014, p. 29-59. See also. RAHNER; RATZINGER, *De revelatione Dei et hominis in Jesu Christo facta*, cited in B. CAHILL, *The Renewal of Revelation Theology (1960-1962)*. Tesi Gregoriana. Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1999, p. 300-317.

¹⁵⁰ See RUDDY, *The Second Vatican Council and the Third Millennium*, 2024, p. 44.

¹⁵¹ See RUDDY, *The Second Vatican Council and the Third Millennium*, 2024, p. 44.

¹⁵² See RUDDY, *The Second Vatican Council and the Third Millennium*, 2024, p. 45.

1.3.4 Ratzinger's Ecclesiology and vision of the Church

The influence of *Dei Verbum* can be seen as well in Ratzinger's approach to Scripture and its interpretation within the life of the Church. He consistently emphasized a hermeneutic that respected both the historical character of the biblical texts and their ecclesial context, resisting approaches that isolated Scripture from the living Tradition and faith of the Church.¹⁵³ Revelation, for Ratzinger, remains inseparable from the Church as the living subject that receives, safeguards, and hands on the Word of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Ratzinger's support for the Council's understanding of the Church as *communio* reflects the same underlying coherence in his thought. Grounded in the life of the Trinity and made concrete in the Eucharist, this vision also takes shape in the relationship between local churches and the universal Church. It moved beyond a purely legal or institutional framework and offered a more lived account of the Church as a community formed by shared faith and participation. This emphasis on communion would remain central to Ratzinger's ecclesiology in the years that followed.

1.3.5 Legacy of Ratzinger's Theological contributions

The present chapter cannot offer a full account of Joseph Ratzinger's many contributions to the Second Vatican Council. A more detailed discussion will follow in the next chapter. Even so, his influence cannot be set aside. As Emery de Gaál rightly notes, "the degree of his influence was so considerable that one cannot ignore Ratzinger's contributions and still do justice to the spirit and message of Vatican II"¹⁵⁴.

De Gaál also describes the Council, as Ratzinger helped to shape it, as marked by a renewed focus on Christ. Ratzinger played an important role in expressing the Catholic faith in a language that was more personal and more clearly centered on Christ—on God's enduring presence in the Eucharist through the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, in the words of Saint Paul, Christ may dwell in your hearts (Eph 3:17). Seen this way, the mystery of Christ is not confined to the past but takes on a breadth that embraces the whole of creation in his Body, the Church. Tradition, then, is not simply what has been handed down, but the living trace of Christ's presence among us, drawing believers into participation in his life. Understood in this

¹⁵³ See RUDDY, *The Second Vatican Council and the Third Millennium*, 2024, p. 45.

¹⁵⁴ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek your countenance*, 2018, p. 61.

light, catholicity becomes Christ's own gesture of welcome extended, through the life of the Trinity, to the world. Tradition thus sustains a living and renewed friendship with God.¹⁵⁵

This relational focus also shaped Ratzinger's approach to Scripture and revelation. In one homily, he expressed it in simple terms: "The more we love Jesus, the more we know him; the more our true freedom grows and our joy in being redeemed deepens. Thank you, Jesus, for your friendship!"¹⁵⁶ At the same time, he warned that an exclusive reliance on the historical-critical method risks turning that relationship into something abstract and distant, a grasping at something that is no longer truly present.¹⁵⁷ For Ratzinger, *Dei Verbum* offered a way to hold together careful historical study and genuine theological insight. A theological reading of Scripture, he argued, does not leave Christ in the past but makes him present here and now, opening the way to a living relationship with him—precisely the goal of revelation, as *Dei Verbum* itself teaches.¹⁵⁸

Looking at it as a whole, Ratzinger's role at the Council was both formative and forward-looking. Through his theological work, his close collaboration with Cardinal Frings, and his contributions to key documents—especially *Dei Verbum*—he helped shape a vision of the Church that remained rooted in Tradition while engaging thoughtfully with the challenges of the modern world. As he reflected,

not every valid council in the history of the Church has been a fruitful one; in the last analysis, many of them have been just a waste of time. Despite all the good to be found in the texts it produced, the last word about the historical value of Vatican Council II has yet to be spoken. If, in the end, it will be numbered among the highlights of Church history depends on those who will transform its words into the life of the Church¹⁵⁹.

At the same time, the Council offered Ratzinger the opportunity to bring his theological insights into the concrete life of the Church, deepening his understanding of how doctrine, pastoral care, and ecclesial unity are intrinsically ordered toward one another. Through this lived experience of the Church, his theology matured into a richer vision of revelation itself—

¹⁵⁵ See DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek your countenance*, 2018, p. 62-63.

¹⁵⁶ RATZINGER, Joseph, *Homily in the Mass Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, April 18, 2005. Cited in RUDDY, *The Second Vatican Council and the Third Millennium*, 2024, p. 44.

¹⁵⁷ Ratzinger explains in *Jesus of Nazareth*, canonical exegesis - whose aim is "reading the individual texts of the Bible in the context of the whole"—does not "contradict historical-critical exegesis, but carries it forward in an organic way toward becoming theology in the proper sense". See. RATZINGER, Joseph. *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, xix. See also. RUDDY, *The Second Vatican Council and the Third Millennium*, 2024, p. 46.

¹⁵⁸ See RUDDY, *The Second Vatican Council and the Third Millennium*, 2024, p. 46

¹⁵⁹ RATZINGER, Joseph. *Epilogue: On the Status of Church and Theology Today*, cited in RUDDY, *The Second Vatican Council and the Third Millennium*, 2024, p. 55.

not as an abstract system of ideas, but as God's patient and loving self-disclosure unfolding within history.

Seen in this light, revelation is never imposed through force or domination. It advances quietly, through humility, fidelity, and love. This conviction led Ratzinger to articulate what he would later describe as a *theology of littleness*, a fundamental category of Christian faith. As he explains, "the theology of littleness is a fundamental category of what it means to be Christian. According to our faith, God's special greatness is manifested precisely in the absence of power"¹⁶⁰. True historical effectiveness, therefore, belongs not to those who command or destroy, but to those who love—whose influence cannot be measured by worldly standards of power.

This perspective reveals the inner logic of God's gradual revelation in history. God does not overwhelm humanity with His greatness; He allows Himself to be known step by step, in ways that respect human freedom and vulnerability. Thus, as Ratzinger observes, God deliberately revealed Himself "in the powerlessness of Nazareth and Golgotha"¹⁶¹ making clear that His identity is not expressed through domination but through self-giving love. The greatest, therefore, is not the one who can destroy the most—although the world continues to regard destructive potential as the supreme sign of power—but the one whose smallest act of love already surpasses the greatest capacity for destruction.

The theology of littleness also illuminates the Church's understanding of revelation itself. God implants within the human heart a fundamental awareness that He exists and that He speaks. Scripture does not begin by arguing for God's existence; it presupposes it: In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Likewise, God presupposes that He will be known through His Word. While philosophical arguments—the cosmological, teleological, and moral—may point toward God, they do not constitute the foundation of faith. God is not a puzzle to be solved by human logic; He reveals Himself.

Revelation reaches its fullness in the Word made flesh: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the Word dwelt among us (cf. John 1:1,14)". God does not merely speak about Himself; He gives Himself in the Son, who became truly human to draw creation into His love. Through Him, we know the triune God, Creator of heaven and earth, who humbles Himself to enter human history. For Ratzinger, Christ cannot

¹⁶⁰ RATZINGER, *Salt of the Earth*, 2013. p. 20.

¹⁶¹ RATZINGER, *Salt of the Earth*, 2013. p. 20.

be separated from Scripture: the incarnate Word and the written Word are inseparable. This self-giving continues in the Church, not as a mere human institution but as the living space in which God's history is received, lived, and shared. To live in and with the Church—where Scripture is proclaimed and embodied—is central to faith. Any attempt to separate Jesus from His Word or from the Church that carries it diminishes the depth, unity, and transformative power of revelation.¹⁶²

Yet this revelation, while complete in Christ, continues to unfold in history through the life of the Church. Here, Ratzinger's experience at the Council proved decisive. Vatican II confirmed for him that doctrine is not opposed to pastoral care, nor is unity opposed to engagement with the world. Rather, all three must remain integrated if the Church is to remain faithful to her mission. Revelation becomes credible not merely through correct formulations, but through lives shaped by humility, love, and truth.

In this way, the theology of smallness, the gradual unfolding of revelation, and the concrete life of the Church converge. Here is manifested the dialogical and Christological character of revelation in Ratzinger's thought: God's greatness shines most clearly where power appears absent, and His Word transforms not by force, but by light and love. Drawing on Augustine and Bonaventure, Ratzinger emphasizes that the Church, while hoping for the fullness of peace in the future, is nonetheless bound to live love in the present; the Kingdom of eternal peace is already growing in the hearts of those who fulfill Christ's law of love within their own historical moment. Both theologians recognize themselves as subject to the apostolic word: "So there remain faith, hope, and love, these three. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13). Thus, the smallest force of love already surpasses the greatest potential for destruction, and it is through this quiet, patient, and Christ-centered strength that God continues to reveal Himself within history.¹⁶³

Conclusion

The formative years of Joseph Ratzinger reveal a theologian whose mind and heart were deeply rooted in the Church's rich spiritual and intellectual heritage, yet acutely attentive to the moral, intellectual, and existential challenges of the modern world. From his early life in post-war Bavaria, marked by faith amidst crisis, to his intensive engagement with St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure, Ratzinger developed a theology of revelation that is both faithful to Tradition

¹⁶² RATZINGER, *Salt of the Earth*, 2013, p. 20.

¹⁶³ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 163.

and attentive to the questions of his time. His experiences, shaped by political upheaval, personal reflection, and a commitment to intellectual and spiritual formation, helped him craft a vision of theology that emerges organically from life itself, where God's presence and action in history are experienced by the people. Revelation, in this sense, is profoundly relational, inviting a response from those who encounter it. These early experiences also laid the foundation for his contributions as a theological advisor at the Second Vatican Council, where he helped articulate a vision of revelation that is personal, historical, and ecclesial.

At the heart of Ratzinger's thought is a decisive rejection of a purely abstract, monological, propositional understanding of revelation. Instead, he consistently emphasizes revelation as the personal, dialogical, self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ—a dynamic act of love that draws humanity into transformation and encounter. Revelation, in his vision, is not merely unidirectional dispensation of information or doctrine; it is a living event, enacted in the Church through Scripture, the sacraments, and the shared life of the community. This dialogical and incarnational perspective, most fully expressed in *Dei Verbum*, presents the Church as the living medium through which God's saving work continues in history.

Ratzinger's theology demonstrates a remarkable integration of faith and reason, history and eternity, doctrine and lived experience. Drawing deeply from Scripture, the patristic tradition, and the medieval synthesis of Bonaventure, he presents revelation as unfolding within the concrete life of the Church, engaging real human persons in their historical and existential context. It is an ecclesial-centered approach that underscores the Church's role not as a distant authority or a collection of abstract truths, but as a living community entrusted with preserving, interpreting, and faithfully transmitting God's truth across generations.

In short, Ratzinger's early formation offers a window into a mind and heart shaped by history, Scripture, and Tradition—always oriented toward guiding the faithful into a genuine encounter with God. While this does not capture the entirety of his thought, it provides a crucial starting point for understanding his notion of revelation as both dialogical and Christocentric. The following chapters will explore these two dimensions in greater depth, showing how revelation calls us into dialogue and continually points us toward Christ. This sets the stage for a deeper appreciation of Ratzinger's theology, beginning here with the formative experiences that shaped his understanding of how God reveals Himself in history and in the life of His Church.

CHAPTER 2. THE DIALOGICAL NATURE OF REVELATION IN JOSEPH RATZINGER

An examination of Joseph Ratzinger's early intellectual development, from his formative years to his doctoral dissertation, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, reveals that this foundational work played a decisive role in shaping his theological vision. Through his engagement with Bonaventure, Ratzinger developed a profound understanding of salvation history and ecclesiology, themes that would later define his wider contribution to Catholic theology. This early study not only laid the groundwork for his theological method but also prepared him for meaningful participation in the Second Vatican Council.

As already indicated in the previous chapter, Ratzinger's early formation shaped his understanding of revelation as God's personal, dialogical self-disclosure in Christ, received and lived within the Church. Moving beyond an abstract or merely doctrinal framework, he came to understand revelation as a living event unfolding in Scripture, sacrament, and ecclesial life, one that engages the whole person within history. In this perspective, faith and reason are not opposed but mutually ordered, while revelation is always grounded in both Tradition and lived ecclesial experience. This establishes a Christ-centered and relational vision in which the Church becomes the living context of God's ongoing action in the world.

Scholars of Ratzinger's theology note that one of the main difficulties in tracing its coherence lies in the fact that he never produced a single systematic theology; instead, his approach is inherently synthetic and integrative, seeking to highlight the inner unity of the Christian vision. For Ratzinger, theological disciplines cannot be treated in isolation—sacramental and moral theology, for example, must remain firmly rooted in their biblical, ecclesiological, and Trinitarian contexts. His theology of revelation is therefore often identified as a privileged entry point into his thought, since it highlights the communicability of the Word of God as its central unifying concern. This insight corresponds closely with the emphasis already present in his dissertation, where he reflects on the historical unfolding of divine revelation and the theological structures through which it is mediated.

In this perspective, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure* appears not merely as the beginning of his academic work, but as a key for understanding the holistic, Christ-centered, and revelation-oriented vision that would characterize his theology throughout his life. It is precisely this trajectory that leads into the present chapter on the dialogical nature of revelation in Joseph Ratzinger. The chapter will first present the essence of revelation in his thought and show how its very structure opens toward dialogue and encounter. It will then examine the

relationship between revelation, Scripture, and Tradition, and how this understanding contributed to his work on the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*. Finally, it will explore how the Church herself becomes the place where this dialogue between God and humanity takes form and continues in history.

2.1. The Essence of Revelation in *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*¹

In his book *theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, Joseph Ratzinger undertakes a penetrating reexamination of the nature and meaning of divine Revelation through a sustained engagement with the theological and spiritual vision of the thirteenth-century Franciscan theologian and Doctor of the Church, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. Ratzinger's turn to Bonaventure emerges organically from his earlier study of Augustine; as he explains, "since I had devoted my first study to Augustine, and thus had become somewhat familiar with the world of the Fathers, it seemed natural now to approach the Middle Ages"², a move that was not merely chronological but driven by deeper methodological concerns. The questions he hoped to bring to this new interlocutor were articulated around the interrelated concepts of "revelation – history – metaphysics"³, and his aim was to "describe the relation between history and metaphysics as Bonaventure understood it"⁴.

As Ratzinger's study progressed, his attention became increasingly focused on "the theology of history as Bonaventure himself had developed it in the spiritual struggle of his own age"⁵, revealing that his engagement was neither antiquarian nor purely historical. The results were unexpected: Bonaventure's theology of history exposes a profound tension around eschatology, decisively shaped by his debate with Joachim of Fiore, and inseparable from broader medieval debates on faith, reason, and philosophy—tensions that, in some ways, invite cautious comparison with the post-Conciliar Church.⁶ Ratzinger's engagement was motivated by theology, not mere historical curiosity, as he sought to respond to the pressing challenges of

¹ In his introduction, Ratzinger explains that significant theological interpretations of history tend to emerge in periods of profound crisis. He notes that Augustine's theology of history developed in response to the collapse of the Roman Empire and that this concern with history continued throughout Western theology. According to Ratzinger, the thirteenth century marked a renewed intensification of historical reflection, influenced especially by the prophetic vision of Joachim of Fiore and its perceived confirmation in the life and mission of St. Francis of Assisi. This context gave rise to a deeper questioning of the medieval understanding of history, culminating in Bonaventure's *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, which Ratzinger identifies as a major and innovative expression of Christian theology of history, to be understood in relation to Bonaventure's broader corpus and intellectual milieu. See RATZINGER, Joseph. *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*. Translated by Zachary Hayes. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971, v-vi.

² RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, xii.

³ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, xii.

⁴ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, xii.

⁵ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, xii.

⁶ See RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, xiii-xiv.

twentieth-century Catholic thought, particularly the limitations of the dominant neo-Scholastic framework, which had often reduced Revelation to a static deposit of doctrinal propositions or supernatural truths to be intellectually assented to. Against this reduction, he found in Bonaventure a vision of Revelation that is dynamic, historical, and dialogical rooted in the person of Christ, unfolding within the concrete life of the Church, and capable of bridging the gap between divine truth and human history, the eternal Word and temporal existence.

Ratzinger regarded this approach (neo-Scholastic framework) as theologically inadequate, particularly considering the growing “historical consciousness” of modern thought. He argued that the neo-Scholastic paradigm tended to reduce Revelation to abstract information, severing it from its living, salvific reality. It overlooked the personal and dialogical nature of God’s self-communication and risked detaching theological truth from its existential and ecclesial context. In response to this reductionism, Ratzinger turned to Bonaventure, drawing from him a richer, more integrated vision of Revelation, one capable of bridging divine truth and human history, the eternal Word and its unfolding within temporal existence.⁷

According to Ratzinger’s interpretation, Bonaventure offers a vision of Revelation that is not merely propositional but profoundly personal, dialogical and historical and the same time Christological. Revelation is not a delivery of timeless truths from a distant deity; it is an act of God’s self-communication within the fabric of history, culminating in the person of Jesus Christ. For Bonaventure, as Ratzinger shows, Revelation is not external to the human subject but is encountered in the concrete history of salvation. It is a living event that includes the ecclesial and mystical participation of the believer. Revelation, in this sense, is essentially dialogical: a divine-human encounter in which God speaks, and humanity is invited to respond with faith, love, and understanding. As Ratzinger explains,

here, ‘revelation’ is always a concept denoting an act. The word refers to the act in which God shows himself, not the objectified result of this act. And because this is so, the receiving subject is also always part of the concept of ‘revelation.’ Where there is no one to perceive ‘revelation,’ no re-vel-ation has occurred, because no veil has been removed. By definition, revelation requires someone who apprehends it⁸.

Revelation, therefore, is not an isolated divine utterance but a relational event, a dialogue, an unveiling that requires the presence and participation of the human subject. It is through this dialogical relationship that Revelation fulfills its ultimate purpose, not simply the

⁷ See RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971. p. 84. See also COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013. p. 22.

⁸ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 108. See also COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 24.

transmission of knowledge, but the transformation of the human person and the drawing of humanity into communion with the Triune God.

This understanding is grounded in Bonaventure's integrative theological method, which unites Scripture, the patristic and monastic tradition, and mystical theology within a robust Christocentric framework. Bonaventure's theology is marked by a deep awareness of history as the stage of God's salvific action. His vision is not linear or abstract but symbolic and sacramental seeing in the events of salvation history the unfolding of God's plan, culminating in the Incarnation. Yet, as Ratzinger carefully notes, there are also limits to Bonaventure's treatment of Revelation when considered considering contemporary theological categories. In a revealing and self-critical passage, Ratzinger writes:

this means that the Bonaventurian concept of *revelatio* (and *inspiratio*, *manifestatio*, *apertio*) is not immediately comparable with similar concepts of modern theology. It is only with this express reservation that the following statements can be made. We deliberately avoid any attempt to compare these notions with those of modern theology even though such a comparison would be possible. Instead, we will merely try to present the ideas of Bonaventure as they stand. In the following development, when the word *revelatio* is used side by side with the English word "revelation," it is always done under these limitations⁹.

Joseph Ratzinger adopts a careful and respectful hermeneutical approach in his engagement with the theology of St. Bonaventure. He acknowledges that, while Bonaventure offers profound theological visions into various dimensions of divine self-communication—employing terms such as *revelatio* (revelation), *inspiratio* (inspiration), and *manifestatio* (manifestation)—these insights do not culminate in a fully articulated or systematic doctrine of Revelation in the modern sense. Rather than presenting Revelation as a singular, unified act grounded in the Incarnation, Bonaventure emphasizes a multiplicity of revelatory events throughout salvation history. Although he affirms the uniqueness and lasting significance of Christ's self-revelation through expressions such as *Christus incarnatus* (the Incarnate Christ), *sacra pagina* (Holy Scripture), *doctrina* (teaching), and *fides* (faith), these elements are not developed into an integrated theological framework. As Ratzinger notes, the absence of a clearly defined conceptual unity results in a theology of Revelation that is theologically rich but remains somewhat fragmented. This methodological observation reflects Ratzinger's broader commitment to respecting the historical and conceptual integrity of theological sources, even as he seeks to draw from them acumens that contribute to a more coherent understanding of Revelation in the context of Christ and the Church.¹⁰

⁹ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 58.

¹⁰ See RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 58.

Ratzinger's contribution, then, lies in drawing together what Bonaventure's theology implies but does not explicitly synthesize. By retrieving Bonaventure's symbolic and Christocentric framework and integrating it into a broader theological vision, Ratzinger constructs a concept of Revelation that is both faithful to tradition and responsive to the questions of modern theology. Though he never composed a formal, systematic treatise, his theology is remarkably holistic. The theme of Revelation acts as a unifying principle, shaping his approach to Scripture, Ecclesiology, Tradition, and Trinitarian theology.¹¹

At the heart of this synthesis is Ratzinger's conviction that Revelation is not merely divine communication but a dialogue, a divine communion and a Christocentric. God's Word is not spoken into a vacuum but into history, calling forth the response of faith and forming the Church as the community of that response. As Hebrews 1:1–2 proclaims, in times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a Son. Revelation is not a divine monologue, but a dialogue, a living and transformative event in which God makes Himself known to unite humanity with Himself.¹²

2.1.1 Revelation as Encounter

In Joseph Ratzinger's theological vision, Revelation does not arrive as a neatly packaged set of propositions or a ledger of divine facts handed down from heaven. It unfolds instead as an encounter—alive, personal, and irreducibly dialogue—where God gives Himself rather than information about Himself. Revelation, for Ratzinger, is never a static object to be stored or catalogued; it is an act, something that happens, breaks in, and takes place within history. And because it is an event rather than a thing, it cannot stand alone: Revelation presupposes one who receives it. Absent a hearer, it remains unfinished, suspended, waiting to be fully realized.

A central insight in Ratzinger's theological vision is the dialogue and participatory nature of Revelation. He draws attention to the linguistic character of the term "Revelation", suggesting that it functions more as a verb than a noun. Revelation, in this sense, is akin to a gerund—an action that is actualized only in the performance of the act itself. Just as "running" denotes an activity rather than a static object, so too Revelation, in Ratzinger's thought, is God's continual act of self-communication to humanity. And, as with any communicative act, it presupposes a recipient who listens and responds. Without such a reception, the act of Revelation remains unfinished. As DeClue explains in his interpretation of Ratzinger's intention,

this approach makes sense when one understands revelation as God's self-communication. Communication takes place between persons. Without the recipient,

¹¹ See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 21.

¹² COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 21–22.

no communication happens. The very term “revelation”, etymologically speaking, denotes the removal of a veil. As Ratzinger indicated in the above quote, if one does not perceive the truth of the reality of what is being communicated, then the veil remains. Think of the many people who saw Jesus yet who did not believe—that is, did not perceive the divine reality in the human visage¹³.

Ratzinger frequently references the Latin root of the word *revelatio*, meaning “the unveiling of the hidden”¹⁴. This etymological understanding captures the essence of Revelation as he understands it: the unveiling of divine reality so that the human person might perceive the truth of who God is. However, this unveiling only achieves its purpose if there is someone present to behold what is revealed. If the veil is lifted but no one is there to witness it, no true Revelation has occurred. Thus, for Ratzinger, the human subject is not a passive observer but an indispensable participant in the revelatory event.

This understanding stands in contrast to certain theological frameworks, particularly those shaped by Neo-Scholasticism, which tended to regard Revelation as a series of objective truths or doctrinal propositions—essentially divine data handed down from above. While Ratzinger does not deny that Revelation contains propositional content, he insists that such content alone does not constitute Revelation in its fullness. What renders Revelation truly revelatory is not solely the transmission of information, but the encounter with the One who reveals. Propositional content, without the context of encounter and reception in faith, remains insufficient.¹⁵

Accordingly, faith occupies a central place in Ratzinger’s conception of Revelation. Revelation is not fully actualized until it is accepted by the human person in faith. One may read Scripture, comprehend its words, and even grasp its theological meanings, yet without recognizing the divine voice and presence within those words, the revelatory act remains incomplete. As Ratzinger himself affirms, “Only Scripture as it is understood in faith is truly

¹³ DECLUE, Richard G. Jr. *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI: A Theology of Communion*. Washington, D.C.: Word on Fire, 2024. p. 157.

¹⁴ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 58.

¹⁵ DeClue further highlights an important insight in Joseph Ratzinger’s thought: the difference between simply seeing and truly perceiving in faith. Many encountered Jesus with their physical eyes, yet not all recognized who he truly was. The disciples, by contrast, both saw and believed. This shows that revelation cannot be reduced to what is externally visible or historically observable. Signs and events are essential, but they do not complete revelation on their own. Revelation comes to fulfillment only when it is received inwardly, when the human person responds in faith and is opened by grace to what God is communicating. Drawing on Bonaventure, the outward form of revelation functions like a summons that awakens the human spirit, drawing it toward deeper understanding and eventually toward love. Without this interior opening, one may look without truly seeing and hear without really understanding. For Ratzinger, this is decisive: the one who receives revelation is already part of what revelation is. If no one receives what God communicates, then revelation has not fully occurred, since the “veil” has not truly been lifted. In this sense, revelation is never merely something placed before us from the outside; it is a lived encounter in which God’s self-disclosure becomes real in the act of being received and transforming the person who welcomes it. See DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024. p. 157-158. See also, RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 108.

holy Scripture”¹⁶. The lifting of the veil occurs only when the response of faith completes the act of self-disclosure initiated by God.

2.1.2 The Controversy over Ratzinger’s Dialogical Structure of Revelation

Ratzinger’s interpretation of Revelation—dynamic, relational, and insistently “dialogical”—stirred significant controversy during the academic review of his *Habilitationsschrift*. Central to his approach was the insistence that Revelation requires human reception, an idea that unsettled one of his examiners, the influential theologian Michael Schmaus. Schmaus was alarmed. He feared that emphasizing the historical and relational character of Revelation was not just a minor innovation but a potential gateway to modernist distortions. As Ratzinger remarks, “Schmaus saw in these not at all a faithful rendering of Bonaventure’s thought but a dangerous modernism that had to lead to the subjectivization of the concept of revelation”¹⁷. In Schmaus’s eyes, Ratzinger’s focus on experience and reception threatened the objective and eternal nature of Revelation, risking a slide into subjectivism where divine truth depends on human response. Seen from this perspective, Ratzinger’s retrieval of Bonaventure seemed less like historical scholarship and more like a challenge to the neo-Scholastic model, which framed Revelation as a stable, immutable body of truths. The tension here was profound: on one side, a vibrant, living understanding of God’s self-disclosure unfolding in history; on the other, a desire to safeguard doctrinal clarity, permanence, and intellectual security. Between these poles, Ratzinger’s work navigated uncharted theological terrain, daring to insist that Revelation comes alive only when met by a receptive and responsive human heart.

Nonetheless, the controversy surrounding his thesis was more than academic. Ratzinger was ultimately required to revise his work significantly to satisfy Schmaus’s concerns. As Collins notes,

this was not a minor edit; it consisted in eliminating over half of his original thesis. He later expanded on the second half of the original thesis in order to make it acceptable to Schmaus. The trauma of this experience, no doubt, left its mark indelibly on the young theologian and would, consequently, sharpen his attentiveness to this aspect of his understanding of the Christian vision as inherently dialogical¹⁸.

The profound challenge Ratzinger encountered did not lead him to abandon his thesis; rather, it strengthened his resolve to articulate a theology of Revelation that respects both God’s

¹⁶ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 67.

¹⁷ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p.109.

¹⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gerhard Müller. Freiburg: Herder, 2008. Cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 26. See also. RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p.109-110.

initiative and the freedom and dignity of the human response, affirming the dialogical nature of Revelation.

Underlying this dialogical model of Revelation is a deeper epistemological conviction, rooted in Ratzinger's early encounter with personalist philosophy—especially Martin Buber—as well as in the patristic and scholastic traditions highlighted in Chapter One, particularly in St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure. According to this conviction, knowledge presupposes both a knowing subject and a known object, and the mode of knowing is shaped by the disposition of the subject. Divine Revelation is therefore not imposed upon the human subject in a deterministic or coercive manner; rather, it is offered in a way that respects the freedom, dignity, and interior openness of the human person. Ratzinger insists that God addresses the human subject through freedom, not despite it. Revelation is thus neither mechanical nor automatic, but calls for openness, receptivity, and an active, personal response.

The theme of receptivity runs deeply through Ratzinger's entire theological vision. For him, theology is not primarily about building elaborate systems or generating original ideas; rather, it is a discipline of faithful listening—of receiving what has been revealed, being formed by it, and handing it on with integrity. This understanding closely aligns with the teaching of *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation from the Second Vatican Council, to which Ratzinger made significant contributions. *Dei Verbum* emphasizes that God reveals Himself through both actions and words that are intimately connected. The fullness of this revelation is found in Jesus Christ. As the text states:

This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation¹⁹.

This vision reflects Ratzinger's own conviction that Revelation is not merely the communication of divine truths, but a living and dialogical event—one that invites the human person into a transformative encounter with the living God.

Richard DeClue explains that for Joseph Ratzinger, emphasizing the receiving subject in revelation is not subjectivism or relativism, but a recognition that God's self-communication is only fully realized when it is received in faith. External signs in salvation history remain essential, but without interior grace and faithful reception, revelation is not completed in the

¹⁹ VATICAN COUNCIL II. *Dei Verbum*: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Roma: 1965. Sec. 2. Available in: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html. Accessed October 20, 2025.

person who encounters it. Thus, both objective divine action and subjective reception belong together. Ratzinger avoids two extremes: against neo-scholastic separation of doctrine from lived faith, he insists on the subject's active participation; against modernist reduction, he maintains the objective truth of revelation and the binding nature of dogma. Revelation is therefore dialogical, not merely informational, a divine invitation to communion that requires a free response from the whole person. Without this response, revelation remains like a gift offered but not yet received.²⁰

2.1.3 The Fulfillment of Revelation in the Response of Faith

Faith, for Joseph Ratzinger, is the indispensable human response to God's self-revelation—a dynamic and personal act that transcends mere intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions. It is a free and trusting acceptance of God's loving initiative, an opening of the whole person—mind, heart, and will—to the transformative encounter with divine mystery. Through faith, the individual not only acknowledges the truth revealed but enters a profound communion with God, actively participating in the mystery that God discloses.

This response is neither passive nor merely subjective; it completes and brings Revelation to its fulfillment. In Ratzinger's understanding, Revelation is a dialogical event that attains its fullness only when it encounters the human response of faith, for “by definition, revelation requires someone who apprehends”²¹. The divine Word initiates the dialogue, but it is the human “*Thou*”, responding in trust and love, that renders the encounter living and efficacious. Faith thus becomes the active partner in the divine-human dialogue, enabling Revelation to move beyond a historical or textual event into a living reality within both the individual believer and the Church. As Ratzinger notes, “the true understanding of revelation demands of each individual reader an attitude which goes beyond the merely ‘objective’ recognition of what is written”²². Seen this way, Revelation does not yield itself to the cool distance of observation. It becomes intelligible only in involvement, in the posture of one who listens and answers—of a heart sharpened by attention and opened to the living God who speaks.

Moreover, in Ratzinger's theology, faith is not a singular moment but a continuous process of listening and responding—an ongoing dialogue that shapes the life of the believer and deepens their understanding over time. It involves not only the initial assent of belief but

²⁰ See DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 158-160.

²¹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p.108.

²² RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 68.

also a sustained commitment marked by transformation, spiritual growth, and an ever-increasing love of God. In this way, faith becomes the bridge between God's eternal self-communication and the temporal, lived experience of both the Church and the individual believer. It is the personal, free, and trusting response by which the human person receives the divine initiative—not merely acknowledging truths but entering a living relationship with God. Without this response of faith, Revelation remains incomplete.

Ratzinger even considers the hypothetical, though tragic, possibility that if Revelation were never received in faith, it would remain unfulfilled. Scripture, Church teachings, and theological writings may endure, but without a believing response, the revelatory event fails to reach its intended purpose. This view does not undermine the objective reality of God's self-disclosure; rather, it highlights the essential role of human freedom and participation within the divine economy. Revelation is not fulfilled merely by God's act of speaking; it becomes complete only when humanity listens, believes, and freely responds in faith. As Ratzinger affirms:

Only Scripture as it is understood in faith is truly holy Scripture. Consequently, Scripture in the full sense is theology, i.e., it is the book and the understanding of the book in the faith of the Church. On the other hand, theology can be called Scripture, for it is nothing other than the understanding of Scripture; this understanding, which is theology, brings Scripture to that full fruitfulness which corresponds to its nature as revelation²³.

This dialogical understanding of Revelation also profoundly shapes Ratzinger's ecclesiology. The Church is not merely a custodian of doctrinal formulas or a repository of past truths. Rather, she exists to bear witness to the living reality of Revelation, to interpret it faithfully within the life of the believing community, and to ensure its continual reception. In this vision, Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium are not isolated or competing sources of authority; instead, they function together as instruments of the living Word, enabling God's voice to be heard afresh in every generation. Revelation, therefore, is not simply a text to be analyzed or a doctrine to be memorized, it is something that must be received in faith, both personally and ecclesial, within the life of the Church. As Ratzinger writes, "In other words, such an understanding demands the attitude of faith by which man gains entrance into the living understanding of Scripture in the Church. It is in this way that man truly receives 'revelation'"²⁴. He further emphasizes that, "The understanding which elevates the Scripture to the status of 'revelation' is not to be taken as an affair of the individual reader; but is realized only in the

²³ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 67.

²⁴ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 68.

living understanding of Scripture in the Church”²⁵. In the later part of this chapter, we will explore more deeply how the Church becomes the dialogical space of revelation, where God continues to speak and humanity responds in faith.

For Ratzinger, Revelation finds its fulfillment only where faith brings into view the inseparable bond between God’s initiative and human response: God does not impose Himself from without but offers Himself in a summons to communion that safeguards human dignity and responsibility. Faith, therefore, is neither passive nor incidental; it is the active, personal assent—the human yes—that answers God’s self-gift. This dialogical encounter lies at the heart of the Christian mystery and grounds all authentic theology, for Revelation is not complete simply when God speaks, but when the human person, freely and trustingly, receives and responds. Only then is the veil drawn back, and what is disclosed is not merely doctrine or text, but the very presence of the living God.

2.2 Revelation and the Levels of Understanding Scripture

For Joseph Ratzinger, Scripture is far more than a collection of ancient writings; it is the divinely inspired and living testimony of God’s self-communication to humanity. Though composed within concrete historical and cultural settings, the biblical texts are animated by the Holy Spirit, who renders them an ever-present witness to the Word of God. Scripture, therefore, is not a static archive of doctrines or moral precepts but a dynamic reality that continues to speak with freshness and authority to every generation of believers. Ratzinger emphasizes that Scripture can never be rightly understood apart from the Church, the community in which it was born, transmitted, and continues to live. The Church, guided by the Spirit, serves as the interpretive home where the Word is proclaimed, received, and interiorly grasped in faith. Within this communion, the Bible’s meaning unfolds in fidelity to apostolic tradition while remaining open to deeper understanding. Detached from the Church, interpretation risks degenerating into subjectivism or literalism; within her life, however, Scripture becomes a living dialogue between God and His people. As Ratzinger explains, Scripture attains its true status as revelation only within this living understanding of the Church, not through the isolated effort of an individual reader. Authentic comprehension of revelation requires faith—a disposition that transcends mere intellectual or objective recognition of the text. Such understanding is “mystical,” surpassing natural knowledge, for it arises from the believer’s participation in the Church’s ongoing encounter with the divine Word. Only by moving beyond

²⁵ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 68.

the literal sense and reading with the eyes of faith within the ecclesial community can one truly receive Scripture as God's revelation and enter into its living mystery.²⁶

Because Ratzinger is convinced that all theology must begin with Scripture, his method is never purely speculative but always grounded in the historical unfolding of salvation. Revelation, for him, is not a single, abstract datum but the living drama of God's self-disclosure in history—a narrative that invites response and participation. Drawing from St. Bonaventure, Ratzinger notes that revelation consists not of one monolithic event but of many "revelations" through which God progressively manifests Himself in time.²⁷ Revelation, then, is not merely the content of what is revealed but the divine act of revealing itself—an event that gives Scripture its narrative and experiential texture rather than a merely propositional one.

In this light, Ratzinger, following Bonaventure, insists that the understanding of Scripture is a "gradual, historical, progressive development...which was in no way closed."²⁸ This means that the meaning of Scripture unfolds on multiple levels of depth and understanding, drawing the believer ever deeper into communion with the Word. Bonaventure identifies three principal ways of reading Scripture that reveal its inexhaustible richness.

The first is the *spiritualis intelligentia*, or spiritual understanding, which corresponds to the traditional fourfold sense of Scripture—the literal, allegorical, moral (tropological), and anagogical. Through this lens, the reader perceives how persons, events, and symbols in the biblical text point to deeper spiritual realities, inspire moral conversion, and open the soul to eschatological hope. The second, the *figurae sacramentales*, perceives Scripture as a unified sacramental whole centered on Christ. Here, the entire biblical narrative is interpreted as a theological drama between Christ and the powers of the Antichrist, echoing Augustine's vision of the *Civitas Dei* and the *Civitas Terrena*.²⁹

Yet beyond this dialectic, Bonaventure describes a higher and more comprehensive approach: the *multiformes theoriae*. At this level, the reader perceives the manifold expressions of the one divine *Logos*—the Word through whom all things were made and in whom all of history finds its ultimate meaning. As noted in *The Book of the Word Made Love* by Christopher S. Collins,

the centrality of the *Logos* is essential for this aspect of Bonaventure's theology of history. The *Logos* through which all things in heaven and on earth are created is the same *Logos* spoken in human history. From Adam and Noah to Abraham, Moses, David, and all the prophets, all the way up to the coming of Christ and in the life of

²⁶ See RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 67-68.

²⁷ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 57.

²⁸ See RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 75.

²⁹ See BONAVENTURE, *Hexameron XIII-XV*. Cited in RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 10.

the Church founded on Christ, many '*theoriae*' appear in the scope of salvation history, but they are expressive of the one *Logos* or Word of God.³⁰

Seen from this angle, the many *theoriae* of Scripture do not scatter into competing meanings but gather into a single, intelligible story shaped by divine love—a story that reaches its climax in Christ, the eternal *Logos* who takes flesh. The whole drama of salvation thus reads as one unbroken Word of God, uttered across the shifting contours of history in manifold forms, yet coming to clarity and completion in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through whom humanity is drawn into communion with God.

In Bonaventure's understanding, history itself is the stage where God's redeeming love enters and transforms creation from within. By becoming human, the eternal Word stepped into time, giving history a new and deeper meaning—its "fullness" arises not from time's own unfolding but from the divine entering the temporal. The Incarnation, therefore, is the center and turning point of all history, the moment from which redemption radiates outward. As Richard DeClue observes, "For Bonaventure, Christ is both the center and the fulfillment of history. Ratzinger consistently embraces this same Christocentric view of all of human history that is fundamentally a movement of *egressus* from God and *regressus* to Him through Jesus Christ"³¹. In Ratzinger's own words,

by His cross, Christ has definitively solved the geometry-problem of world history. With His cross, He has uncovered the lost center of the circle of the world to give the true direction and meaning to the movement of the individual life and to the history of mankind as such³².

This striking image captures how the Cross reorients all of creation around its true center, revealing the divine logic that gives unity and purpose to the whole of history. To understand the present and orient the future rightly, one must therefore cultivate a consciousness that is both historical and eschatological—aware of history's divine direction toward fulfillment in Christ. Within this framework, hope becomes the guiding virtue, discovered not outside of history but within it, through the Church's ongoing life rooted in Christ, who is both history's center and its goal.³³ For both Bonaventure and Ratzinger, history is ultimately a movement of

³⁰ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 7. See also COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 28.

³¹ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 32. See NICHOLS, Aidan. *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*. New York: Burns & Oates, 2007. p. 42.

³² RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971. p. 146.

³³ In relation to the present discussion on revelation and Scripture within Ratzinger's theology, this study will not yet pursue a full treatment of the Christocentric dimension of revelation, as this will be developed more extensively in the following chapter. It is sufficient here to note that for Ratzinger, all authentic revelation finds its center and fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. Scripture is thus not merely a written record of divine communication but the inspired testimony that both reveals and participates in this Christ-centered reality, where the unfolding of salvation history ultimately converges on Christ, who is simultaneously the content, mediator, and fullness of God's self-disclosure. This interpretation finds further support in Emery de Gaál, who maintains that

love—flowing from God and returning to Him through Christ. The Church, living in the present, participates in this same movement by embodying divine love and allowing the kingdom of peace to grow in human hearts. Thus, the encounter with Christ—love made flesh in history forms the foundation of the Church’s mission and identity, the place where the world meets divine love in dialogue, a vision that profoundly shaped Ratzinger’s later theological thought.

Thus, Scripture functions simultaneously as a historical witness and a living sacrament of encounter. It bears witness to God’s acts in history while actively mediating His presence to the Church today. The Word of God does not merely inform; it performs—it shapes, transforms, and draws believers into participation in divine life. For Ratzinger, the true meaning of Scripture emerges only when it is read in faith, illumined by the Spirit, and interpreted within the living tradition of the Church.³⁴

This understanding of Scripture naturally opens onto the question of Tradition. If revelation is a living act of divine self-disclosure, then the transmission of that revelation cannot be confined to the written word alone. Tradition, for Ratzinger, is the living memory of the Word within the Church—a memory that ensures the vitality and unity of revelation across time. The following section will examine the intimate relationship between Scripture and Tradition, demonstrating how they form together a single, indivisible source of divine revelation.

2.3 Relationship between Revelation, Scripture, and Tradition

2.3.1 Revelation as the Source of Scripture and Tradition

Joseph Ratzinger emphasizes the profound unity and inseparability of Scripture and Tradition as the two essential and complementary modes through which divine revelation is transmitted within the life of the Church. Contrary to views that treat Scripture and Tradition as distinct or competing sources of revelation, Ratzinger insists that both flow from a single,

Christ stands at the very center of Ratzinger’s theology; although often regarded as primarily ecclesiological—given the focus of his dissertation and *Habilitationsschrift*—Ratzinger’s deepest motivation and unifying principle are fundamentally Christological (De Gaál, *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI: The Christocentric Shift*, 2010). While de Gaál inaccurately describes the *Habilitationsschrift* as ecclesiological, his central claim remains valid: Christ is the theological axis around which all of Ratzinger’s thought turns. This Christocentric understanding has been further substantiated in Richard G. DeClue, Jr.’s work, which analyzes how Ratzinger’s theology of revelation, Church, liturgy, and eschatology all converge upon the person of Jesus Christ, reinforcing that the true meaning of Scripture and revelation is ultimately realized in the living encounter with the *Logos* made flesh. See. DE GAÁL, Emery. *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI: The Christocentric Shift*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. See also Richard DeClue, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI: A Theology of Communion*. Washington, D.C.: Word on Fire, 2024.

³⁴ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 68.

unified deposit of faith—the fullness of God’s self-communication—entrusted to the Church and safeguarded by its living magisterium, the authoritative interpreter of revelation. For Ratzinger, Scripture cannot be rightly understood apart from Tradition, nor can Tradition be divorced from Scripture: the former is the written expression of God’s Word, while the latter is the living transmission of that Word in the Church’s worship, teaching, and communal life. Both are organically interwoven, with Tradition giving depth and continuity to Scripture, and Scripture providing the normative foundation for Tradition. Yet, Ratzinger also insists that Scripture and Tradition are not, in themselves, the sources of revelation, for revelation itself is their source. He notes that in the Middle Ages, it was common to call Scripture *fons scientiae*—the source of knowledge—but never *fons revelationis*, the source of revelation. If revelation is the source of both Scripture and Tradition, then neither can be identified as revelation itself.³⁵ Drawing on the thought of St. Bonaventure, Ratzinger observes, “As far as I can see, at no time does Bonaventure refer to the Scriptures themselves as ‘revelation’”³⁶. In his critique of *De Fontibus Revelationis*, he clarifies that revelation is not something that follows from Scripture and Tradition, but rather God’s own speaking and acting—the single divine source from which both flow. Written prior to *Dei Verbum* yet anticipating its theology, Ratzinger’s view mirrors the Council’s teaching that revelation unfolds through God’s deeds and words, which together manifest and explain his saving plan. Rather,

for revelation signifies all God’s acts and utterances directed to man; it signifies a reality of which Scripture gives us information but that is not simply Scripture itself. Revelation goes beyond Scripture, then, to the same extent as reality goes beyond information about it. We could also say that Scripture is the material principle of revelation ...but is not the revelation itself³⁷.

For Ratzinger, revelation is ultimately God’s self-disclosure in salvation history, his communication of himself and his will to humanity. Scripture bears witness to this revelation, but revelation itself transcends the written word, encompassing the total reality of God’s saving actions and speech. Thus, while Scripture can be described as the material principle of

³⁵ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024. p. 162-163.

³⁶ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 62

³⁷ RATZINGER, Joseph. *The Question of the Concept of Tradition*. In: RAHNER; RATZINGER. *Revelation and Tradition*, 1966, p. 35. RATZINGER, Joseph. *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, trans. Henry Taylor, ed. Peter Hünermann and Thomas Söding. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008, p. 51. These texts (*The Question of the Concept of Tradition* and *God's Word*) are used together in this research because the principal theological content is essentially the same. Although the later publication presents certain passages with revised wording and editorial adjustments, it preserves Ratzinger's original understanding of revelation as God's self-communication in Jesus Christ and of Tradition as the living transmission of that revelation within the Church. Consequently, the two works may be read in dialogue with one another, with the later text serving to clarify and reinforce arguments already present in the earlier work.

revelation, it is not identical with revelation itself, which is nothing less than the living encounter between God and humanity in history.³⁸

This integrative vision highlights that revelation is not a static archive of texts or customs, but a living experience and transmitted within the community of faith. The magisterium—guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit—plays a vital role in discerning, interpreting, and safeguarding this revelation in every generation, ensuring that the unity between Scripture and Tradition remains intact and vibrant. In this framework, the dialogue between Scripture and Tradition reflects the ongoing self-communication of God, unfolding in history and continually inviting the Church to a deeper understanding and fuller participation in the mystery of salvation. Ratzinger’s insistence on this holistic approach safeguards the Church from both the dangers of biblical literalism detached from the faith community and the risks of tradition becoming disconnected from its scriptural foundation.

2.3.2 Revelation, History, and the Renewal of Theology at Vatican II

Ratzinger’s mature understanding of the relationship between revelation, Scripture, and Tradition was deeply influenced by his Bonaventurian appreciation of revelation as a historical and dialogical event—a dynamic encounter between God and humanity that unfolds through time. When Ratzinger served as a *peritus* (theological expert) at the Second Vatican Council, this understanding shaped his influential critique of the preparatory document *De fontibus revelationis* “On the Sources of Revelation”. The document’s title and framework suggested that Scripture and Tradition were two separate “sources” of revelation. Ratzinger rejected this view, arguing that revelation itself originates solely in God’s self-communication and that both Scripture and Tradition flow from this one divine source. In his words, revelation does not arise *from* Scripture and Tradition; rather, both Scripture and Tradition arise *from* revelation. This insight led to the eventual revision of the document and paved the way for the promulgation of *Dei Verbum* (1965), the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, which reflects Ratzinger’s vision of unity and interdependence between Scripture, Tradition, and the Church.³⁹

³⁸ Ratzinger further explains in his footnote that, this does not mean that Scripture is merely an empty account of realities outside itself. Rather, revelation is truly communicated through words, since God speaks to humanity through human language. However, the mere existence of words does not yet constitute revelation. Revelation is more than the simple presence of a text or message. Ratzinger is emphasizing the distinction between the words themselves and the divine reality they communicate. This distinction does not deny that revelation has a verbal character; instead, it shows that revelation reaches its fullness only when the divine truth expressed in words is truly received and understood in faith. See RATZINGER, Joseph. *God's Word*, 2008, p. 51.

³⁹ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 33. See WICKS, Jared. *Prof. Ratzinger at Vatican II: A Chapter in the Life of Pope Benedict XVI*. New Orleans: Loyola University Press, 2007. p. 24.

During this period, Ratzinger collaborated closely with other major theologians of the Council, particularly Karl Rahner, to develop a renewed theology of revelation. Their collaboration culminated in the book *Revelation and Tradition* 1965,⁴⁰ a significant work that explored how divine revelation continues to unfold in the Church's life. The introduction to this volume noted that their joint work responded to two major contexts: *ad extra*, the ecumenical movement that sought Christian unity, and *ad intra*, the Church's internal struggle to recover a deeper historical and theological consciousness after the modernist crisis. Both theologians aimed to articulate how God's self-communication (revelation) could be understood in a world increasingly aware of historical development and human subjectivity.⁴¹

Karl Rahner argued that theology required a renewed understanding of revelation capable of overcoming the divide between immanentism, which places excessive emphasis on human experience, and extrinsicism, which treats revelation as something entirely external to humanity. Approaching this question from both philosophical and anthropological perspectives, Rahner drew on Thomistic metaphysics and existentialist thought to articulate his position. He maintained that every human person, through divine grace, is inwardly elevated and fundamentally open to God, a condition he described as "entitative divinization".⁴² In this context, Rahner explains that,

this is seen to be the highest instance of the principle that God in his relation of freedom to his creation is, after all, not a finite cause side by side with others in the world, but is the living, permanent transcendent ground of the self-movement of the world itself. It is precisely this principle which also applies *suo modo* to the relation between God and man in the occurrence and history of revelation; in fact it applies here in the highest degree, because this history must in the highest degree be both the act of God and of man, if it is to constitute the highest reality in the being and becoming of the world. If it is possible in principle to overcome in that way the sterile antithesis of immanentism and extrinsicism in the ontological interpretation of change

⁴⁰ RAHNER, Karl; RATZINGER, Joseph. *Revelation and Tradition*, trans. W. J. O'Hara. New York: Herder and Herder, 1966. This English edition is a translation of the original German volume *Offenbarung und Überlieferung* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1965), published as part of the *Quaestiones Disputatae* series. Written in the context of the theological debates surrounding the Second Vatican Council, the work brings together essays by Rahner and Ratzinger—both serving as theological experts (*periti*) at the Council—to examine the relationship between divine revelation and ecclesial tradition. The book played an important role in clarifying theological questions that were later addressed in the conciliar constitution *Dei Verbum*, particularly concerning the transmission of revelation, the authority of Scripture, and the living tradition of the Church. See also COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, p. 33.

⁴¹ Based on earlier preparatory work, theologians Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, each wrote separate essays that were eventually combined into a single book titled *Revelation and Tradition*, published in German in 1965. The publisher's introduction to this book highlights its dual context: externally (*ad extra*), it engages with the new spirit of ecumenism that was emerging during the time of the Second Vatican Council; internally (*ad intra*), it addresses the Catholic Church's ongoing efforts to move beyond the modernist crisis and the challenges of understanding faith within the framework of historical consciousness. Together, Rahner and Ratzinger's contributions represent the closest and most significant attempts by two of the most influential theological experts (*periti*) involved in drafting *Dei Verbum*—the Council's document on divine revelation—to develop fresh ways of expressing the core truths of the Christian faith. See, RAHNER, Karl; RATZINGER, Joseph. *Revelation and Tradition*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1966.

⁴² See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 34.

and history in general, then theology must also surmount such an antithesis in the question which concerns us here⁴³.

For this reason, Karl Rahner insists that theology must move beyond any rigid opposition between immanentism and extrinsicism by recognizing that revelation is neither reducible to purely human experience nor imposed as something wholly external to the human person. Rather, revelation takes place within the dynamic encounter between God's grace and human existence. Grace transforms the deepest orientation of human intellect and freedom, creating within the person an openness to divine self-communication even before it is consciously embraced in faith. Revelation, therefore, is not simply an external message from God but also an interior transformation of human consciousness. In this context, Rahner writes:

If transcendence always has its very being in history, is always mediated historically, and if man has a transcendental condition which is constituted as a permanent feature of his life as a person precisely by what we call divinizing grace by God's self-communication (not by some other causal operation), then precisely that absolute transcendence directed towards the absolute intimate presence of the ineffable mystery giving himself to man has a history and this is what we call the history of revelation. The revelation event itself, therefore, always has two sides. On the one hand it constitutes man's supernaturally elevated transcendence as his permanent though grace-given destiny, always and everywhere operative, present even by the very fact of being rejected. That is the transcendental experience of the absolute and merciful closeness of God, even if it cannot be objectively expressed at will in concepts for everyone. On the other hand, the revelation event is also the historical mediation, the objective, explicit expression of the supernaturally transcendental experience. It occurs in history and, taken in its totality, constitutes the whole of history; the individual's own particular theological reflection belongs to it, though it does not constitute its primary basis or determine it. That is what is called the history of revelation in the usual sense, provided it really is the history of the true self-unfolding of the super naturally transcendental experience and not its misinterpretation, and provided that it truly is the result of God's transcendental self-communication in grace and, therefore, occurs through God's will for such self-communication under his supernatural saving providence and is grasped as such. If this view is taken of the unity and reciprocal relationship between transcendental revelation and revelation of the predicamental and historical kind, or_ rather of the transcendental and historical (mediating) factors of the one revelation and its one history, a really primordial determination of what is revealed emerges : God is revealed as communicating himself in absolute, merciful presence as God, that is, as the absolute mystery. The historical mediation of this transcendental experience is also revealed as valid, as permitting and guaranteeing the absolute experience of God⁴⁴.

Rahner further explains that faith cannot be understood merely as the acceptance of external doctrines or truths heard from outside (*ex auditu*). Beneath the historical and doctrinal expression of revelation lies a transcendental dimension: the human person is created with an inner openness and capacity for God's self-communication. This "credulity" is not mere gullibility, but the ontological orientation of the human person toward communion with God

⁴³ RAHNER, Karl. *Observations on the concept of Revelation*. In: RAHNER; RATZINGER. *Revelation and Tradition*, 1966, p. 12-13.

⁴⁴ RAHNER, *Observations on the concept of Revelation*, 1966, p. 13-14.

through grace. Revelation and faith are therefore both historical and transcendental: God reveals himself concretely within history, while the human person is inwardly capable of receiving and responding to that revelation because he or she is fundamentally open to God.⁴⁵ Yet although Rahner firmly situates this divine-human encounter within human history and freedom, his understanding of revelation often remains highly speculative and abstract, expressed primarily through the philosophical language of transcendence rather than through the concrete historical forms of revelation itself.⁴⁶

Ratzinger, by contrast, approached theological reflection from a historical and narrative perspective, grounding revelation firmly in salvation history. He began with the central proclamation, “Jesus is the Christ”, tracing how this confession fulfills the hopes and promises of the Old Testament. Ratzinger explains,

consequently they do not oppose to the old scripture, or set side by side with it, a new scripture, but they place in contrast to the one single scripture, i.e. the Old Testament, the Christ-event as the spirit which explains scripture, a fundamental conception which also determined the form of the oldest creeds and alone renders them intelligible. The formula "Jesus is the Christ" in fact signifies that in the historical Jesus the Christ-message of the Old Testament is fulfilled, that who Jesus is, can be understood on the basis of the Old Testament and the meaning of the Old Testament perceived in the light of the Christ-event⁴⁷.

For Ratzinger, revelation is inseparable from the concrete historical events through which God acts and speaks. Drawing on the Pauline distinction between *gramma* (the written word) and *pneuma* (the Spirit), he emphasized that Christ, as the living Word, brings Scripture to fulfillment and renders it intelligible. As noted in Paul’s writings, this distinction is explicit: the old and new covenants are contrasted as *gramma* and *pneuma*—letter and spirit—and the Lord is designated as the *pneuma* who makes Scripture intelligible, providing its true, living content rather than merely a literary meaning (2 Cor 3:6–18). Revelation, therefore, is not confined to the written text but continues as a living encounter with the Spirit within the life of the Church.⁴⁸

This view provides the theological foundation for Ratzinger’s understanding of Tradition. Tradition is not merely the repetition of inherited formulas or doctrines; it is the living transmission of the Gospel within the Church, animated by the Holy Spirit. The Church, as the

⁴⁵See RAHNER, *Observations on the concept of Revelation*, 1966, p. 14.

⁴⁶See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 34. See especially Thomas Sheehan, Rahner’s Transcendental Project, p. 29–42, and Daniel Donovan, Revelation and Faith, p. 83–97, In: MARMION, Declan; HINES, Mary E. *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

⁴⁷RATZINGER, Joseph. *The Question of the Concept of Tradition*. In: RAHNER; RATZINGER. *Revelation and Tradition*, 1966, p. 37. See also. RATZINGER, *God’s Word*, 2008, p. 53–54.

⁴⁸See RATZINGER, *The Question of the Concept of Tradition*, 1966, p. 37–39. See RATZINGER, *God’s Word*, 2008, p. 53–55.

Body of Christ, continues to interpret and embody revelation within new historical contexts, following what Ratzinger calls the *analogia fidei*—the coherence and harmony of faith across time. As Ratzinger explains, the Old Testament is to be understood considering the Christ event and “also an interpretation of the Christ event itself on the basis of the *pneuma*, which means on the basis of the church’s present”⁴⁹. The Christ event, in turn, must be interpreted within the faith and worship of the Church today. Scripture and Tradition exist in a reciprocal, life-giving relationship: Scripture provides the normative witness to revelation, while Tradition keeps that witness alive and active within the community of believers.⁵⁰

Ratzinger later reflected that his collaboration with Rahner revealed the profound differences in their theological outlooks, remarking that they came from “different theological planets”⁵¹. While Rahner began with the human person’s inner experience of grace, Ratzinger’s theology began with the historical actions of God, recorded in Scripture and enacted in the life of the Church. As Christopher S. Collins observes, “Though Ratzinger’s style is historical, it is not primarily anthropological because the narrative he follows in history is that shaped by the actions of God in history. The starting point is not humanity’s natural or even supernatural inclinations toward God”⁵². His approach is grounded not in speculative philosophy but in the narrative of salvation, emphasizing the divine initiative rather than human subjectivity. For Ratzinger, revelation is never abstract or merely inward; it is the living Word of God, revealed in Jesus Christ and continually made present through Scripture, Tradition, and the Church’s sacramental life.

⁴⁹ RATZINGER, *The Question of the Concept of Tradition*, 1966, p. 41-42. See. RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 58. See also. COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 35.

⁵⁰ Aaron Pidel, SJ, notes that in Ratzinger’s 1965 essay “The Question of the Concept of Tradition,” Ratzinger presents the relationship between the Old and New Testaments through a dynamic *analogia fidei* in which Scripture is understood within the interplay of unity and differentiation. Drawing on Paul’s contrast between *gramma* and *pneuma* (2 Cor 3:6–18), Ratzinger interprets the New Testament as reading the Old Testament in the Spirit, with Christ himself as the *Pneuma* who reveals its true meaning. Pidel highlights Ratzinger’s claim that the Old Testament attains its full inspired sense within this Christological–pneumatic horizon, while at the same time already possessing an intrinsic openness to such rereading, as shown in the early Church’s initial reliance on the Old Testament alone. This supports Ratzinger’s broader view that New Testament interpretation of the Old is not an external imposition but the unfolding of the Old Testament’s own inner dynamism, which lives and grows through successive reinterpretations within the life of the Church. See. PIDELE, Aaron. *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture: Testing the Ratzinger Paradigm*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023, p.91-92; “In the New Testament conception, the Old Testament appears as ‘Scripture’ in the proper sense, which has attained its true significance through the Christ-event by being drawn into the living sphere of the reality of Christ.” See RATZINGER, *The Question of the Concept of Tradition*, 1966, p. 55. Cited in PIDELE, Aaron. *The Inspiration and Truth of Scripture*, 2023, p. 92.

⁵¹ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 1998, p. 128. Cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 34-35.

⁵² COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 35.

2.3.3 Scripture, Tradition, and the Living Presence of the Word

Ratzinger identifies as a central theological problem the question of how Christ, the living Word of Revelation, remains present in history and continues to encounter humanity. This issue became especially decisive in the context of the Reformation dispute over “Tradition,” where the Catholic Church understood Tradition as a means of transmitting Revelation alongside Scripture in order to safeguard the continuity of Christ’s presence in the Church. Historically, however, “Tradition” also came to include a wide range of ecclesial customs and practices (*consuetudines ecclesiae*)—such as liturgical disciplines, fasting, blessings, and devotional forms—which were often treated as integral expressions of Christian life. The underlying problem, therefore, is how to properly understand the real continuity of Christ’s presence in history: whether it lies in doctrinal transmission, in ecclesial practices, or in a deeper theological reality in which Revelation remains living and active within the life of the Church⁵³. In this light, Ratzinger highlights the decisive role of God’s action in history and the revelation of the Word as the basis for genuine ecumenical dialogue. From the outset, he is attentive to the divisions among Christians that stem from different ways of relating revelation, Scripture, tradition, and the Church. The Reformers tended to locate revelation exclusively in Scripture, viewing later doctrinal and ecclesial developments as secondary accretions, whereas the Catholic tradition understands revelation as something that continues to be received and unfolded within the living Tradition of the Church, under the guidance of Christ and the Holy Spirit. At the same time, Ratzinger notes that elements within the Reformation tradition itself, such as Melancthon’s openness to ecclesial order, suggest that the Church’s visible structures can serve rather than obstruct the faithful reception of the Gospel, indicating a deeper complementarity between Word and Church.⁵⁴

⁵³ See RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 41-42.

⁵⁴ Ratzinger explains that the problem of Tradition became even more acute during the Reformation because it was tied to a deeper dispute about the relationship between the Word of God, the Church, and the Magisterium. Luther believed that, in rediscovering the Gospel, he was also liberating the Word of God from what he saw as the oppressive control of the ecclesiastical Magisterium, which, in his judgment, had imprisoned the Word and distorted its authentic meaning. The Reformers repeatedly argued that the living power of God’s Word had been weakened within the Catholic Church because it had become subordinated to institutional authority. Melancthon, however, expressed this position in a more moderate and conciliatory way. Even while supporting the Lutheran reform movement, he suggested that the papacy could still be tolerated “for the sake of peace and unity,” provided that it did not stand against the Gospel and that its authority be understood as a merely human arrangement (*jure humano*), not as divinely absolute. From this conflict emerged two fundamentally different understandings of the Church and Tradition. In the Catholic view, the Church was traditionally understood through three inseparable elements: *fides* (faith or right teaching), *communio* (sacramental communion), and *auctoritas* (authority or Magisterium). Within this structure, the Magisterium served as the authentic guardian and interpreter of the Word of God. The Reformers, however, reversed this relationship. For them, the Word of God became the criterion by which the Magisterium itself must be judged. Church authority could therefore be accepted or rejected depending on its fidelity to Scripture. In this way, Scripture came to stand above the Church as an autonomous and self-

Ratzinger emphasizes the central role of God's action in history and the revelation of the Word as a foundation for ecumenical dialogue. From the beginning, he recognized the divisions among Christians that arose from differing understandings of the relationship between revelation, Scripture, tradition, and the church. The Reformers viewed church teachings as later additions to the authentic revelation found solely in Scripture, while the Catholic perspective holds that God's revelation continues to unfold within the living tradition of the church, guided by Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵ Even some Reformers, such as Melanchthon, acknowledged that respecting the church's structures could enrich the faithful's reception of the Gospel, showing that the Word and the church are complementary rather than opposed. At the same time, however, Ratzinger observes a decisive shift in Melanchthon's understanding of the relationship between the Word and ecclesial authority:

In Melanchthon's thinking, it is the other way around: the word appears as the criterion for office, which is ultimately to be tested by the yardstick of the word and is thereby also liable to be rejected. The word has become independent. It stands over and above office, as an entity in itself. Perhaps it is even in this reversal of the relations between word and office that the real opposition lies between the Catholic and Protestant conceptions of the Church, which would then coincide with the opposition between their concepts of tradition. For the rejection of office as a criterion for the word means, logically, reducing the word to Scripture as interpreted by itself, which is now the only remaining authentic form of the word and no longer tolerates any tradition as an independent entity beside itself⁵⁶.

2.3.4 The Council of Trent and the Question of Tradition

Joseph Ratzinger offers a sustained examination of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition in both Protestant and Catholic theology. From the Protestant perspective, the identification of revelation exclusively with Scripture risks separating the Word from the living reality of the Church, thereby opening the way to subjective interpretation and reducing Scripture to the status of a historical text. Post-Tridentine Catholic theology, however, often moved toward the opposite tendency by treating Tradition as an authority functioning alongside Scripture, at times obscuring the intrinsic unity between them. Ratzinger situates these tensions within their historical and theological development, particularly in the debates surrounding the

sufficient authority. Ratzinger sees here the decisive contrast between the Catholic and Protestant concepts of the Church. This same inversion also shaped the debate about Tradition: once the Magisterium was no longer regarded as the living interpreter of the Word, revelation was effectively reduced to Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), while Tradition ceased to be recognized as an independent and living reality within the life of the Church. See RATZINGER, *The Question of the Concept of Tradition*, 1966, p. 28-29. See RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 43-44.

⁵⁵ See RATZINGER, *The Question of the Concept of Tradition*, 1966, p. 26-28. See RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 41-43.

⁵⁶ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 44-45.

Council of Trent, whose attempt to articulate the relation between Scripture and Tradition sought both to respond to Reformation critiques and to preserve the Catholic understanding of Tradition as the living transmission of the Word within the Church.⁵⁷

Ratzinger describes Trent's struggle over the concept of Tradition as unfolding under the pressure of Reformation criticism. "In its struggle with the concept of tradition, he writes, the Council of Trent had before it the two starting points of Reformed criticism, as we have just outlined them, and was trying to formulate a reply to them"⁵⁸. He further observes that the Council Fathers found themselves caught between the demands of doctrinal clarification and ecclesial reform:

It is moving to realize how, in view of the Lutheran equation of *traditio* and *abusus*, the themes of *traditio* and *reformatio* are combined for this Church assembly and how time and again the Fathers find themselves in this dilemma: Should they respond to Luther's attack on tradition first by defining the concept of tradition, or should they first respond with *reformatio* by removing abuses⁵⁹?

What emerges from this struggle is a conception of the Word of God that is inseparable from the life of the Church. For Trent, the Word is not an autonomous entity existing independently of ecclesial communion, but a divine gift entrusted to the Church by Christ himself and preserved within her life through the guidance of the Holy Spirit⁶⁰.

Ratzinger develops this question further through engagement with the work of the Tübingen theologian J. R. Geiselmann, whose historical interpretation of Trent significantly influenced twentieth-century Catholic theology and the discussions preceding Vatican II. Ratzinger regards Geiselmann's work as "perhaps the most significant attempt, on the Catholic side, to arrive at a new view of the problem of tradition by going beyond any one-sided Counter-Reformation position"⁶¹. According to Geiselmann's reading of the Tridentine debates, the earliest drafts of the decree on revelation proposed that revealed truth was contained "*partim in libris... partim in... traditionibus*," that is, partly in Scripture and partly in Tradition.⁶² Such

⁵⁷ Yet Ratzinger also recognizes that this classical Catholic-Protestant opposition continues to reveal a lasting Western dilemma: whether the Word can remain living and normative when entrusted to ecclesial mediation, or whether it must be isolated as an independent authority to protect it from institutional distortion. In this sense, the Catholic position insists that the Word is never at the mercy of human arbitrariness because it is given by Christ to the Church, while the Protestant concern raises the enduring question of how to prevent its enclosure within institutional control or interpretive constraint. He traces these debates historically, highlighting the Council of Trent's efforts to articulate revelation as present in both written Scripture and unwritten tradition—a formulation that allowed dialogue with Protestant perspectives while preserving the Catholic understanding of tradition as the ongoing appropriation of the Word. See RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 45-46.

⁵⁸ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 45.

⁵⁹ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 45.

⁶⁰ See RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 45.

⁶¹ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 47.

⁶² VORGRIMLER, Herbert ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols. New York: Herder and Herder, 1967, 3: p. 156. See GEISELMANN, Josef Rupert *Die Heilige Schrift und die Tradition: zu den neueren*

language implied two distinct repositories of revelation and suggested that certain truths existed exclusively within Tradition. Ratzinger notes, however, that this formulation would have rendered dialogue with Protestant theology virtually impossible. The Council Fathers therefore adopted the more unified expression in *libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus*, affirming that revelation is transmitted in written Scripture and unwritten Tradition without positing two independent sources of revelation⁶³.

Within this framework, Geiselmann argued that Trent did not reject the material sufficiency of Scripture and that a qualified form of *sola scriptura* could therefore be reconciled with Catholic theology⁶⁴. Ratzinger acknowledges the ecumenical significance of this proposal and admits that it appeared to open important possibilities for dialogue between Catholics and Protestants. At the same time, he remains critical of its theological implications. While Geiselmann's thesis represented genuine progress in overcoming rigid confessional polemics, Ratzinger contends that closer analysis reveals serious historical and conceptual difficulties. The issue, he argues, lies in the ambiguity of the notion of "the sufficiency of Scripture" itself. Once the concept of sufficiency is broadened to accommodate every theological qualification, it risks losing any precise meaning⁶⁵.

2.3.5 Revelation Beyond the "Two Sources" Theory

For this reason, Ratzinger shifts the discussion away from the narrower question of whether Scripture is materially sufficient and toward the more fundamental issue underlying the entire debate: the relation between the authority of Scripture and the authority of the Church. In his judgment, the central theological problem concerns the mode of presence of the revealed Word within the believing community rather than the distribution of revealed content between two sources⁶⁶. Revelation cannot be reduced to a static deposit of propositions; it is a living reality that becomes present in faith. Hence, "Revelation is in fact fully present only when, in addition to the material statements which testify to it, its own inner reality is itself operative in the form of faith"⁶⁷.

Ratzinger therefore insists that theology must move beyond the merely "positive sources" of Scripture and Tradition to their deeper origin in revelation itself—the living Word

Kontroversen über das Verhältnis der Heiligen Schrift zu den nichtgeschriebenen Traditionen. Freiburg: Herder, 1962, p. 287. Cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2024, p. 37.

⁶³ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 47-48. VORGRIMLER, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 3: p. 157. Cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2024, p. 37-38.

⁶⁴ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 48.

⁶⁵ See RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 48-49.

⁶⁶ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 50.

⁶⁷ RATZINGER, *The Question of the Concept of Tradition*, 1966, p. 36. RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 52.

of God from which both arise and apart from which neither can be properly understood⁶⁸. In this respect, he ultimately considers Geiselmann's attempt at reconciliation insufficient. As DeClue notes, Ratzinger believed that Geiselmann inaccurately thought he had reconciled the Catholic principle with the Protestant principle of sola scriptura. The problem, according to Ratzinger, is that "material sufficiency" is itself a misleading category, since revelation cannot be isolated from the ecclesial and historical reality in which it is received and transmitted⁶⁹.

This leads Ratzinger to a broader understanding of revelation. Revelation exceeds Scripture in two respects: first, because it is grounded in God's own action and therefore transcends textual expression; and second, because it is realized within the act of faith and thus extends beyond the written text itself. "Scripture is not revelation," he states, "but, in any case, is only a part of this greater reality"⁷⁰. Scripture remains central, yet it cannot be separated from the living Tradition of the Church through which it is interpreted, proclaimed, and received. DeClue accordingly emphasizes that, for Ratzinger, Scripture cannot be materially sufficient because its meaning becomes intelligible only within the broader context of ecclesial life, liturgy, doctrine, and worship⁷¹. As Ratzinger explains, the formulation that Scripture and Tradition are "two sources" of revelation often gave rise to the mistaken view that Tradition constitutes an additional deposit of revealed truths existing alongside Scripture. Against this misunderstanding, he insists that Tradition expresses "the ecclesial bond of the Word of Scripture," meaning that Scripture is not a static or merely historical text accessible to anyone as literature in isolation, but becomes revelation only within the living Church and her proclamation of the Word. In his words, "the sentence 'Scripture and tradition are the two sources of the knowledge of revelation' is synonymous with the other: Scripture is God's revelation only in the living Church of God"⁷².

As Emery de Gaál observes, Ratzinger criticizes the tendency of certain neo-scholastic approaches to narrow revelation into a system of doctrinal propositions derived from two parallel "sources," Scripture and Tradition. Against this model, Ratzinger insists that God alone is the *unus fons* of revelation⁷³. Revelation is not primarily the communication of truths about God but the self-disclosure of God himself. De Gaál further explains that Ratzinger advocates

⁶⁸ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 50.

⁶⁹ RATZINGER, *Cardinal Frings's Speech*, p. 136. Cited in DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 168-169.

⁷⁰ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 52-53.

⁷¹ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 169.

⁷² RATZINGER, *Offenbarungsverständnis*, p. 66-67; Cited in DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 170.

⁷³ DE GAÁL, Emery. *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance: Explorations and Discoveries in Pope Benedict XVI's Theology*. Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2018, p. 37.

a dynamic understanding of revelation in continuity with patristic and medieval theology. In the Middle Ages, Scripture was understood as a *fons scientiae*, a source of theological knowledge, but never as a *fons revelationis* in isolation. Revelation precedes both Scripture and Tradition and constitutes the condition for their existence. To identify revelation too closely with the biblical text alone risks reducing theology to a form of scriptural positivism⁷⁴.

2.3.6 Tradition as the Living Horizon of Revelation

Ratzinger's interpretation of Trent culminates in the claim that the Council preserved a far richer conception of revelation than later theological controversies often allowed. "The first and most important objective fact," he writes, "seems to me first of all to be that the Council still very clearly saw the connection between the concept of tradition and that of revelation"⁷⁵. Following the patristic and medieval tradition, Trent understood revelation not in narrowly material terms, but as a living reality that encompasses both the once-for-all historical event of God's self-disclosure and its abiding presence within the faith of the Church. Revelation possesses its historical definitiveness (ἐφαπαξ), yet it also remains a living "today" in which what occurred in the past continues to be effective in the present life of faith⁷⁶. Christian faith therefore refers not only to what has been, but also to what remains active in the Church and open toward the future.

In this context, Ratzinger identifies several dimensions of Tradition present within the Tridentine debates: the inscription of revelation in the hearts of believers, the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit throughout the Church's history, the conciliar life of the Church, and the liturgical and existential forms through which faith is embodied and transmitted⁷⁷. Tradition, therefore, is not an addition to Scripture, but the living horizon within which Scripture exists and is understood. Scripture remains central yet never isolated from the visible life of the Church.

Taken together, these observations allow Ratzinger to interpret Trent not as a closed doctrinal system shaped merely by confessional controversy, but as a theological vision whose depth and complexity continue to offer important resources for contemporary theology. For this reason, he concludes that Trent still provides "new fruitfulness, confirmation in its seeking, and signposts on the way"⁷⁸.

⁷⁴ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 37.

⁷⁵ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 86.

⁷⁶ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 86-87.

⁷⁷ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 87.

⁷⁸ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 87.

For Ratzinger, the key question is not theoretical but grounded in history and faith: how does the Word of God become present among the faithful? Drawing on Bonaventure, he shows that revelation always unfolds within historical contexts and through the response of faith. Scripture itself demonstrates this process, as the prophecies of the Old Testament find their fulfillment in the Christ-event and are interpreted in the New Testament. As Collins notes, Ratzinger explains that this dynamic is already at work within Scripture itself: the relationship between the Old and New Testaments is one continuous expression of the Word of God unfolding in salvation history.⁷⁹ In one sense, Ratzinger observes, only the Old Testament was considered Scripture by the writers of the New Testament; the New Testament, therefore, is the Spirit-guided interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the Christ-event.⁸⁰

Ratzinger goes so far as to assert that without tradition, Scripture cannot truly be revelation: “The understanding which elevates the Scripture to the status of ‘revelation’... is realized only in the living understanding of Scripture in the Church”⁸¹. Tradition, therefore, is not secondary to Scripture but the very condition that allows Scripture to be encountered as God’s living Word. It is through tradition that the faith received from God is handed down, interpreted, and authentically embraced across generations. At the center of this process stands the Christ-event, which illuminates both Scripture and tradition, bringing the Word to life for the faithful and guiding the Church’s continual engagement with revelation. Richard G. DeClue, in his studies, emphasizes that one cannot fully grasp Ratzinger’s theology of divine revelation without recognizing Christ as its high point. This is not a mere addition to his thought but an essential dimension of his Christology, since for Ratzinger the connection between revelation and the person of Jesus Christ lies at the very heart of what revelation *is* and how it continues to be experienced in the life of the Church.⁸²

Thus, for Ratzinger, the relationship between revelation, Scripture, and Tradition reflects the very essence of Christianity as a faith rooted in history, community, and God’s initiative. Revelation is not merely a collection of ancient texts or rituals but a living encounter with the living God. The unity of Scripture and Tradition ensures that revelation remains both historically grounded and dynamically present, enabling the Church to carry forward the Word of God in continuity with its origins while remaining open to the Spirit’s guidance. Shaped by Ratzinger’s Bonaventurian insights and affirmed in *Dei Verbum*, this vision offers the Church

⁷⁹ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 39. See also. RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 53.

⁸⁰ See RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 53-54. See RATZINGER, *The Question of the Concept of Tradition*, 1966, p. 37-38.

⁸¹ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 67.

⁸² See DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 177.

a coherent and life-giving framework for understanding how God's self-communication continues to be encountered, proclaimed, celebrated, and lived in the life of the faithful today.

2.4 Ratzinger in *Dei Verbum*

Joseph Ratzinger played a decisive role in shaping *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, one of the most influential documents of the modern Church on the mystery of revelation.⁸³ As a *peritus* (theological expert) to Cardinal Joseph Frings, Ratzinger worked closely with other leading theologians to move beyond the rigid and overly propositional frameworks that had characterized earlier drafts, especially the rejected schema *De Fontibus Revelationis* and to articulate instead a more biblical, pastoral, and Christ-centered understanding of divine revelation. From the beginning, he recognized that the question at hand was not merely academic but fundamental to the Church's life and mission: How does God speak to humanity? How is revelation to be understood within the unfolding of history and culture? And how does the Church faithfully receive and transmit this revelation? The journey toward *Dei Verbum* required confronting enduring theological questions concerning the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, the role of the Holy Spirit, the challenges of historical interpretation, and the Church's vocation as the living bearer of the Word of God.

Christopher S. Collins observes that "ultimately, serving as Frings's *peritus*, Ratzinger would contribute along with several other theologians, including Karl Rahner, to the crafting of the *Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*"⁸⁴. More specifically, Collins notes that "what had often previously been matter consigned to the abstract language of propositional statements had, in *Dei Verbum*, been informed by a new theological personalism, thanks in no small part to the contributions of Joseph Ratzinger"⁸⁵. This theological personalism—placing encounter and relationship at the center of revelation—reflects Ratzinger's conviction that revelation is not merely the transmission of divine information but God's self-gift to humanity in love. It marked a decisive movement away from a purely scholastic formulation toward a

⁸³ Several elements of *Dei Verbum*'s teaching closely reflect Ratzinger's own theological insights. From its opening chapter, the Constitution begins not with human effort or reasoning, but with God's initiative. Revelation is presented first and foremost as God's saving action in history, not simply as a collection of doctrinal statements or written formulas. Its ultimate purpose, as *Dei Verbum* §2 states, is to draw humanity into fellowship with God—a theme that resonates deeply with Ratzinger's conviction that the goal of revelation is communion, the intimate union between God and the human person. *Dei Verbum* §2.

⁸⁴ WICKS, Jared. *Prof. Ratzinger at Vatican II: A Chapter in the Life of Pope Benedict XVI*. New Orleans: Loyola University Press, 2007. p. 24. Cited in. COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 33.

⁸⁵ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 44.

theology that recognizes revelation as God's self-communication in history, calling for a personal and communal response of faith.

John L. Allen likewise underscores the depth of Ratzinger's influence, describing *Dei Verbum* as "the Vatican II document over which Ratzinger exercised the greatest personal influence"⁸⁶. The Council's final vision bears this imprint clearly. It embraced the understanding that "the pattern of this revelation unfolds through deeds and words," both in creation and in history, and that these two elements are inseparably intertwined in God's dialogue with humanity (*Dei Verbum* 2). As Collins explains, Ratzinger himself would later describe this renewed theology of revelation as one "seen basically as dialogue"⁸⁷. Revelation, therefore, is not a static collection of truths but a living, historical dialogue between God and humankind, a relationship grounded in the Word made flesh and perpetuated in the life of the Church.

Throughout the four sessions of the Council, one recurring point of tension was the question of Tradition. During the first session in 1962, a draft text on "the sources of revelation" was presented, written in the neo-scholastic style that treated revelation, faith, Scripture, and Tradition mainly as propositional doctrines. When submitted to the assembly, the bishops overwhelmingly rejected it, and the next day Pope John XXIII agreed that a new text was necessary. Reflecting on the significance of this debate and the pope's intervention, the council peritus Joseph Ratzinger wrote:

The real question behind the discussion could be put this way: Was the intellectual position of "anti-Modernism"—the old policy of exclusiveness, condemnation, and defense leading to an almost neurotic denial of all that was new—to be continued? Or would the Church, after taking all necessary precautions to protect the faith, turn over a new leaf and move on into a new and positive encounter with its own origins, with humanity, and with the world of today? Since a clear majority of the fathers opted for the second alternative, we may even speak of the Council as a new beginning. We may also say that with this decision there was a major advance over Vatican Council I. Both Trent and Vatican I set up bulwarks to protect the faith; Vatican II undertook a new task, building upon the work of the previous Councils⁸⁸.

⁸⁶ ALLEN, *Cardinal Ratzinger*, 2000, p. 56.

⁸⁷ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 40.

⁸⁸ RATZINGER, Joseph. *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, New York: Paulist Press, 1966, p. 44. Cited in. RUSH, Ormond. *Presentation: The Synthesis Report, Holy See Press Office*, October 23, 2023, accessed October 30, 2025, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2023/10/23/231023d.html>. One of the central tensions during the Second Vatican Council concerned how the Church understands tradition. Ratzinger distinguished between a "static" view of tradition and a "dynamic" or "living" one. The static approach treated tradition mainly as fixed formulas and timeless propositions detached from history, while the dynamic understanding saw tradition as the living transmission of faith guided by the Holy Spirit within the life of the Church through history. This dynamic vision does not abandon the past but understands it as continually unfolding and becoming newly meaningful in the present while remaining open to the future. Drawing from *Dei Verbum*, especially its teaching that apostolic tradition "develops" in the Church, Ratzinger recognized that the Holy Spirit leads this growth through the interaction of theology, the lived faith of believers, and the teaching authority of the magisterium. In this way, tradition is not something frozen in the past but a living reality in which the whole Church participates together in listening, discerning, and responding to God's revelation throughout history. See RATZINGER, Joseph. *Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation*, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*. Volume 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler. New York: Herder, 1969. p. 181-198. Cited in. RUSH, Ormond.

2.4.1 Historical and Theological Horizon

Ratzinger's involvement in *Dei Verbum* emerged within a broader setting of theological renewal. The mid-20th century witnessed the “biblical movement” in Catholicism—new attention to Scripture, patristic return, liturgical reform, and renewed ecumenical awareness. As one commentator notes, *Dei Verbum* was the mature fruit of a decades-long Catholic biblical renewal. This movement challenged the Church to rethink how revelation, Scripture, and tradition relate, and how the faithful may be drawn more deeply into the Word of God.⁸⁹

Ratzinger identified three central themes in *Dei Verbum* that closely reflect his own theological concerns: (1) a renewed understanding of tradition, (2) the theological challenge of applying historical-critical methods to Scripture, and (3) the influence of the biblical movement on the life of the Church. For Ratzinger, the older “two-source” model of revelation—which treated Scripture and Tradition as parallel, independent repositories—was insufficient. Instead, he envisioned a dynamic and unified framework: revelation originates in God, is communicated through divine words and deeds, enters into human history, takes form in both Scripture and Tradition, and continues to unfold in the living faith of the Church.

In this light, Ratzinger regarded the opening lines of *Dei Verbum* as among the most profound expressions of the Council's teaching:

Hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith, the sacred synod takes its direction from these words of St. John: ‘We announce to you the eternal life which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we announce to you, so that you may have fellowship with us, and our common fellowship be with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.’⁹⁰

According to Ratzinger, these verses encapsulate the essence of *Dei Verbum*'s theology of revelation. Indeed, the opening words of *Dei Verbum* highlight the role of human receptivity, the “hearing” of the word of God.⁹¹ The constitution affirms God's primacy in the revelatory process—what Ratzinger describes as the dominance of the word of God, its sovereign

Presentation: The Synthesis Report, Holy See Press Office, October 23, 2023, available in <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2023/10/23/231023d.html>. Accessed October 30, 2025.

⁸⁹ It is well documented that Ratzinger served as one of the *periti* on the sub commission responsible for preparing the revised draft that would ultimately develop into *Dei Verbum*. According to Wicks, the sub commission organized its work by assigning theologians to different draft chapters, and Ratzinger played a key role in synthesizing members' feedback and refining the text. His contributions were particularly influential in shaping what became Chapter VI (nos. 21–26) of the final document—a richly developed section highlighting the vital place of Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church. See WICKS, Jared. *Prof. Ratzinger at Vatican II: A Chapter in the Life of Pope Benedict XVI*. New Orleans: Loyola University Press, 2007. p. 13.

⁹⁰ *DV* §1.

⁹¹ FLANNERY, *Basic Sixteen Documents*, *Dei Verbum* 1, p. 97. Cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 40.

supremacy above all human eloquence and activity of the Church. The Church's mission, therefore, does not begin with human initiative but with humble receptivity. She listens before she speaks, handing on only what she has first received from God. At the same time, while retaining confidence in how God had revealed himself in Scripture and tradition, and most fully through Christ in the Catholic Church, *Dei Verbum* also created space for understanding the ongoing appropriation of this revelation in dialogue with those outside the church. In this way, revelation is understood not as a closed or static deposit, but as the living Word of God continually received, proclaimed, and encountered within the life of the Church and in her engagement with the world.⁹²

In this sense, *Dei Verbum* articulates the Church's identity as a servant of the Word, not its master. The Church does not proclaim herself but bears witness to the glory of God revealed in Christ. Her role is to be a faithful herald—receiving the Word with reverence, preserving it in faith, and proclaiming it with conviction. The Constitution's opening line, “hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith”⁹³, thus defines the Church's mission: a dynamic participation in the dialogue between God and humanity.

2.4.2 Shaping *Dei Verbum*: Unity of Scripture and Tradition

One of Joseph Ratzinger's most significant contributions to *Dei Verbum* is his articulation of the unity between Scripture and Tradition. Against centuries of theological tension, he helped the Council move beyond the static, propositional framework of earlier theology toward a vision of revelation that is dynamic, relational, and living. Ratzinger has described in different places his dissatisfaction with the original schemata for the Council's deliberation on the “Sources of Revelation” that had been given to the central preparatory committee.⁹⁴ He was not alone: when the schemata were introduced to the Council by Cardinal Ottaviani in November 1962, several cardinals immediately registered a *non placet* for various reasons, foremost among them that, in their current form, the schemata would undermine the Council's basic ecumenical aims.⁹⁵ Ratzinger maintained that Scripture and Tradition are not competing or independent sources but “distinct yet inseparable modes” through which the one Word of God is transmitted within the life of the Church. Scripture cannot be properly

⁹² See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 40-41.

⁹³ *DV* §1.

⁹⁴ RATZINGER, *Milestones*, p. 156; VORGRIMLER, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 3; RATZINGER, Joseph. *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*. New York: Paulist Press, 1966, p. 185. Cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 41-42.

⁹⁵ VORGRIMLER, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 3: p. 160. Cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 42.

understood apart from Tradition, nor Tradition apart from the Church. Together, animated by Spirit, they constitute an indivisible reality in which revelation continues to speak and take flesh. As Ratzinger cautioned, “to separate Scripture from the total tradition of the Church leads either to Biblicism or modernism—or both”⁹⁶.

A distinctive feature of *Dei Verbum*, deeply influenced by Ratzinger’s thought, is its presentation of revelation as divine-human dialogue rather than monologue. The Council affirmed that “the pattern of this revelation unfolds through deeds and words” (DV 2) within both creation and history. Ratzinger later described revelation as being “seen basically as dialogue”⁹⁷, thereby moving beyond static conceptions of divine communication. This dialogical understanding marks a fundamental theological advance: revelation is not a closed deposit of truths but a living event occurring in history, addressed to the Church, and inviting a response of faith. As Ratzinger asserted, “Revelation always and only becomes reality where there is faith”⁹⁸. Thus, revelation and the community of faith are mutually constitutive—the Word becomes real only when received in faith, and the faith of the Church exists only through continual encounter with the living Word, a continual dialogue.

Ratzinger’s approach to Scripture reflects his deep engagement with modern hermeneutics and historical-critical scholarship. Rather than rejecting contemporary methods, he advanced a *hermeneutics of faith*—an interpretive approach that recognizes the historical and literary dimensions of Scripture while situating them within the Church’s living tradition of belief. *Dei Verbum* (DV 12) articulates this balance, urging interpreters to consider the historical circumstances of the biblical texts while reading them “in the same Spirit in which

⁹⁶ RATZINGER, Chapter VI, p. 267. Cited in RUSH, Ormond, Presentation: The Synthesis Report. Holy See Press Office, October 23, 2023. Available in, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2023/10/23/231023d.html>. Accessed October 30, 2025.

⁹⁷ In his treatment of the origins and theological background of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, Joseph Ratzinger recalls Archbishop Florit’s *relatio* on the first two chapters of the document. Florit observed that “because of its inner importance as well as the many vicissitudes that it has undergone, [the] history of the draft on the Constitution of Divine Revelation has fused itself with the history of this council into a kind of unity.” Collins notes that the Council’s teaching on revelation became foundational for interpreting the broader theological vision of Vatican II, including its teachings on liturgy, ecclesiology, and the Church’s engagement with the modern world. At the heart of *Dei Verbum* stood the question of how the Church understands God’s self-communication to humanity—a revelation extending from eternity into the concrete realities of history. The Council therefore affirmed that the pattern of this revelation unfolds through deeds and words emphasizing the dynamic and historical character of divine revelation. In the immediate aftermath of the Council, Ratzinger himself described this emerging understanding of revelation as one “seen basically as dialogue,” thereby moving beyond a purely propositional or static conception of divine communication. See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013. p. 39-41. See FLANNERY, Austin, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*. Northport, NY: Dominican Publications, 1996. See *Dei Verbum* 2, p. 98. See also. DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 35-36.

⁹⁸ RAHNER; RATZINGER, *Revelação e Tradição*, 1968, p. 25. See RATZINGER, Joseph. *God’s Word*, 2008, p. 52. See also COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013. p. 38.

they were written.” This method unites historical awareness with theological fidelity, ensuring that the Church’s reading of Scripture remains both critically informed and spiritually grounded.

At the heart of Ratzinger’s vision lies the pneumatological and ecclesial nature of revelation. *Dei Verbum* teaches that Scripture and Tradition share a single divine source and flow together from the one revelation of God (DV 8, 10). The Holy Spirit both inspires Scripture and animates the Church, enabling her to proclaim, interpret, and embody the Word. We see this *present* nature of the divine–human dialogue expressed in *Dei Verbum* 8: God, who spoke in the past, continues to dialogue with the spouse of his beloved Son [the Church]. And the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church—and through it in the world—leads believers to the full truth and makes the word of Christ dwell in them in all its richness. According to Ratzinger, *Dei Verbum* thus presents

an understanding of revelation that is seen basically as dialogue... The reading of Scripture is described as a *colloquium inter Deum et hominem* a dialogue between God and human beings ... The dialogue of God is always carried on in the present... with the intention of forcing us to reply⁹⁹.

In this perspective, the Magisterium does not stand above the Word of God but serves it—attentively listening, discerning, and faithfully transmitting what it has received. As Ratzinger aptly observes, “Scripture is God’s revelation only in the living Church of God”¹⁰⁰. This incarnational, communal, and Spirit-filled vision situates revelation within the Church’s historical and sacramental life, a context in which divine truth continues to be encountered, proclaimed, and lived. Tradition, likewise, is multifaceted, encompassing the Church’s “teaching, life, and worship” (DV §8)¹⁰¹. According to Ratzinger, tradition “has its place not only in the explicitly traditional statements of Church doctrine, but in the unstated—and often untastable—elements of the whole service of the Christian worship of God and the life of the Church”¹⁰². In this way, both Scripture and tradition are understood as living realities, intimately woven into the life, worship, and mission of the Church.

The pastoral and ecumenical implications of Ratzinger’s contribution to *Dei Verbum* have been far-reaching. By reframing revelation as a living dialogue rather than a static set of propositions, the document placed Scripture and Tradition at the heart of Catholic life and

⁹⁹ RATZINGER, Joseph. *Chapter I: Revelation Itself*, p. 171. Cited in Ormond Rush, *Presentation: The Synthesis Report*, Holy See Press Office, October 23, 2023. Available in, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2023/10/23/231023d.html>. Accessed October 30, 2025.

¹⁰⁰ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 67.

¹⁰¹ See DV §8: Therefore, the Apostles, handing on what they themselves had received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they had learned either by word of mouth or by letter (see 2 Thess. 2:15).

¹⁰² RATZINGER, Chapter II, p. 184. Cited in Ormond Rush, *Presentation: The Synthesis Report*, 2023. Available in, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2023/10/23/231023d.html>. Accessed October 30, 2025.

theology. Ratzinger emphasizes that Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium function in mutual interdependence: none operates in isolation, and each derives its meaning and authority from its relationship to the others. This insight reinforces the idea that divine revelation is experienced as a unified, living reality.¹⁰³ Consequently, *Dei Verbum* fostered renewed engagement with Scripture in the liturgy, catechesis, and theological scholarship, moving the Bible to the center of Catholic life. Ecumenically, by underscoring a single Word of God as the source of revelation, Ratzinger's perspective opened new avenues for dialogue with Protestant communities, many of which stress *sola scriptura*. Situating both Scripture and Tradition within the same movement of divine self-communication, the document provides a framework for unity grounded in the shared reality of the Word proclaimed, received, and lived in faith.

Since its promulgation on 18 November 1965, *Dei Verbum* has remained one of the most influential documents of the Second Vatican Council, and Ratzinger's theological vision continues to shape contemporary Catholic thought. His later works—such as *Introduction to Christianity*¹⁰⁴ and *Jesus of Nazareth*¹⁰⁵—develop the foundations laid by the Council. For Ratzinger, theology is not a purely academic exercise but a service to the Church, rooted in the conviction that the Word of God is living, historical, Christ-centered, and Ecclesially embodied. This understanding also informs the Church's missionary work: the Council encourages the publication of Bibles with explanatory notes to help non-Christians engage with Scripture, reflecting confidence in the Word's power to make Christ present everywhere. Furthermore, Chapter VI of *Dei Verbum* draws a parallel between Scripture and the Eucharist, emphasizing their unity. As Ratzinger explains, “the word of God and the body of Christ, word and sacrament, belong together and are the threefold, and yet one, way in which the incarnate *Logos* is with His Church and gives life to it”¹⁰⁶. *Dei Verbum* thus presents revelation as a dynamic, Spirit-filled dialogue—historically grounded, Christ-centered, sacramentally embodied, and continually alive in the life of the Church.

2.5 The Church as the Historical Event and *Locus* of God's Dialogue with Humanity

Joseph Ratzinger's ecclesiology is inseparable from his theology of revelation. For him, the Church cannot be adequately understood merely as an institutional structure, a sociological

¹⁰³ See RATZINGER, Chapter II, p. 197-198. Cited in Ormond Rush, *Presentation: The Synthesis Report*, 2023. Available in, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2023/10/23/231023d.html>. Accessed October 30, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004.

¹⁰⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker. New York: Doubleday, 2007.

¹⁰⁶ RATZINGER, Chapter VI, p. 272. Cited in Ormond Rush, *Presentation: The Synthesis Report*, 2023. Available in, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2023/10/23/231023d.html>. Accessed October 30, 2025.

community, or even a spiritual fellowship detached from history. Rather, the Church is the historical form of God's self-communication in Christ—a living communion that arises from revelation understood as dialogue. Revelation, in Ratzinger's thought, is not the transmission of abstract truths but God's personal self-giving that seeks and elicits a human response. The Church emerges precisely within this dialogical movement as the space in which God's Word is received, lived, and handed on throughout history. In this sense, the Church is fundamentally the place where the dialogue between God and humanity continues in history. Reflecting on the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, especially *Lumen Gentium* and *Dei Verbum*, Ratzinger explains that the Church must always be understood in relation to God and not merely as a social or institutional organization. Christ, the eternal Word made flesh, is the true "light of the nations" (*lumen gentium*), and the Church exists so that this divine Word may continue to speak and be received in human history¹⁰⁷. Rooted in Christ yet alive in history, the Church is both stable and dynamic: stable because her center is always Christ, and dynamic because God continues to speak and act through her in different times and cultures. Thus, the Church is the people of God gathered together to listen to God's Word, respond to it in faith, and continually grow into deeper communion with Christ. To speak of the Church as communion (*communio*) is therefore to speak of revelation continually taking shape in time¹⁰⁸.

2.5.1 Revelation as Divine Dialogue in History

Ratzinger consistently resists any conception of revelation as a static deposit of information. Drawing deeply from Scripture, the Church Fathers, and medieval theology—especially Augustine of Hippo and Bonaventure—he insists that revelation is intrinsically relational and dialogical. God does not merely speak about himself; he gives himself. Revelation reaches its fullness not simply in a text or doctrine, but in the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. As Ratzinger repeatedly emphasizes, "the Word became flesh" means that revelation is an event, not merely a message. Implicit within Ratzinger's theology of revelation, grounded in the communicative dynamics of "the Word," is a tension that both anchors the teaching of the Council within tradition and opens that same tradition toward future development. Precisely because the Word is spoken from eternity, it possesses unity and stability; yet because it is spoken from eternity into history, it remains living and dynamic¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁷ See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 94-95.

¹⁰⁸ See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 95.

¹⁰⁹ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 95.

This understanding was already present in his early academic work and became even more explicit through his engagement with Bonaventure's theology of revelation. According to this perspective, revelation is not complete with the utterance of the divine Word; it requires reception and response. Without such a response, revelation has not yet fully occurred. Revelation therefore unfolds within a living relationship between God and humanity—a relationship that matures over time as the Church grows in understanding and faith. The dialogical structure of revelation implies that history is not an accidental backdrop, but an essential dimension of God's self-disclosure. Thus, Ratzinger became convinced that "Scripture in the full sense is theology, i.e. it is the book and the understanding of the book in the faith of the Church"¹¹⁰. Revelation is therefore "realized only in the living understanding of Scripture in the Church"¹¹¹. Consequently, "such an understanding demands the attitude of faith by which man gains entrance into the living understanding of Scripture in the Church. It is in this way that man truly receives revelation"¹¹².

For Ratzinger, revelation cannot be separated from the historical journey of the People of God. As he writes, "The historical ascent of the Church from the Patriarchs at the beginning to the People of God of the final days is simultaneously a growth of the revelation of God"¹¹³. Revelation unfolds historically because God's dialogue with humanity unfolds historically. This historical unfolding reaches its decisive moment in Christ and in the emergence of the Church, for "the appearance of Jesus Christ is connected with the idea that the Church, which till then had been hidden, now becomes visible"¹¹⁴. Therefore, "the Church and redemption are rendered historical in an entirely new way which cannot be a matter of indifference for the history of dogma nor for systematic theology"¹¹⁵.

Ratzinger also understands the Church's historical existence through the work of the Holy Spirit. Reflecting on the Resurrection and the birth of the Church, he explains that "the power of God in the history that opens with the Resurrection of Jesus produced the effect that, in the consciousness of those praying, faith in the 'Spirit' and faith in the Church interfered with each other"¹¹⁶. Ecclesiology therefore cannot be separated from pneumatology. As Ratzinger further explains, "Church must take its departure from teaching about the Holy Spirit and his gifts. But its goal lies in a doctrine of the history of God with men or, alternatively, of the

¹¹⁰ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 67.

¹¹¹ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 67.

¹¹² RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 68.

¹¹³ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 92.

¹¹⁴ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 102.

¹¹⁵ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 107.

¹¹⁶ RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 333.

function of the story of Christ for mankind as a whole”¹¹⁷. In this way, Christ remains present and active within history, for “Christ remains present through the Holy Spirit with all his openness and breadth and freedom”¹¹⁸. This pneumatological dimension further illuminates why the Church is not merely a human organization but the living continuation of Christ’s presence and action in history.

For Ratzinger, “the Church is an effect of Christ’s saving work...it is the result of God’s action”¹¹⁹. The Church arises from Christ’s mission of gathering humanity into unity. As he explains,

for he came in order to gather together what was dispersed (cf. Jn 11:52; Mt 12:30). His entire work is thus to gather the new people. Hence, this early stage is already marked by the appearance of two elements that are essential for the future understanding of the Church. First, the dynamism of unification, in which men draw together by moving toward God, is a component of the new people of God as Jesus intends it. Second, the point of convergence of this new people is Christ; it becomes a people solely through his call and its response to his call and to his person¹²⁰.

2.5.2 Christ as the Center and Fulfillment of Revelation

At the heart of this dialogical understanding of revelation stands Jesus Christ. For Ratzinger, revelation is irreducibly Christocentric. Christ is not one mediator among others, nor merely the highest prophet; he is the revelation of God himself. In the Incarnation, God enters into communion with humanity in an unprecedented and definitive way. Jesus Christ is the living unity of God and humanity, the place where divine initiative and human response coincide perfectly. As expressed in *O Caminho Pascal*,

the one and transcendent God of the Old Testament reveals his inner life, for he is in himself the eternal dialogue of love. In himself, he is relationship, Word, and love, and therefore he can speak, listen, respond, and love. Because he is relation, he can open himself to the creature’s relationship with him. In the incarnation of the eternal Word, communion between God and the human person is realized—a communion that previously seemed incompatible with the transcendence of the one God¹²¹.

This Christological center has decisive ecclesiological consequences. Because Christ does not remain an isolated individual, revelation cannot remain private or merely interior. Christ draws others into himself, forming a community that participates in his relationship with

¹¹⁷ RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p.332.

¹¹⁸ RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p.332.

¹¹⁹ RATZINGER, Joseph. *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, trans. Adrian Walker. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996, p. 23.

¹²⁰ RATZINGER, *Called to Communion*, 1996, p. 23.

¹²¹ RATZINGER, Joseph. *O Caminho Pascal: Curso de Exercícios Espirituais realizado no Vaticano na presença de S.S. João Paulo II*, trad. Atílio Cancian. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1986, p. 125. “O único e transcendente Deus do Antigo Testamento revela a sua vida íntima, pois ele é em si mesmo o diálogo eterno do amor. Em si mesmo, ele é relação, é palavra e amor, e por isso pode falar, ouvir, responder, amar. Dado que é relação, pode abrir-se para a relação da criatura com ele. Na encarnação da Palavra eterna, realiza-se a comunhão entre Deus e o ser humano, que antes parecia incompatível com a transcendência do único Deus”.

the Father. The Church, therefore, is not secondary to revelation but arises from its inner logic. If revelation is communion offered by God, then the Church is the communion that receives and lives from that gift. According to Gerard Mannion, Ratzinger understands Jesus as the answer to the yearning for the kingdom and therefore sees his primary mission as “a gathering of an eschatological community for the kingdom, which brought the Church into being. Christ is the point of convergence of the drawing near of people of God”¹²². Mannion further observes that Ratzinger offers “an ecclesiological interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels, Paul, and Acts that seeks to illustrate that an ecclesiology of communion has good grounding in the biblical testimonies”¹²³.

As Christopher S. Collins observes, Ratzinger understands the Church as continuing “the course of the dialogue given in the Scriptural witness and the church’s ongoing appropriation of the nature of this dialogue between God and humanity as a great gift given through the church for the whole world”¹²⁴. Collins further notes that

this unity and multiplicity at the heart of the Christian theology of God is also essential to the theology of the Church. Since we come to know this harmony of unity and multiplicity most perfectly in the person of Christ, he is also at the center of the church’s self-understanding¹²⁵.

The Church’s unity is therefore rooted in the very life of the Triune God. As Ratzinger explains, “the first characteristic of the Church in the Apostles’ Creed is her unity. The Church emerges from the unity of the Triune God and is at the same time its mirror. In this Trinitarian rootedness lies the deepest reason for the Church as a *communio*-unity”¹²⁶.

Indeed, for Ratzinger,

Christ is the center of the Church in that the very essence of the Church is to gather to hear the Word from God spoken and in turn to respond to that Word. The Church learns how to do this insofar as it is conformed to the person of Christ who is both the Word spoken from God to humanity and also humanity’s perfect response to God¹²⁷.

Ratzinger himself emphasizes that the Church is an effect of Christ’s saving work...it is the result of God’s action. As he explains,

Christ came in order to gather together what was dispersed (cf. Jn 11:52; Mt 12:30). His entire work is thus to gather the new people. Hence, this early stage is already marked by the appearance of two elements that are essential for the future understanding of the Church. First, the dynamism of unification, in which men draw together by moving toward God, is a component of the new people of God as Jesus

¹²² RATZINGER, Joseph. *The Ratzinger Reader: Mapping a Theological Journey*. Edited by Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion. New York: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2010, p. 86.

¹²³ RATZINGER, *The Ratzinger Reader: Mapping a Theological Journey*, 2010. p. 88.

¹²⁴ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 91.

¹²⁵ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 91.

¹²⁶ HEIM, Maximilian Heinrich. *Ecclesiology*, In: CARDÓ, Daniel; LANG, Uwe Michael, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Ratzinger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, p. 179.

¹²⁷ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 91-92.

intends it. Second, the point of convergence of this new people is Christ; it becomes a people solely through his call and its response to his call and to his person¹²⁸.

This ecclesial communion reaches its deepest realization in the Paschal Mystery. Reflecting on the symbolism of Christ's pierced side in the Gospel of John, Ratzinger writes that "the open side of the new Adam repeats the mystery of the 'open side' of man at creation: it is the beginning of a new definitive community of men with one another, a community symbolized here by blood and water, in which John points to the basic Christian sacraments of baptism and Eucharist and, through them, to the Church as the sign of the new community of men. The Church is thus born from Christ's self-giving love on the Cross and lives continually from that same sacramental communion."¹²⁹

2.5.3 The Church as the Space of Revelation's Reception

Ratzinger's lifelong engagement with the Church Fathers, especially Augustine, was crucial in shaping this vision. In Augustine, he discovered a theology in which truth is inseparable from communion and love. Augustine's own intellectual journey—from Manichaeism through Neoplatonism to the humility of Christian faith—became, in Ratzinger's reading, a paradigm for understanding revelation itself. Truth is not grasped through intellectual mastery alone, but through conversion, humility, and belonging to the Church.

This insight deepened through Augustine's "second conversion," which Ratzinger associates with his ordination and episcopal ministry. Augustine came to recognize that truth is known ecclesially, within the communion of the Church, rather than through private insight or elite knowledge. Charity, not intellectual superiority, becomes the path to truth. In this way, the Church appears not merely as a teaching authority but as the living subject of faith, the place where revelation is received, interpreted, and embodied. Reflecting on Augustine's response to the Donatists, Ratzinger explains that the Church is held together not merely by external structures or valid sacraments, but above all by *caritas*, the divine love that creates authentic communion. Even where sacraments are valid, without communion with the *ecclesia catholica* their deepest meaning remains incomplete¹³⁰.

"What becomes possible within the Church is access to the fullness of truth, as the human person finds the fullness of his or her identity in relationship with the one through whom all things have their being"¹³¹. The Church Fathers, in Ratzinger's view, are therefore not simply

¹²⁸ RATZINGER, *Called to Communion*, 1996, p. 23.

¹²⁹ See RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 141.

¹³⁰ See RATZINGER, *Popolo e casa di Dio in Sant'Agostino*, 2005, p.146-158.

¹³¹ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 88-89.

early commentators on revelation; they belong to the original revelatory event itself. They represent the Church's first normative response to the Word of God. Through them, the canon of Scripture was discerned, the rule of faith articulated, liturgical worship structured, and the integration of faith and reason achieved. This foundational response established the "space" in which revelation continues to be received throughout history. As Ratzinger notes, Augustine's ecclesial vision applies to all the names used to describe the Church: "*per ecclesia* (through the church), *per corpus Christi* (through the body of Christ), *per civitas Dei* (through the city of God) and, in connection with this, also *per populus* (people of God) and *per domus Dei* (through the house of God)"¹³².

Ratzinger's reading of Bonaventure is particularly significant here. He writes, "Furthermore, we have already seen that within the Catholic Church we find not only Aquinas' answer to Joachim, but Bonaventure's answer as well"¹³³. Moreover, "Bonaventure's answer takes up the basic themes of Joachim and relates them to the thought of the Church without any loss of the living eschatological tension"¹³⁴. In Bonaventure, Ratzinger finds a theology capable of preserving both ecclesial continuity and eschatological dynamism.

This becomes especially evident in Bonaventure's interpretation of Scripture and history. Ratzinger explains that in the early Church "there were two trees, just as there had been in Paradise; the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of life is Christ Himself. This tree becomes accessible in the spiritual understanding of Scripture. But he who understands the Scriptures only in the literal sense eats of the tree of knowledge"¹³⁵.

Bonaventure's theology thus points toward a spiritual and ecclesial reading of Scripture that transcends mere literalism while remaining rooted in the Church's faith.

Ratzinger further explains that for Bonaventure,

the eschatological process of division had already begun with the events which were taking place at the University of Paris. If anyone gives philosophy final and definitive validity and does not use it simply as a means, he eats of the tree of knowledge and he 'falls from the faith'¹³⁶.

Here, Ratzinger warns against any absolutization of reason detached from faith and ecclesial communion.

¹³² RATZINGER, *Popolo e casa di Dio in Sant'Agostino*, 2005, p.148-158.

¹³³ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 115.

¹³⁴ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 115.

¹³⁵ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 152.

¹³⁶ RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 153.

2.5.4 Eucharist and the Historical Form of Communion

The dialogical structure of revelation becomes most tangible in the Eucharist. For Ratzinger, the Eucharist is the concrete place where Christ's self-giving continues in history and where the Church is constantly renewed. The Eucharist is not merely one activity among others; rather, it is the source and summit of ecclesial life because it is the sacramental form of communion with Christ. In the Eucharist, revelation reaches its sacramental and historical concreteness, for the Word who became flesh continues to give himself to humanity in the communion of his Body and Blood.

In his reflections on the reception of the Second Vatican Council, Ratzinger describes the emergence of "*communio* ecclesiology" as an attempt to synthesize the Council's teaching on the Church. Looking back on the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, he explains that "there has been a new attempt to sum up the whole of the Council's ecclesiology in one basic concept, which dominates the discussion, under the term *communio*-ecclesiology"¹³⁷. Communion therefore becomes the key hermeneutical principle for understanding the mystery of the Church. The Church is fundamentally communion because, in Christ, humanity is drawn into a new and living relationship with God and with one another.

Reflecting on the meaning of the word *communio* (*koinonia*), Ratzinger traces its development from ordinary human fellowship and shared life to its fullest realization in the mystery of Christ and the Church. He connects this understanding to the Gospel account of Peter, James, and John as partners in fishing, seeing in it a symbol of how ordinary human cooperation is transformed into ecclesial communion gathered around Christ. He likewise relates this to the Hebrew *chaburah*, the fellowship gathered for the Passover meal, which reaches fulfillment in Christ's Last Supper and sacrificial self-offering. In the Old Testament, the relationship between God and humanity was understood primarily in terms of covenant because God remained infinitely transcendent and communion between God and humanity had not yet been fully realized. In the New Testament, however, through the Incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, this distance is overcome. The Church therefore becomes the community born from Christ's Passover, gathered around the Eucharist, where believers participate in the life, love, and self-giving of Christ himself¹³⁸.

Drawing on St. Paul and the patristic tradition, Ratzinger insists on the inseparability of the Eucharist and the Church. The Church does not simply celebrate the Eucharist; she comes

¹³⁷ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 105; See RATZINGER, Joseph. *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005, p. 129.

¹³⁸ See RATZINGER, *O Caminho Pascal*, 1986, p. 122-124.

into being through it. In receiving the Body of Christ, believers become the Body of Christ. This is why Augustine can say, be what you see, and receive what you are. Eucharistic communion, therefore, becomes the deepest realization of revelation as dialogue: God gives himself, and the Church responds by becoming what she receives. As Ratzinger explains, “this new communion is first brought into being in the dynamic movement of gathering. Emanating from Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit, this dynamism has its center in the Lord, who communicates himself in his very Body and Blood”¹³⁹.

Ratzinger further emphasizes that the Church’s Eucharistic nature cannot be separated from Christology and Trinitarian theology. Reflecting on the Pauline doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ, he insists that “it is entirely impossible to conceive of the New Testament’s notion of the people of God apart from Christology”¹⁴⁰. Christology necessarily opens into the Trinity because the risen Christ remains present and operative through the Holy Spirit. As Ratzinger notes, St. Paul’s affirmation that “the Lord is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:17) expresses the fundamental reality that shaped the Church from the beginning¹⁴¹. The Church’s unity is therefore not merely organizational but profoundly Trinitarian, flowing from participation in the communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Ratzinger explains,

the feast of the Holy Trinity is different from all the other feasts of the liturgical year, such as Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost, when we celebrate the wondrous works of God in history: the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the Descent of the Holy Spirit, and consequently the birth of the Church. Today we are not celebrating an event in which ‘something’ of God is made visible; rather, we are celebrating the very mystery of God. We rejoice in God, in the fact that he is the way he is; we thank him for existing; we are grateful that he is what he is and that we can know him and love him and that he knows and loves us and reveals himself to us¹⁴².

At the same time, Ratzinger explains that although the image of society as a body was known in Stoic philosophy, St. Paul radically transformed its meaning when he called the Church the Body of Christ. The Church is not merely like a body by analogy; she truly is the Body of Christ, the living organism through which the life and activity of the risen Lord continue in the world. Christ the Head acts through his Body for the salvation of humanity, so much so that the Church can be called the “fulness” (*pleroma*) of Christ (Eph. 1:22–23). The Church therefore exists not as a merely sociological reality, but as the sacramental presence of Christ’s saving action in history.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ RATZINGER, *Called to Communion*, 1996, p. 32.

¹⁴⁰ RATZINGER, *Called to Communion*, 1996, p. 33-34.

¹⁴¹ RATZINGER, *Called to Communion*, 1996, p. 34.

¹⁴² RATZINGER, Joseph. *Western Culture Today and Tomorrow: Addressing Fundamental Issues*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019, p. 125.

¹⁴³ See RATZINGER, *Called to Communion*, 1996, p. 33-35.

This Eucharistic foundation also clarifies the Church's historical and visible character. For Ratzinger, the Church exists within human history and therefore shares humanity's struggles, weaknesses, and historical development, yet she is not the ultimate reality or final goal in herself. Rather, she is the means through which God leads humanity toward the Kingdom of God. The visible Church—with her sacraments, teachings, structures, and ministry—is the concrete historical community founded by Christ, while the invisible Church refers to the deeper reality of communion with God and the fulfillment of the Kingdom that the visible Church is called to serve and make present in the world.¹⁴⁴

Communion is therefore not an abstract ideal, but a concrete sacramental reality. The Church is historical precisely because revelation unfolds in time and seeks a communal response. Through the Eucharist, history itself is gathered into Christ and oriented toward its fulfillment. Ratzinger therefore insists that “Catholicity is not just a pleromatic redundancy and even less an external means of organizing the whole; it is a central inner dimension of the very mystery of the Eucharist”¹⁴⁵. The Eucharist reveals the Church's catholicity because in it the many are gathered into the one Body of Christ.

This understanding also illuminates the very meaning of the word “Church.” As observed by DeClue in his study of Ratzinger, “the etymology of ‘church,’ understood in its historical and religious context, bespeaks both the divine origin of the Church (as God's gathering of his people) as well as the core of the Church's essence”¹⁴⁶. The Church exists because God gathers humanity into communion through Christ.

Influenced deeply by Henri de Lubac, Ratzinger further understands the human person as fundamentally oriented toward communion. As DeClue observes in his interpretation of Ratzinger, the human person is created for covenant and communion with God. Human existence is essentially relational, marked by a two-fold orientation: vertically toward God and horizontally toward others. Corporeality and sociality belong to the image of God as such, and thus the human being exists as a being in relation. Humanity comes from God and from others, and lives for God and for others. Communion is therefore not accidental to human existence but belongs to the deepest identity of the human person as image of the Triune God¹⁴⁷.

For Ratzinger, the Eucharist also reveals that the Church is born from Christ's obedient love. Reflecting on Christ's prayer in Gethsemane, he explains that the unity between Christ's

¹⁴⁴ RATZINGER, *Called to Communion*, 1996, p. 31.

¹⁴⁵ RATZINGER, Joseph. *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*. Trans. Mary Frances McCarthy. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987, p. 294.

¹⁴⁶ DECLUE, *The Mind of Joseph Ratzinger*, p. 216.

¹⁴⁷ See DECLUE, *The Mind of Joseph Ratzinger*, 2024, p. 216-218.

divine and human wills is not mechanical but the communion of love itself. In the obedience of the Son, “not what I will, but what you will” (Mk 14:36), humanity is reconciled with God and transformed from within. The Eucharist therefore becomes participation in this *admirabile commercium* (admirable Exchange), the wondrous exchange through which humanity is drawn into communion with God. As Ratzinger explains, “to receive the Eucharist in its deepest meaning is to enter into this exchange of wills. In the suffering of this exchange, and only here, is human nature truly transformed, the conditions of the world changed, community born, and the Church brought into being”¹⁴⁸.

2.5.5 Local and Universal Communion

Ratzinger’s understanding of the Church as Eucharistic communion allows him to articulate a nuanced relationship between the local and universal Church. Each local Eucharistic assembly is fully Church, yet no local church exists in isolation. The one Church of Christ exists in and from the many local churches, united by the one Eucharist, apostolic ministry, and communion with the whole Church.

For Ratzinger, this universality belongs to the Church from the very beginning. Reflecting on Pentecost, he explains that the presence of many nations in Acts 2 reveals that the Gospel is intended for all peoples and that the Church is called to embrace the whole world. The Twelve Apostles, gathered with Mary at Pentecost, symbolize the new People of God in their universality and fullness. Thus, the Church did not begin merely as a local community in Jerusalem, but as a universal communion concretely realized in every local church through the Eucharist¹⁴⁹.

This vision rejects both a purely centralized model that diminishes local reality and a fragmented model that undermines unity. Communion is the key: unity is not imposed externally but arises from shared participation in Christ. Within this structure, episcopal ministry and papal primacy serve communion rather than replace it. The Bishop of Rome exercises a ministry of unity grounded not primarily in juridical authority, but in Eucharistic communion—a “presiding in love” that safeguards the Church’s catholicity. This universality is visibly expressed even within the Eucharistic prayer itself, where the pope is named before

¹⁴⁸ RATZINGER, *O Caminho Pascal*, 1986, p. 128. “Receber a eucaristia no seu significado mais profundo quer dizer entrar neste intercâmbio das vontades. No sofrimento deste intercâmbio, e somente aqui, muda-se realmente a essência humana, mudam-se as condições do mundo, nasce a comunidade, nasce a Igreja.”

¹⁴⁹ See HEIM, Maximilian Heinrich. *Ecclesiology*. In: CARDÓ, Daniel; LANG, Uwe Michael, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Ratzinger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, p. 184.

the local bishop, signifying that every local church exists only within communion with the universal Church¹⁵⁰.

The Church, then, is fundamentally a Eucharistic communion. She is the Body of Christ, constituted as such by the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the bond of unity, the sacrament of love, and the pledge of future glory. In the Eucharist, the Church already participates in the heavenly banquet and anticipates the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). The Church is therefore the anticipation of the Kingdom, the first fruits of the new creation, and the instrument through which God is accomplishing his purpose in the world. She is the mystery of Christ in whom the hidden wisdom of God is made manifest (Eph. 3:9–10), the light of the world (Matt. 5:14), the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13), and the city set on a hill (Matt. 5:14)¹⁵¹.

2.5.6 Revelation, History, and Mission

Because revelation is dialogical and communal, it necessarily opens outward toward mission. The Church does not exist for herself, but as the sacrament of God's will to unite humanity in Christ. Mission is not an optional activity; rather, it is the extension of Eucharistic communion into the world. In one of Ratzinger's striking images, mission seeks to complete the miracle of Pentecost by healing the divisions of humanity and drawing all people into one Body.

This missionary dimension also grounds Ratzinger's ecumenical concern. Christian divisions are not merely organizational failures, but wounds within the Body of Christ that hinder the full historical realization of communion. Ecumenism, therefore, is rooted in the Church's very nature as Eucharistic communion and aims ultimately at restored unity at the Lord's table. As Ratzinger vividly explains that,

the designation of the Church as a sacrament thus deepens and clarifies the concept of Church and offers a response to contemporary man's search for the unity of mankind: the Church is not merely an external society of believers; by her nature, she is a liturgical community; she is most truly Church when she celebrates the Eucharist and makes present the redemptive love of Jesus Christ, which, as love, frees men from their loneliness and leads them to one another by leading them to God¹⁵².

In Ratzinger's theology, the Church stands at the living intersection of revelation, Christology, Eucharistic communion, and history. She is neither the source of revelation nor its replacement, but its living reception, sacramental embodiment, and historical continuation in the world. Revelation, understood as God's dialogical self-giving in Jesus Christ, gives rise to

¹⁵⁰ See HEIM, Maximilian Heinrich. *Ecclesiology*, 2024, p.184.

¹⁵¹ RATZINGER, *Called to Communion*, 1996, p. 39.

¹⁵² RATZINGER, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 1987, p. 294.

communion, and this communion, lived sacramentally and historically, gives rise to the Church. At the center of this vision stands Christ himself, the incarnate Word in whom divine initiative and human response are perfectly united. Through his Incarnation, Paschal Mystery, and continuing presence in the Eucharist, humanity is drawn into communion with the Triune God. The Church therefore emerges not merely as an institution or sociological reality, but as the people gathered by Christ, continually renewed through the Eucharist, and formed into his Body through the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Eucharist becomes the deepest realization of revelation as dialogue: God gives himself completely, and the Church responds by becoming what she receives.

For Ratzinger, the Church is at once visible and invisible, historical and eschatological. She journeys within history, sharing in humanity's weakness and struggles, yet always pointing beyond herself toward the Kingdom of God. Through Scripture, Tradition, the Fathers, and the sacraments, the Word continues to dwell and reveal in history and to gather humanity into unity and communion. The Church's unity is therefore not merely organizational or juridical, but profoundly Christological and Trinitarian, rooted in the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and made visible in the one Eucharist celebrated throughout the world. Because revelation is dialogical and Christocentric and at the same time missionary, the Church can never close in upon herself; she exists to continue Christ's mission of gathering humanity into communion and healing the divisions of the world. Here it is clear that Ratzinger presents the Church as the sacrament of communion, the historical space where truth and love meet, and where humanity encounters the living God through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

In this chapter, Joseph Ratzinger's theology of divine revelation has been shown to be fundamentally shaped by its dialogical nature, in which God's self-communication is never a one-sided transmission of information but a living encounter that calls for a response of faith within history. Drawing on St. Bonaventure's theology of history, revelation is understood as an encounter in which the eternal Logos enters time and continues to act through the "seeds" of the Word that unfold in Scripture, Tradition, and the life of the Church. This dialogical structure means that revelation is fully realized only in the response of faith: God speaks, and the human person—individually and ecclesially—is drawn into hearing, receiving, and living that Word.

Within this framework, Scripture and Tradition are not rival sources but inseparable dimensions of the one dialogical event of revelation. They arise from history and remain alive in history because revelation itself is an ongoing divine-human dialogue guided by the Holy

Spirit. The Church, therefore, is not a mere repository of fixed teachings but the historical space where this dialogue continues to take visible form. In *Dei Verbum* especially, this is expressed in the unity of God's Word and the Church's living reception of it, where listening precedes proclamation and faith is understood as participation in what is heard.

This dialogical character also shapes Ratzinger's Christology: Jesus Christ is the definitive Word of God, in whom dialogue between God and humanity reaches its fullness. In him, revelation is not only spoken but embodied, making communion with God possible and drawing humanity into this relationship. The Church continues this Christ-event in history as the community in which the Word is heard, celebrated, and responded to—especially in the liturgy and the Eucharist, where communion becomes the concrete form of divine-human dialogue.

Finally, this chapter has shown how the dialogical nature of revelation runs through Ratzinger's reading of ecclesial history, from the tensions of the Reformation and the Council of Trent to the renewal of theology at Vatican II. What is at stake is not only the transmission of doctrine, but the living continuity of God's address to humanity in Christ through the Church. Revelation, in this sense, is never complete without reception; it exists as an event that unites divine initiative and human response.

Thus, Ratzinger's theology presents revelation as fundamentally dialogical: grounded in God's free initiative, fulfilled in Christ, and continually enacted in the life of the Church. This dialogical vision offers not a closed system, but an ongoing invitation into communion with God, where faith is participation in the living Word who still speaks in history.

CHAPTER 3: JESUS CHRIST, THE FULLNESS OF DIVINE REVELATION

Having examined the nature of divine revelation in the theology of Joseph Ratzinger and its fundamentally dialogical character, it now becomes necessary to explore the Christological center in which this revelation reaches its fullness and definitive expression. In Ratzinger's theological vision, revelation is not understood as the mere communication of doctrinal propositions or abstract truths, but as the living self-disclosure of God within human history. Divine revelation unfolds as a personal and relational event in which God freely enters into dialogue with humanity, inviting the human person into communion with Himself. Within this perspective, revelation possesses a historical, dynamic, and salvific character that finds its culmination in the mystery of Jesus Christ.

Within this theological framework, Christ emerges as the center and fulfillment of revelation and history. The Incarnation of the eternal Word signifies the decisive moment in which God's self-communication becomes fully visible and accessible in human existence. Revelation is therefore not simply a past event confined to sacred history, but a living reality that continues to unfold through the presence of Christ in the life of the Church and through the action of the Holy Spirit. The historical manifestation of God in Christ reveals not only the divine nature but also the ultimate meaning of humanity, creation, and salvation history itself.¹

¹ In his General Audience of 10 March 2010, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on St. Bonaventure's understanding of history and ecclesial renewal, emphasizing that genuine Christian progress can never be separated from the Church's enduring foundation in Jesus Christ, nor interpreted as a rupture with her apostolic continuity. In this sense, he underscores Bonaventure's rejection of any static or purely backward-looking view of the Church, affirming instead that authentic renewal unfolds from within the one mystery of Christ in history. As Benedict XVI recalls, "This does not mean that the Church is stationary, fixed in the past, or that there can be no newness within her. *Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*: Christ's works do not go backwards, they do not fail but progress." Benedict XVI further explains that, for St. Bonaventure, Christ is not merely the end of history in a terminal sense, as often understood in earlier patristic frameworks, but rather its abiding centre. History, therefore, does not simply conclude with Christ but enters into a new phase shaped by His ongoing presence and action in the Church. "For St Bonaventure," he notes, "Christ was no longer the end of history, as he was for the Fathers of the Church, but rather its centre; history does not end with Christ but begins a new period. The oneness of Christ also guarantees newness and renewal in all the periods of history." In this perspective, Bonaventure's theology safeguards both continuity and renewal, showing that the Church's fidelity to Christ is precisely what makes authentic development and spiritual vitality possible in every age. BENEDICT XVI. *General Audience*. Paul VI Audience Hall, Wednesday, March 10, 2010. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100310.html. Accessed November 3, 2025. See also. See DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 181. As has been observed in contemporary theological interpretation, revelation in Christ marks the decisive turning point within the *exitus-reditus* structure of history. In this classical Bonaventurian schema, creation's *exitus*—its going forth from God—finds its fulfillment in Christ, while its *reditus*—its return to God—is accomplished through the incarnate Word, who gathers all creation back to the Father. This interpretative framework highlights Christ as the living center and fullness of divine revelation. Within this perspective, revelation reaches its definitive historical and personal fulfillment in Jesus Christ, understood as the unique locus in which God's self-communication is fully given and made accessible to humanity. See DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 180. See BLANCO SARTO, Pablo. *La Teología de Joseph Ratzinger: una introducción*. 2. ed. Madrid: Pelicano; Palabra, 2011, p. 87. In continuity with the Bonaventurian *exitus-reditus* structure, the Incarnation of the eternal Word in Jesus Christ reveals the intrinsic unity of creation and salvation

This Christocentric understanding of revelation in the theology of Joseph Ratzinger also highlights the profound unity between creation and redemption. The same divine *Logos*² through whom all things were created enters history in order to restore and gather creation back to its origin in God. Consequently, revelation is inseparable from the mystery of salvation: in Jesus Christ, God reveals Himself while simultaneously accomplishing the redemption of humanity. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ constitute the supreme manifestation of divine love and the definitive realization of God's salvific plan. Through the Paschal Mystery, revelation attains its highest expression, as the cross reveals the depth of divine self-giving and the resurrection proclaims the victory of life over sin and death.

Furthermore, in Ratzinger's theology of revelation, divine truth is not communicated merely through concepts or teachings but is encountered personally in Christ Himself. Revelation becomes personal, dialogical, and transformative because it is embodied in the incarnate Word. In Christ, the invisible God becomes visible, and the eternal enters into history without ceasing to transcend it. As the fullness of revelation, Christ remains the enduring source of truth and salvation for every generation, continually speaking to humanity through Scripture, Tradition, and the life of the Church.

This chapter will therefore examine the Christocentric dimension of revelation in the theology of Joseph Ratzinger, focusing on how the mystery of Jesus Christ constitutes the fullness and pinnacle of divine self-disclosure. It will explore the relationship between revelation, history, and salvation, showing how the Incarnation reveals the unity of creation and redemption within the divine plan. Attention will be given to the understanding of Christ as the living center of history and the definitive Word of God through whom humanity encounters the

history: the same Word through whom all things came to be (Jn 1:3) is also the one in whom all things find their fulfillment and return to the Father. In this perspective, Christ is not an external intervention in history but its inner center and completion, as the definitive movement of return to God is accomplished in Him. In Ratzinger's thought, Christology has a logical coherence that is not simply intelligible in the realm of pure speculation but is illuminated by experience in history. See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 55-56.

² The Word, or *Logos*, through whom everything was created, is fully revealed as love in Jesus' self-giving on the cross. This shows that we can't understand God's Word only through abstract logic or reason; we have to look at how God's plan unfolds throughout history. For Ratzinger, the story of salvation helps us see that Christ reveals the true meaning of creation, and his life, death, and resurrection give purpose to everything. The application of the concept of *Logos* to Christ also carries deep meaning in the Gospel of John. Ratzinger explains that *Logos* does not simply mean the eternal rationality of being, as it did for the ancient Greeks, but refers to a person—Jesus himself—who is the living Word of God. The Greeks saw "*logos*" as meaning or reason, but John focuses on its meaning as "Word" (*verbum*), showing a relationship between the one who speaks the Word (the Father) and the Word that is spoken (the Son). This relationship is revealed in Jesus' prayers and actions during his mission on earth. According to Ratzinger, the *Logos* is not an abstract idea but is made visible to the world in Jesus, the incarnate Word of the Father. In this way, the Word is not just logical but dialogical—God communicating his love to humanity through his Son. See RATZINGER, Joseph, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J.R. Foster, San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004, p.189. see also DE GAÁL, Emery. *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance: Explorations and Discoveries in Pope Benedict XVI's Theology*. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic Press, 2018. p. 187.

fullness of truth and communion with God. In this way, the chapter seeks to demonstrate that, in Ratzinger's theology of revelation, revelation finds its ultimate meaning and completion in the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Logos who reveals the Father and draws all creation toward its final fulfillment.

3.1 Ratzinger's Understanding of the Christocentric Nature of Revelation

Following the discussion in the previous chapter concerning the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, it is important to emphasize once again Ratzinger's central claim that revelation cannot be reduced to Scripture alone. For him, revelation is not limited to the written word or to the Church's transmitted teachings; rather, it is fundamentally the divine act through which God communicates Himself and His will to humanity. Ratzinger therefore insists that one must move beyond the external forms of Scripture and Tradition to their deeper source: "Revelation is the living Word of God, from which Scripture and Tradition both spring and without which neither can be grasped in the importance they have for faith. The question of Scripture and Tradition remains insoluble so long as it is not expanded to a question of revelation and tradition"³. As Emery de Gaál further explains, "Revelation, who is Christ the incarnate Logos, is the one spring from which both Scripture and Tradition issue forth. This is the Christocentric shift that Ratzinger so eloquently advocates and argues from"⁴. De Gaál likewise notes that Ratzinger drew inspiration for this Christ-centered approach from St. Bonaventure, emphasizing that revelation itself, Christ, the eternal Word, is greater than the sum of Scripture and Tradition.⁵

3.1.1 Christ as the Fullness of Revelation and the Hermeneutical Key to Theology

Although it is impossible to encapsulate here the entirety of Ratzinger's Christology and theological vision, it is nevertheless important to examine how his understanding of the Christocentric nature of revelation serves as a foundation for the construction of his theology. As Ratzinger himself explains, "the reality that comes to be in Christian revelation is nothing and no one other than Christ himself. 'He who has seen me has seen the Father', Christ says in John (14:9)"⁶. Revelation therefore is not merely information communicated by God, but the very presence of God made visible in the incarnate Logos. In this sense, as Collins observes,

³ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 50. See also DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 173-174.

⁴ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 174.

⁵ See DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 174.

⁶ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 56. See also. RATZINGER, *Revelação e Tradição*, 1968, p. 29.

“the figure of Jesus Christ is seen as the fullness of the revelation of God, Christology then becomes, for Ratzinger, the hermeneutical key to the whole of theology”⁷.

At the center of this theology stands Jesus Christ. Ratzinger consistently maintains that revelation is not simply the communication of doctrines, moral teachings, or abstract truths about God, but God’s personal and living self-disclosure in the person of Christ. The Incarnation of the eternal Word (*Logos*) is therefore the decisive moment of revelation: God enters human history, assumes human nature, and makes Himself visible within the concrete reality of the world. Christ is not merely the bearer of revelation; He is revelation itself. In Him, God’s truth, love, and salvific will are fully manifested. Through His words, actions, suffering, death, and resurrection, the mystery of God becomes historically present and relationally accessible to humanity. As has been observed in interpretations of Ratzinger’s theology, the person of Jesus Christ stands at the foundation of all Christian faith and theological reflection, since every authentic understanding of revelation proceeds from and returns to the incarnate Word.⁸

3.1.2 Christ as the Center of History and Salvation

This Christocentric understanding of revelation is deeply connected to Ratzinger’s interpretation of Bonaventure and his theology of history. As Joseph Ratzinger explains in his study of Bonaventure, Bonaventure gradually developed a Christocentric understanding of history in which Jesus Christ is understood not merely as the end of time but as its very center. While preserving the traditional doctrine of the six ages of history, Bonaventure reformulated the meaning of the “fullness of time” through the concept of *medietas* or centrality, arguing that Christ came neither too early nor too late, but at the perfect midpoint of salvation history.⁹ For Bonaventure, Christ as mediator between God and humanity also becomes the center of all history, since everything before Him prepares for His coming and everything after Him flows from Him. Ratzinger highlights that this theological vision opened Bonaventure to certain historical insights of Joachim of Fiore, particularly the dynamic understanding of salvation history, though without accepting Joachim’s idea of an independent age of the Spirit.¹⁰

Ratzinger further declares:

It is precisely the figure of Jesus Christ, the middle person in the Trinity as well as the mediator and middle between God and man, who gradually becomes the synthesis of everything that is expressed for Bonaventure in the concept of center. Christ becomes

⁷ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 57.

⁸ DE GAÁL, Emery Gyulai. *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI: The Christocentric Shift*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 301. Cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 57.

⁹ See RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 109-110.

¹⁰ See RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 109-110.

the center. And as a consequence of this general interpretation of Christ from the notion of center, He becomes also the 'center of time'¹¹.

Thus, Christ is not simply inserted into history as one figure among many, but stands as the decisive center through whom history itself receives its meaning and direction. Although Bonaventure appropriates certain historical structures associated with Joachim, Ratzinger insists that Bonaventure ultimately maintains a firmly Christocentric theology. "But the difference that separates Bonaventure from Joachim is greater than it may seem at first. Basically he is in agreement with the Thomistic critique, for he also affirms a Christocentrism"¹².

Ratzinger therefore emphasizes that Bonaventure's mature theology reaches its highest point in the *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, where "the notion of 'Christ as the center of all' reaches its highest development"¹³. Unlike Joachim, for whom Christ could appear as one stage within a larger historical progression, Bonaventure understands Christ as "the axis of world history," the true center of time itself.¹⁴ As Ratzinger explains,

if Joachim was above all concerned with bringing out the movement of the second age to the third, Bonaventure's purpose is to show, on the basis of the parallel between the two ages, that Christ is the true center and the turning point of history. Christ is the center of all. This is the basic concept of Bonaventure's historical schema, and it involves a decisive rejection of Joachim. In the final analysis, he is closer to Thomas than to Joachim."¹⁵

Consequently, "In the *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, the concept of the center achieves its most extensive development. Christ is now understood as the center of all things in the most radical sense"¹⁶.

In continuity with the Bonaventurian *exitus-reditus* structure, the Incarnation reveals the intrinsic unity between creation and salvation history: the same Word through whom all things came to be (Jn 1:3) is also the one in whom all things find their fulfillment and return to the Father. As Ratzinger observes, "For him, the history of the world is ordered in an egressus and a regressus; In the center of these stands Christ"¹⁷. He further explains that "For Bonaventure, history consists of two corresponding movements from the very beginning egressus and regressus. Christ stands as the turning point of these movements and as the center who both divides and unites"¹⁸. Thus, "the duality of egressus and regressus makes the history of the

¹¹ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 110.

¹² RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 117.

¹³ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 118.

¹⁴ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 118.

¹⁵ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 118.

¹⁶ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 135.

¹⁷ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 141.

¹⁸ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 142-143.

world into a great circular movement which proceeds from God and returns again to God.”¹⁹ In this light, Christ is revealed not as an external intervention in history but as its inner center and completion. Ratzinger therefore exclaims: “In the light of this, another citation which is peculiar to the Hexaemeron becomes clear. There Christ is presented as the center of all things.”²⁰

This Christological and historical vision also shapes Ratzinger’s understanding of revelation as participation in the reality of Christ Himself. Accordingly, “receiving revelation is considered equivalent to entering into the reality of Christ, from which emerges that dual objective situation that Paul describes alternately with the words ‘Christ in us’ and ‘we in Christ’”²¹.

Revelation is therefore not simply an external communication of truths but an incorporation into the living reality of Christ. As DeClue explains,

revelation in Christ is the turning point of the *exitus-reditus* structure of history that we have referred to time and again.... It is the high point of God’s union with humanity that enables the rest of humanity to begin the journey back to God on the way to the eschaton²².

DeClue further adds, citing Peter Hofmann, “Christ is the center and the goal of salvation history; the world is ordered to him in procession and return”²³.

This Christocentric understanding of revelation shapes not only Ratzinger’s theology but also his broader vision of the Church and Christian existence. The Church exists to make Christ known and to extend His revelation throughout history. Doctrine, liturgy, and moral teaching all derive their meaning from the encounter with the living Word. Revelation, guided by the Holy Spirit, is embodied in the Church’s Tradition, understood as a “living reality that encompasses both the learning process and the learning outcome of the whole Church”²⁴. Ratzinger’s theology of revelation is therefore deeply personal, historical, and relational: revelation is not primarily an idea to be mastered, but a divine person to be encountered, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, who reveals the Father and invites humanity into communion with the divine life. From this presentation we are able to examine the understanding of the Christocentric nature of revelation in Ratzinger.

¹⁹ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 146.

²⁰ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 146.

²¹ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 56.

²² DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 179.

²³ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 183. See. HOFMAN, Peter. *Jesus Christus als Mitte der Geschichte: Der Einfluss Bonaventuras auf das Denken Joseph Ratzingers/Benedikts XVI. Und dessen Bedeutung für die aktuelle Fundamentaltheologie*, in *Zur Mitte der Theologie im Werk Josph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI.*, ed. Maximilian Heim and Justinus C. Pech in *Ratzinger-Studien*. Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2013, 6:85.

²⁴ BOEVE, Lieven. *Revelation, Scripture, and Tradition: Lessons from Vatican II’s Constitution Dei Verbum for Contemporary Theology*, 423, cited in De GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 175.

3.2 The Eternal Word: God the Son in the Trinitarian Revelation

In his work *The Mind of Joseph Ratzinger*, DeClue devotes an entire section to the Trinitarian understanding of God, offering a comprehensive analysis of Ratzinger's theological perspective. Within this framework, Ratzinger asserts that an adequate understanding of divine revelation requires a distinctly Trinitarian approach—one that recognizes the intrinsic relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the unfolding of God's self-disclosure. As DeClue notes, "One of Ratzinger's concerns is to maintain both metaphysics and history as important aspects of faith and theology. He is allergic to theological approaches that dismiss one or the other"²⁵. This balance is clearly reflected in Ratzinger's Christology, which takes the humanity of Jesus with utmost seriousness while never losing sight of His divinity. For this reason, Benedict's theology is best described as a "high Christology." As he himself asks, "If he [Jesus] was really only a man like any of us, what was happening then, and what happens now? Can one expect that an enthusiasm for a Jesus of that kind will last?" Jesus' humanity is essential to His role as the apex of divine revelation and the foundation of salvation (soteriology); however, that humanity derives its full significance precisely because He is truly God the Son—the Eternal Word made flesh.²⁶ As Ratzinger explains, "It is only if Jesus was God, only if God became man in him, that something actually took place in him"²⁷. As Ratzinger observes,

in the *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, the concept of the center achieves its most extensive development. Christ is now understood as the center of all things in the most radical sense. Naturally, therefore, the final assault of the powers of darkness is understood as an assault against the 'Center,' that is, against Christ who, as the 'middle person' of the Trinity, appears as the one who bears the *divina exemplaritas mundi*.²⁸

In this light, as the eternal Son and the one who bears the divine exemplar of the world, Christ stands at the core of God's plan for creation. Accordingly, the final onslaught of the powers of darkness is directed against this "Center," for opposition to Christ is ultimately opposition to the divine order and meaning inherent in creation itself. Ratzinger's observation reveals a profound Christological vision in which Jesus is not merely the Redeemer who enters history, but also the key to understanding history, humanity, and the cosmos. In Him, God's self-revelation attains its fullness, unveiling both the mystery of the Triune God and the true destiny

²⁵ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, 2024, p. 183.

²⁶ See DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 182-183.

²⁷ RATZINGER, Joseph. *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God*, trans. Brian McNeil. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008, p. 88.

²⁸ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 135-136.

of creation. Thus, Christ is the center from which all things originate, through whom all things are sustained, and toward whom all things are ultimately directed.

Although theological reflection often begins with the Father, it is through the Son that our knowledge of God is most fully realized. This truth is underscored by the words of Jesus Himself, as He reveals the Father to us (cf. Matt. 11:27; John 14:6–11; John 17:25–26). In other words, it is through God’s self-revelation in history—above all in the life and saving work of Jesus of Nazareth—that humanity gains access to knowledge of God as Trinity. As Ratzinger observes,

the doctrine of the Trinity did not arise out of speculation about God, out of an attempt by philosophical thinking to figure out what the fount of all being was like; it developed out of the effort to digest historical experiences. . . . In the formative period of the New Testament comes a completely unexpected event in which God shows himself from a hitherto unknown side: in Jesus Christ one meets a man who at the same time knows and professes himself to be the Son of God²⁹.

The disciples’ gradual recognition of Jesus’ divinity, as shown in the Synoptic Gospels, reveals the profound and progressive nature of God’s self-revelation through His Son—a revelation that unites the divine and the human in the most intimate way. As DeClue explains, “Even though our knowledge of God the Son is consequent upon our knowledge of Jesus in His humanity, it is still important to consider Him in His eternal life as the second person of the Trinity”³⁰. In other words, while our understanding of Christ begins with His human life and actions, it must ultimately ascend to the contemplation of His eternal divine identity as the Son. Thus, Ratzinger affirms, “that which makes Jesus important and irreplaceable in every age is precisely the fact that He was and is the Son, that in Him God has become man”³¹. In harmony with this, Collins adds that “Ratzinger understands clearly that as the figure of Jesus is historical, he is rightly approached by the method of historical analysis. But a historical approach divorced from the perspective of faith is not sufficient for true knowledge of him”³². Jesus’ significance, then, is not merely derived from His teachings, miracles, or moral example, but from the very reality of who He is—the eternal Word (*Logos*) through whom all things were made and in whom all things find their meaning. As the perfect self-expression of the Father, He is both the mediator and the revelation of God’s inner life to the world. Only by holding together these two dimensions—the historical Jesus and the eternal Son—can we grasp the full depth of divine revelation, where the eternal Word enters time, and the infinite love of God

²⁹ RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 63. See also. DECLUE, *The Mind of Joseph Ratzinger*, 2024, p. 97-98.

³⁰ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 98.

³¹ RATZINGER, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 2008, p. 87.

³² COLLINS, *The Word made Love*, 2013, p. 59.

becomes visible and transformative in the person of Jesus Christ. For Ratzinger, then, one must affirm the full divinity of Christ prior to the Incarnation as utterly essential for understanding His relevance in His temporal mission in the world as man.³³

3.2.1 The Trinitarian Ground of Divine Revelation in Bonaventure's Theology³⁴

According to St. Bonaventure, divine revelation is identified principally with the historical facts and the institutional occurrences of the church. The unity of metaphysics and history is also very well formulated by Bonaventure. Referring to John's Prologue he says that the Word is spoken both at the level of intellectual comprehension, the assumption of humanity, and its manifestation through signs, miracles and the shedding of blood. Divine revelation, in this sense, is to be understood from the view point of the Trinitarian dimension of God's self-communicative action in behalf of fallen mankind. To understand divine revelation in this definitive fashion, we must attend to Bonaventure's analysis of history through its various stages. The dimension of history that he analyzes is salvation history, the ongoing process of human encounter with the Triune God of Christian faith. According to Bonaventure, all things come from God, as their final cause they are however to be understood as moving toward their ultimate direction which is their incorporation into all things which have originates from the triune God, to whom they are to be directed back. This dynamic of *reductio*—the return or homecoming of creation to its divine source—shapes Bonaventure's understanding of world history as a great circular movement proceeding from God and returning to Him.³⁵ The world, therefore, finds its meaning not in opposition to God but in its destined fulfillment in Him. Within this framework, revelation functions as the means by which creation is drawn back toward its Creator, making it both a metaphysical event and a historical reality. As Gaál aptly summarizes, "Revelation is the encounter in person between God and humanity within a

³³ See DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, 2024, p. 99.

³⁴ For a more extensive and detailed treatment of the *Trinitarian foundation* and *Christological core* of divine revelation in Bonaventure's theology as interpreted by Joseph Ratzinger, see Richard DeClue's doctoral dissertation, "*Joseph Ratzinger's Theology of Divine Revelation*". SThD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2021, p. 168–183. DeClue offers a systematic exposition of how Ratzinger reads Bonaventure's theology of revelation as fundamentally rooted in the inner life of the Trinity, wherein the Father's eternal self-expression in the Son—the *Verbum Dei*—forms the metaphysical ground of all divine communication. In this perspective, revelation is not merely an external transmission of divine truths but the very self-communication of God's inner life, culminating historically in the Incarnation of the Word. DeClue further clarifies that, according to Ratzinger, Bonaventure's Trinitarian metaphysics provides the ontological basis for revelation, while its Christological center—the person of Jesus Christ—manifests this eternal divine self-expression within time and history. Thus, the Incarnation represents both the apex and the fullness of revelation, where the eternal *verbum intelligibile* becomes the *verbum sensibile*, making visible in human form the inner Word of God. For further development of these themes, particularly the Trinitarian ground of revelation, see also the entire Chapter III, "The Triune God," in DECLUE, *The Mind of Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 68–112.

³⁵ See RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 143-146.

concrete history, which is part of salvation history and culminates in the incarnation of the Logos in Jesus Christ”³⁶. Joseph Ratzinger’s interpretation emphasizes that for Bonaventure, the mystery of revelation is grounded in the inner life of the Trinity itself, wherein the divine self-communication is reflected most profoundly in the eternal generation of the Son, the Word (*Logos*), from the Father. It is precisely in the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Word made flesh, that this divine self-communication is perfectly realized. As Ratzinger explains,

it is precisely the figure of Jesus Christ, the middle person in the Trinity as well as the mediator and middle between God and man, who gradually becomes the synthesis of everything that is expressed for Bonaventure in the concept of center. Christ becomes the center³⁷.

Thus, for Bonaventure, revelation culminates in Christ, the incarnate Word, who unites God and creation and brings the entire cosmic process of *reductio* to its fulfillment in Himself.

3.2.1.1. The Eternal Word and the Trinitarian Structure of Revelation

Bonaventure develops this insight through an analogy between human communication and the divine processions within the Trinity. Just as a human person conceives and expresses words, God the Father eternally speaks the Word, the Son, who is consubstantial with Him. Building upon Augustine’s distinction between the inner and outer word, Bonaventure, according to Ratzinger, further refines this analogy by proposing a threefold model of expression. He identifies three analogies between the eternal Word and human words: the *verbum intelligibile*, the *verbum medium*, and the *verbum sensibile*. These three dimensions help illuminate the mystery of the divine Word and the manner in which God reveals Himself. The meaning of each term be explained as follows:

The *verbum intelligibile* moves in the pure inwardness of the spirit and is identical with the thought process, the thinking appropriation of a this; the *verbum sensibile* signifies the announcement, the sensible proclamation of the thought; it is the task of the *verbum medium* to manufacture the connection between the two; it is “the thinking of speech,” thus the process, in which the pure thought is first inwardly formed into the word³⁸.

In DeClue’s analysis of Ratzinger’s interpretation, these three analogies receive a profound theological application to the mystery of the eternal Word. Ratzinger writes:

It [the Word] is first of all Son, proceeding in eternal origin from the Father, God’s interiority eternally comprehending itself; beyond this, however, it is ‘archetypus mundi,’ archetype of the world, not only in God’s eternal thinking of himself, but simultaneously God’s idea of the world [*Weltgedanke Gottes*], not only *conversio rationis ad se ipsam*, but also *conversio ad sensum*, thinking toward the external word and so medium of the creation of the world. Finally, however, it is also comparable to

³⁶ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 180.

³⁷ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 110.

³⁸ RATZINGER, *Offenbarungsverständnis*, p. 131, Cited in DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 184.

the *verbum sensibile*, the outwardly spoken word: God's Son made man. In the Incarnation, that process to which human thought is subjected in its becoming word—the union of the spirit with the sensibly comprehensible—analogously takes place with the Eternal Word³⁹.

Through this triadic structure, Bonaventure articulates how the eternal self-expression of God unfolds in creation and reaches its fullness in the Incarnation. The *verbum intelligibile* mirrors the eternal procession of the Son within the divine life; the *verbum medium* reveals the Son as the archetype of all creation; and the *verbum sensibile* is fulfilled in Christ, the Word made flesh. As Ratzinger affirms, “therefore, the real salvation-historical process of revelation is thus taken into this metaphysics of the Trinity”, and “that is why there cannot be a higher instance of Divine revelation of God's self-communication to man—than the Incarnation”⁴⁰. In harmony with this perspective, Gaál emphasizes, that for Ratzinger, Jesus Christ holds absolute primacy in divine revelation. In the past, God communicated indirectly—through prophets, symbols, and partial manifestations—but with the coming of Christ, God's self-revelation reached its fullness. Referring to Hebrews 1:1–2, de Gaál notes that, for Ratzinger, God has spoken His definitive and unsurpassable word in these “last days” through His Son, who is both the creator and the heir of all things. In Jesus, God no longer speaks through intermediaries but personally encounters humanity. Through His words, actions, and very being, Christ reveals not only God's will but God's inner life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴¹ The faithful thus come to know God as Trinity only through Christ, who mediates divine life to humanity. He is the living Word of God, the perfect image of the Father, and the bridge uniting heaven and earth. For Gaál, this means that revelation is no longer a message or doctrine alone, but a personal event—the encounter with Jesus Christ Himself. In Him, all previous revelations find their fulfillment, and through Him, humanity enters into communion with the Triune God.⁴² In this way, revelation

³⁹ RATZINGER, *Offenbarungsverständnis*, p. 133, Cited in DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 185.

⁴⁰ RATZINGER, *Offenbarungsverständnis*, p. 134. Cited in DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 186.

⁴¹ While the doctrine of the Trinity remains a specific and distinct reality within Christian faith, the inseparability of Trinitarian and Christ-centered proclamation must be understood at the outset of the present essay. Ratzinger explains that the God who is far from us is one who reveals himself in a Trinitarian way. The God who is one “sends forth his Son in the mission of the Spirit,” and it is thus within the Son's mission and outpouring of the Holy Spirit through his saving events that the Trinity becomes intelligible. This doctrine is not detached speculation on the part of intellectuals, but rather a reality witnessed to in the story of salvation history as: the Father sends the Son to reveal him; the Son who reveals the Father; and, the Holy Spirit who makes believers share in the life of the Son, thereby enabling them to be brothers and sisters of Christ, and thus sons and daughters of the Father. It would follow that Christian life must reflect this Trinitarian structure, and that authentic preaching is both Trinitarian and Christocentric. The mystery of the Trinity is revealed, then, through the saving events in the life of Christ and in the work of the Spirit in the Church. The inseparability of the Christocentric and the Trinitarian in Christian proclamation is the theme of a work by Ratzinger in his 1973 book *Dogma und Verkündigung* (Dogma and Preaching). See RATZINGER, Joseph. *Dogma e anúncio*. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1977, p. 33-38.

⁴² See DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 181.

itself becomes the meeting point of metaphysics and history: God's inner life becomes outwardly manifest in Christ, who is both the expression of divine truth and the means by which all creation returns to its origin in the Trinity. This understanding naturally leads to the next topic, the mystery of the Incarnate Word, in whom the fullness of revelation is made visible and the divine plan of *reductio* is brought to completion.

3.3 The Incarnation: The Eternal Word Made Flesh

As noted earlier, one of Ratzinger's central aims is to demonstrate how metaphysical and salvation-historical perspectives complement each other. He achieves this most clearly by focusing on Jesus Christ, the concrete universal, in whom the realities of being (ontology) and historical existence converge to bring about salvation. In this way, the Incarnation not only manifests God's eternal self-expression but also unites the transcendent and the historical, showing how divine revelation is both ontological and salvific, rooted in the very life and person of Christ. In both Ratzinger's and Bonaventure's theologies, the Incarnation holds a central place within the Trinitarian understanding of revelation. The *Logos*—the eternal Word, who is the second Person of the Trinity—becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ. In this moment, God's eternal self-expression, the Word, enters the created world and assumes a human nature. For Ratzinger, the Incarnation represents the supreme form of divine self-revelation: the Word is no longer abstract or distant but becomes concrete and tangible in the person of Jesus Christ. Through the Incarnation, God's self-expression is made visible, accessible, and intimately relatable to humanity. Only in light of the Incarnation can one understand the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ fulfilled the will of the Father on this earth, and in God's plan, it is only in Him that revelation reaches its intended completion.⁴³

No greater or more complete revelation could take place that would surpass that of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word. As DeClue, citing Jared Wicks, explains, "Ratzinger thought *De revelatione* should tell why revelation 'ends' with Christ's Apostles—namely, because it reaches in Christ such fullness that no more can be added"⁴⁴. Collins further explains that, for Ratzinger, the entire meaning and saving power of Jesus Christ rest on His identity as the Eternal Word (*Logos*) who truly became flesh within history. If Jesus were not the divine Word made human—if He were merely a moral teacher or prophetic figure—then His life and

⁴³ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 186.

⁴⁴ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 186. See WICKS, Jared. *Light from Germany on Vatican Council II*, *The Catholic Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 735. See also RATZINGER, Joseph. *Brief von Joseph Ratzinger*, in "Texte im Umfeld des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils," in *Mitteilungen Institut Papst Benedikt XVI.*, vol. 5, Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2012.

message would ultimately lack redemptive depth and transformative power. What grants Jesus' life its unique salvific significance is that the eternal Logos, the divine principle that gives coherence and meaning to all creation, entered human history as *sarx*, as flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. In Him, the eternal reason and order of creation become visible in human form, expressed fully through divine love.⁴⁵ The incarnation is significant because it is the fulfillment of the earlier revelations of God—both in the created order (which reveals that God is the Creator) and in the Law and the prophets (which reveal first the holiness of God, and second the holiness which God desires for humankind). This leads Christians to understand Jesus Christ as, at its center, the ultimate mediator of all divine truth, and its completion in God's redemptive plan.

3.3.1 The Incarnate Word and Humanity

Ratzinger's Christology stands at the very center of both his theology of God and his understanding of humanity, showing that knowledge of the divine and insight into the human person are inseparable from the reality of Jesus Christ. By placing Christ at the heart of his theological vision, Ratzinger presents God not as a distant abstraction but as a relational and communicative being—not only *Logos*, eternal reason, but *Dia-Logos*, the one who speaks, loves, and enters into communion with creation. This perspective challenges purely static conceptions of divine immutability, portraying God's perfection as dynamic and personal, expressed through creative intelligence and self-giving love. As DeClue, drawing on Blanco, observes, Ratzinger's theological anthropology is deeply integrated with his broader theology: humanity is created in the image of God and renewed through the Incarnation of the Word. Consequently, “the concept of divine creation is intertwined with Christology and Trinitarian theology”⁴⁶.

Because humanity is made in the image of the triune God, human personhood must be understood within a relational and Trinitarian framework. Ratzinger writes that “man is God's image in his concrete reality, which is relationship. Since God is no self-enclosed monad, neither is man.” The divine being is inherently relational: the Father exists as *being-for*, the Son as *being-from*, and the Holy Spirit as *being-with*. Likewise, the human person reflects this divine pattern precisely insofar as the dimensions of *from*, *with*, and *for* shape the core of human existence. The relatedness of persons, therefore, finds its origin in the Trinity and, as Ratzinger

⁴⁵ See RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 193–194. See DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 70–71.

⁴⁶ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 123; See also BLANCO, *Teología de Joseph Ratzinger*, 2011, p. 137.

explains, “it is at the same time the fundamental statement about what is at stake in the concept of person. It opens the concept of person into the human spirit and provides its foundation and origin”⁴⁷. Personhood, then, is not defined by isolation or self-sufficiency but by communion, love, and relational existence, mirroring the inner life of the triune God.

Christ further illuminates this relational identity by revealing that the human longing for communion is ultimately fulfilled only in encounter with the absolute “You”—God Himself. In *Introduction to Christianity*, Ratzinger presents a profoundly relational vision of the human person, rooted in both Trinitarian theology and Christological anthropology. As Collins notes, according to Ratzinger, the human *I* naturally longs for a *You*, and while this desire is partially satisfied in relationships with others, it finds its ultimate fulfillment only in encountering God, the absolute *You*. Jesus Christ embodies both sides of this dialogue: He demonstrates the perfect human response to God while simultaneously revealing how God’s own *I* reaches out to humanity in love. In the Incarnation, the eternal Word enters history, drawing the human person out of isolation into the fullness of relational life. This encounter mirrors the eternal dialogue of love between the Father and the Son, united in the Holy Spirit—a Trinitarian relationship into which every person is invited.⁴⁸ True human fulfillment thus arises from participation in this divine–human dialogue, modeled on the perfect relational pattern of the Trinity, which also grounds all authentic human relationships. Seen through this Christological lens, the human person is both historical and transcendent rooted in time yet oriented toward eternity, called to a destiny that finds its fulfillment in union with God through the Incarnate Word, who bridges divinity and humanity.⁴⁹

Building upon this Christocentric and relational anthropology, DeClue notes—citing Ratzinger—that in addition to being the revelation of God, Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word,

⁴⁷ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 125; see also RATZINGER, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 2008, p. 30; RATZINGER, Joseph. *Truth and Freedom*. Translated by Adrian J. Walker. *Communio: International Catholic Review* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1996): p. 16–35.

⁴⁸ In relation to the argument above, Ratzinger suggests that Christian proclamation at the same time is ultimately rooted in a living reality of faith rather than abstract doctrine. He builds on the biblical formula, found in Eph 2:18, “through Christ in the Holy Spirit to the Father” — “a summary of the essence of Christianity”, as he puts it elsewhere — in order to give this proclamation a Christocentric formulation and emphasize the Trinitarian faith that is decisively linked to it. The proclamation is not a proclamation of a doctrine, dogma or outline of the faith; the Christian proclamation is intimately tied to worship and life: it is the proclamation of the reality of the saving events of Christ’s death and resurrection, in the liturgy and the sacraments, which does not remain something outer or abstract but rather evangelically connects to the journey of conversion of one who dedicates her life and world in great fidelity to this proclamation. In this sense, Christian proclamation can be described — on its luminous and persuasive side — as “essentially liturgical proclamation”, which, at the heart of its liturgy and sacraments, expounds on and mediates the goodness and truth of the faith, especially in the Easter celebrations. Furthermore, this fits in with the idea of salvation and revelation as dynamic and salvific at their essence (as in ‘salvific revelation’, as Ratzinger says elsewhere) when they are about the participation in Christ’s death and resurrection. See RATZINGER, Joseph. *Dogma e anunciação*. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1977, p. 38-40.

⁴⁹ See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 65–66.

also reveals what it truly means to be human. The Christological dogmas affirm both dimensions: they express not only the divinity of Christ but also the fullness of his humanity. For Ratzinger, these dogmas unfold the simple yet profound confession that “Jesus is the Christ,” with all the theological and anthropological implications that such a statement entails. As he explains,

developed Christological dogma acknowledges that the radical Christship of Jesus presupposes the Sonship, and that the Sonship includes the Godship... But it also acknowledges no less resolutely that in the radicality of his service Jesus is the most human of men, the true man; and it thus subscribes to the coincidence of theology and anthropology—a correspondence in which, ever since then, the truly exciting part of Christian faith has resided⁵⁰.

DeClue further explains that, for Ratzinger, Christ is the one in whom the truth about both God and humanity is revealed: “it is revealed who man is; for he comes from the Word of God who created him, and he was created toward the Word of God who loves him”⁵¹. In Christ, the eternal Word, who is both God and perfect man, provides a concrete and living witness to the truth about humanity. As DeClue summarizes, “He (the Word of God) is God and perfect man. As such, Jesus also provides a concrete witness to the truth about humanity”⁵². Similarly, de Gaál affirms that “God’s only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, demonstrates for every age again what genuinely fulfilled human existence is”⁵³.

According to de Gaál, contemporary theology—following the trajectory of thinkers such as Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, and Romano Guardini—recognizes that revelation and Incarnation are inseparably connected. Through Jesus Christ, God has fully revealed Himself: in His words, gestures, and actions, the Son of God discloses the face of the Father.⁵⁴ As *Gaudium et Spes* proclaims, “only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear”⁵⁵.

⁵⁰ See RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 211–212; cited in DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 187–188.

⁵¹ RATZINGER, *De Voluntate Dei erga hominem*, in *JRGS* 7/1, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller [Freiburg: Herder, 2012], pp. 178–179; cited in DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 188.

⁵² DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, 188.

⁵³ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 81.

⁵⁴ LATOURELLE, *Theology of Revelation*, p. 359. Cited in DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 185–186.

⁵⁵ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*. December 7, 1965. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_po.html.

Only in the light of the Incarnation, then, can the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ be understood. Because He is both fully divine and fully human, Jesus uniquely reveals God to humanity and, at the same time, reveals humanity to itself. As DeClue concludes, “Jesus is able to reveal both God and man because He is fully man. Additionally, He is able to reveal what man is precisely through the communion of His humanity with His divinity”⁵⁶. Jesus Christ is the Incarnate Word, the fullness of God’s self-communication. Since he is God’s only Son, eternally begotten of the Father, Jesus, as the Incarnate Word, is God’s fullest expression of who God is in his divine being. Jesus is the divine-human encounter. And in him itself we meet God as he exists in his own mystery. And it is through this divine-human encounter that we learn the very mystery of our own; for in Jesus we discover our own true identity as God’s creation made uniquely in his image and likeness.

3.3.2 The Dynamic Unfolding of the Logos

For Joseph Ratzinger, the concept of Logos—the divine Word—stands at the very center of theology and salvation history. It is not a static or abstract principle but a living reality that unfolds within time. Ratzinger’s theological vision approaches truth not as a collection of detached propositions but as a narrative—a sacred drama in which God’s self-revelation gradually discloses its depth and meaning throughout history. This “drama within the drama” reveals that the eternal Logos continues to act and speak within the life of the Church, guiding its understanding of divine truth across the centuries.⁵⁷ As the eternal Logos turned finite man, He leads His Church into the truth of divine revelation and fills it with grace. At the same time, He makes a deep call to the people of the world, showing them the way to salvation, if they accept Him through faith, hope, and love. Being the eternal *Logos* and the first-born Son of God, He retains true divine power and majesty. In His Person, however, He also embraces exalted human dignity and an order of blessed existence, making Him the model and ideal of all humanity. By guiding His Church in eternal truth while carrying on an embrace of mankind and all creation, He brings forth a wondrous foreshadowing of human destiny, the recognition of humanity’s God-intended place in the cosmos. He is the eternal Son and eternal Logos incarnate; for His Church, for his people.

The term *Logos* derives from the Greek word for “word” or “reason,” the root of the English logic. It conveys ideas of rationality, meaning, and intelligible order. As DeClue explains, when Christian theology speaks of the eternal Logos, it refers to God’s own inner

⁵⁶ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 188–189.

⁵⁷ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p.189.

rationality and self-understanding—God’s “divine thought.” In the prologue to the Gospel of John, the Evangelist proclaims that Jesus is this divine *Logos*: the eternal Word who was with God from the beginning and who indeed is God. By calling Jesus the Logos, John reveals that in Him, the very reason and wisdom of God have taken flesh. Jesus is therefore not merely a bearer of divine truth but the personal expression of God’s own mind and being—making the invisible God known through His life, words, and actions.⁵⁸

As de Gaál observes, for Ratzinger, this understanding of the Logos emphasizes relationality at the heart of God’s being. While the ancient Greeks understood Logos primarily as “meaning” or ratio, John highlights *Logos* as Word (*verbum*), emphasizing the intrinsic relation between the one who speaks and the Word that is spoken. This relational aspect points directly to the Father-Son dynamic in Christ. The filial relationship is manifest whenever Jesus prays or acts during His salvific mission on earth. According to Ratzinger,

the *Logos* is not to be understood abstractly but as made visible in the world through Jesus, who is the living Word of the Father. The concept of the Son, in Ratzinger’s view, is inseparable from relation: the Father is Father because He begets a Son, and the Son is Son because He exists in relation to the Father. In Jesus Christ, the Logos proceeds “from” and exists “toward” the Father, revealing God as the ultimate source and goal of divine relationality. Just as an ambassador represents the one who sent him, setting aside his own identity to convey the sender’s message, so Christ manifests the Father in every word and deed, perfectly revealing God’s presence and purpose in the world⁵⁹.

In *Introduction to Christianity*, Ratzinger traces the historical and theological evolution of the term Logos, showing how its meaning has deepened within the Christian tradition. He interprets John’s use of the term as both a continuation and a transformation of its Greek and Jewish roots. In Greek philosophy, Logos referred to the rational order or divine reason that structures the cosmos—an impersonal principle of meaning. The Gospel of John, however, redefines and personalizes this concept. By identifying Jesus of Nazareth as the Logos, John reveals that divine reason is not an abstract cosmic force but a person—the living Word of God who enters into relationship with humanity. In Christ, Logos moves from abstract reason (*ratio*) to personal word (*verbum*), expressing divine communication and communion. The eternal Logos is therefore not detached or static but the Son who exists entirely in relation to the Father and who reveals this relational life to humanity. As Ratzinger explains:

Logos does not mean simply the idea of the eternal rationality of being, as it did essentially in Greek thought. By its application to Jesus of Nazareth, the concept of Logos acquires a new dimension. It no longer denotes simply the permeation of all being by meaning; it characterizes this man: he who is here is ‘Word.’ ... He who is here is Word; he is consequently ‘spoken’ and hence the pure relation between the

⁵⁸ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p.101.

⁵⁹ RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p.182–188. See also DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 186–187.

speaker and the spoken to. Thus *Logos* Christology, as 'word' theology, is once again the opening up of being to the idea of relationship⁶⁰.

Ratzinger's conviction of the depth of the truth and the explicitness of the Word of God, which arises in him through the Church, is the same thing: it presupposes that man is capable of coming to divinity and that the divine Word has been revealed in definite, strictly historical form. He sees revelation as relational. God meets man as person, the living Word of God, and man can only respond to Him in the same way - in the form of a living person. This communion seems to him to be decisive for understanding what revelation is and how the divine Word is encountered in Christ. It is the intersection of biblical revelation and Greek philosophy that he emphasizes in his understanding of the Word, but here too, he sees it as actively unifying the two points on the basis of their divine structure and basic inner logic. This is also the basis of the output of the biblical myth and the output of the Greek philosophy for the understanding of God: through a mutual purification, through their own enrichment in the unifying objective, it brings the two points closer together and inflects them to a depth by virtue of the superior logic of the one subject matter. The encounter of the biblical myth and the Greek philosophy does not take place in a speculative reflection of the two statements, it were indeed irrelevant study on paper. He does not transform the common conscious worldview, but is in opposition to it. The longing for ultimate meaning and the fullness of the knowledge of God handed to those who seek this truth, which is the prerequisite for the acceptance and trust of faith in divine revelation, are essential components in understanding Ratzinger's claim for an acceptance of objective truth that is not barren for further questions.⁶¹

It is through this incomplete, worldly wisdom along with divine wisdom of biblical faith that a spirit propels Christian faith. The situation created a breakthrough to the formation of the first Christian thought by the very successful but brief missionary initiatives carried out in the first centuries, made possible by the providential, historical appearance of Jesus Christ. The starting point of the first elements of Christian thought occurred due to the necessity of raising the dialectical tension present between two prevailing, complementary perspectives: Greek wisdom, or reason, and biblical faith in the Old Testament. Seeking common ground in a certain sense of spirituality shared by both perspectives, as noted by Joseph Ratzinger in his work *"Introduction to Christianity"*, thus acting as a bridge connecting them both through a dual mediatory figure, the Logos, word and divine reason, the Incarnate Word, made flesh, Jesus

⁶⁰ RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p.189. See also DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 101-102.

⁶¹ See DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 102.

Christ, whose person accepted was a combination of Greek, worldly reason, and divine rationality as presented through personal, biblical revelation, and thus would narratively serve as infinite source of meaning throughout human history.⁶²

As Collins observes, in a typically patristic style of theological exposition, in which Ratzinger emphasizes the unity of what seems incompatible, he highlights the “scandal” of asserting the union of Logos and *sarx*. In the opening lines of his section on Christ in *Introduction to Christianity*, Ratzinger writes:

the second article of the Creed proclaims the absolutely staggering alliance of logos and sarx, of meaning and a single historical figure. The meaning that sustains all being has become flesh; that is, it has entered history and become one individual in it; it is no longer simply what encompasses and sustains history but a point in it⁶³.

This profound paradox, eternity embracing time, divine majesty entering human frailty, can be understood only through the mystery of divine love. Love alone explains why the eternal Word would cross the infinite distance between Creator and creation, choosing to share fully in the human condition. In Collins’s interpretation of Ratzinger, the concept of *Logos*, as applied to Jesus in the prologue of John’s Gospel, represents a pivotal and transformative moment in Christian thought, marking the shift from an abstract philosophical principle to a living, personal reality. While Logos had traditionally denoted the rational principle permeating all being, Ratzinger underscores that in Christ it becomes a concrete, relational presence: the Word is not merely an idea or abstract reason, but one who is spoken, who exists in dynamic relationship, and who engages humanity directly. In this way, Logos theology—or word theology—opens the very structure of being to the logic of relationship. Collins observes that this movement from ratio (reason) to verbum (Word) carries profound implications: the universe and human history are reinterpreted in light of the incarnate Word, situating humanity within a cosmos governed not by impersonal forces but by a personal God whose reason, will, and love determine the ordering of creation.⁶⁴

Central to Ratzinger’s understanding is the inherently dialogical character of the Word: a word presupposes a speaker, a listener, and a response, and in Christ—the eternal Word made flesh—this relational structure reaches its fulfillment as God addresses humanity.⁶⁵ Furthermore, as de Gaál stresses, for Ratzinger the historical Jesus cannot be separated from the Christ of faith, nor the Christ of faith from the historical Jesus; the two subsist in one another. The title of Christ (Messiah, the Anointed) is inseparable from the person of Jesus, just as the

⁶² See RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 192-193.

⁶³ RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 193.

⁶⁴ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 75.

⁶⁵ See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 73-77.

person is inseparable from his office, so that his works, words, and identity are fully integrated with his divine mission. This inseparability highlights the harmonious cooperation of human and divine natures and affirms that the incarnate Word, fully human and fully divine, serves as the ultimate personal center of reality. The historical and theological dimensions of Christ converge in a Logos who is both the living Word and the concrete mediator of God's dialogue with creation, demonstrating that human freedom, relationality, and the intelligibility of the universe are grounded in personal encounter with the incarnate Logos, whose being and actions unify the cosmos in a communicative and salvific relationship.⁶⁶

In the view of Ratzinger, which, in turn, springs from the theological tradition of the Church, God's self-communication in history takes on the name '*Logos*'... The logos as divine reason in the universal sense... the divine reason which is universal actual existence, is Truth as a person for me. It is the Truth and also the person. Christ is therefore not a truth by which one interprets Scripture and Tradition, that is to say a 'principle' which one holds on to, or which one is attempting to express. Rather is Christ the key through which one succeeds in understanding the whole of scripture, in understanding the whole of Tradition. He himself is Truth as a person, hence, the absolute self-communication of God to mankind. The revelation of divine love, that is to say of God, transforms history subsequently into a history of salvation, an 'invitation' to come to a communion with God. This understanding will lead us to our next topic: the person of Christ as the key to Scripture and Tradition, providing the center through which God's revelation is understood and lived.

3.4 Christ in Scripture and Tradition

In Joseph Ratzinger's theology, Jesus Christ stands at the center of both Scripture and Tradition, giving each its deepest coherence and meaning. When the Gospel of John proclaims that the Logos—the divine Word—became flesh, Ratzinger asks what kind of person this incarnate Logos is and maintains that the answer emerges only when Scripture is read within the living faith of the Church. Christ is not merely the culmination of the biblical narrative; He is its hermeneutical key—the One in whom the history of God's covenant with Israel finds its fulfillment. In this regard, DeClue observes that Jesus, the Incarnate Word, is not only the fullest expression of God's self-communication but also the key to understanding every other instance of God's revelatory words and deeds, and therefore the key to interpreting the entirety of Sacred Scripture, including the Old Testament.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 187–188.

⁶⁷ See DECLUE, *The Mind of Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 186.

Drawing on Ratzinger's thought, DeClue further emphasizes that the whole Old Testament—not merely selected passages—bears witness to Christ, since its deepest orientation is Christological and constitutes the foundation of Christian faith. Ratzinger himself explains that the confession that “Jesus” is the “Christ” means that the messianic expectation of the Old Testament reaches its fulfillment in the historical Jesus; one understands who Jesus is through the Old Testament, just as the meaning of the Old Testament becomes clear in light of the Christ-event.⁶⁸ Yet, as Ratzinger stressed in his address to the German-speaking bishops on the eve of Vatican II, the Old Testament also undergoes a Christological transformation. Its authority is not derived from itself but from Christ, who removes the veil that once covered the face of Moses (2 Cor 3:12–18). Christ, therefore, cannot be approached merely as a historical figure detached from faith. He must be encountered as He is witnessed to in Scripture and contemplated within the Church's living Tradition.⁶⁹

3.4.1 Christ as the Hermeneutical Key to Scripture and Tradition

The unity of Scripture and Tradition becomes intelligible only in relation to Christ. The Old Testament finds its deepest significance in Him, while the New Testament bears witness to His definitive revelation. Christ is therefore not simply one theme among many within the biblical narrative; He is the interpretive principle through which the whole history of salvation is understood. Scripture derives its inner unity from Him, and Tradition preserves and transmits the Church's living encounter with Him throughout the centuries.

For Ratzinger, the Christ-event is the decisive act that gives meaning and unity to history, Scripture, and humanity's relationship with God. He writes that “the whole of history, and the whole of Scripture, must be considered on the basis of this act,” since even the events of the Old Testament are oriented toward Christ and receive their fullest significance in Him.⁷⁰ The biblical narrative is therefore not a collection of disconnected religious experiences but a unified history whose center is Jesus Christ.

This Christological perspective also clarifies why revelation cannot be identified simply with the biblical text. Because God's word and God's action belong together, biblical interpretation cannot separate historical events from their theological meaning. Scripture must instead be read as a unified whole in which God's saving acts and their fulfillment in Christ mutually illuminate one another. Revelation is thus more than the written text; it is the living

⁶⁸ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 54.

⁶⁹ DECLUE, *The Mind of Benedict XVI*, 2024, p.186–187.

⁷⁰ RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 120.

reality of God's self-communication to which Scripture bears witness. For this reason, biblical texts possess a depth of meaning that transcends their original historical context and continually opens onto the broader horizon of God's saving plan.⁷¹

The New Testament, therefore, does not render Scripture obsolete. Rather, it opens the Old Testament to the fuller horizon of the Christ-event and represents what Ratzinger describes as the ongoing interpretation of Scripture in light of Christ.⁷² The Christian faith finds its Christological core in revelation through Scripture and Tradition, enabling the self-revelation of God in the Incarnate Word.

This perspective also shapes Ratzinger's understanding of Tradition. Because Christ remains alive and present in His Church, Tradition cannot be reduced to the preservation of teachings from the past. Rather, it is the Church's living interpretation of God's revelation in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit and continually deepening its understanding of the Gospel within changing historical circumstances.⁷³ The foundation of Christian faith is therefore not Scripture and Tradition considered as two separate sources, but the dynamic relationship between the Old Testament, the Gospel of Christ, and the ongoing action of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Since the Gospel encompasses the living presence of Christ among believers, Tradition becomes the Spirit-guided continuation of the Christ-event within the life of the Church.⁷⁴

3.4.2 Christ, the Law, and the Fulfillment of Israel's Heritage

Reading Jesus within this framework also sheds light on the tension found in the Gospel accounts concerning His relationship to the Law and Israel's religious heritage. At times, He strongly affirms the enduring validity of the Law, warning that even the smallest commandment must not be set aside (Mt 5:19). At other moments, however, He acts with striking freedom, declaring that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27). As Ratzinger observes, "He was and remained a Jew; that is, he linked his message to the tradition of believing Israel. ... He lived it and, in doing so, revealed its meaning. ... Traditions were criticized in order that genuine tradition might be revealed"⁷⁵.

Collins likewise notes that, for Ratzinger, Jesus embodies both fidelity to tradition and freedom from those interpretations that had gradually obscured its original purpose. His actions

⁷¹ See RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 120-123.

⁷² See RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 55-56.

⁷³ See RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 58-59.

⁷⁴ See RATZINGER, *God's Word*, 2008, p. 71-73.

⁷⁵ RATZINGER, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 1987, p. 95.

reveal neither a rejection of Israel's heritage nor an uncritical submission to inherited practices, but a recovery of their deepest meaning in relation to God's will.⁷⁶ Consequently, Ratzinger rejects attempts to portray Jesus either as a radical opponent of tradition or as a rigid traditionalist, positions advanced by certain scholars such as Ernst Käsemann.⁷⁷

For Ratzinger, this interplay of fidelity and freedom belongs to the very identity of Jesus. His obedience is directed neither toward tradition as an end in itself nor toward rebellion against it, but toward the will of the Father. In His Sonship—the perfect and loving correspondence to the Father's will—divine initiative and human response meet. Through this filial relationship, Israel's heritage is renewed and opened to all peoples. The true meaning of Scripture and Tradition, including the whole of the Old Testament, is therefore found in Christ's relationship with the Father, through whom humanity is drawn into communion with God and the covenant reaches its fulfillment.⁷⁸

3.5 The Revelation of God in the Incarnation, the Cross, and the Living Christ

Joseph Ratzinger presents a deeply coherent understanding of divine revelation, one that turns not to abstractions or detached teachings but to the concrete person of Jesus Christ. For him, revelation unfolds as God's own self-communication in history, reaching its fullness in the Incarnation, the Cross, and Christ's enduring presence in the Church. The Incarnation discloses not only the mystery of God but the truth of humanity itself. As DeClue notes, “When it is said that Christ's humanity reveals what it truly means to be human, this must not be understood solely in reference to human nature and thereby abstractly. Becoming man includes the entirety of Jesus's life on earth”⁷⁹, and citing Ratzinger, “the individual need possesses his life in its completeness in one single moment; even in the individual, life has a temporal extension, and it is only the totality of this temporal structure that makes him the man he is”⁸⁰.

This insight cannot be separated from Ratzinger's insistence that Jesus' entire identity arises from His eternal relationship with the Father. Jesus is the Son because He is the Word—proceeding from the Father as a spoken word proceeds from the speaker. Benedict highlights this repeatedly in *Jesus of Nazareth*, especially in the opening chapter of the first volume. At

⁷⁶ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 80.

⁷⁷ See KÄSEMANN, Ernst. *Was Jesus Liberal?* in idem, *Der Ruf der Freiheit*, 3rd ed. Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1968, 19-53, cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 79-80.

⁷⁸ RATZINGER, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 2008, p. 33–37. See also COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 80.

⁷⁹ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 191.

⁸⁰ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 191. See also, RATZINGER, *God of Jesus Christ*, 2008, p. 69.

the baptism in the Jordan, Jesus is revealed as the beloved Son of the Father, and this filial identity shapes His entire mission. His refusal of Satan's temptations rests on His unwavering reference back to the Father; His teachings emerge from this same intimacy; and even His final words on the Cross flow from His communion with the Father. Ratzinger sees this filial identity not merely as a defining feature of Jesus' person but as the identity into which Jesus draws His followers—teaching them to pray as He prays, and thereby extending His own relationship with the Father to the Church, which becomes a community of God's children.⁸¹

This vision harmonizes with de Gaál's reading of Ratzinger: "Christ" and "Jesus" cannot be separated. The Anointed One reveals the Trinity precisely because the Father's sending of the Son reaches its goal when the Word becomes visible in human history. Ratzinger articulates this with striking clarity:

God's dialogue with man... has achieved its goal... not to say many things, but to utter himself in the Word.... In the man Jesus, God has once and for all uttered himself: he is his Word and, as his Word, himself.... Divine existence and human existence touch and unite... at the one point 'Jesus of Nazareth'⁸².

Thus, as de Gaál summarizes, in Jesus God "utters Himself once and for all".⁸³ In Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy, that which holds the two facets of Jesus' Person, the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, is the union of divinity and humanity. The evidential basis for this union is testimony to the voice of the risen Lord in Scripture and in the Church. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul are a reliable historical foundation for knowledge of Jesus because they provide not an unadulterated account of Jesus' life but an account of Jesus' life through the prism of an experience with the risen Lord.

3.5.1 The Incarnation, the Cross, and the Filial Life of Jesus

At the heart of Joseph Ratzinger's theology stands the mystery of the Incarnation, in which God enters human history not merely as a distant force or abstract principle, but as a living, tangible presence. In Jesus Christ, the eternal Word does not merely brush against history or announce truths from afar; He steps fully into human life, drawing near in a way that humanity can see, touch, and follow. For Ratzinger, the Incarnation is not a singular moment of revelation but a lifelong unfolding of God's desire to redeem humanity from within human experience. What gives this revelation its inner coherence is Jesus' identity as the beloved and

⁸¹ RATZINGER, Joseph (BENEDICT XVI). *Jesus of Nazareth*. Vol. 1, 2007, p. 9–45; p.135–141; Cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 81.

⁸² RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 263.

⁸³ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 188.

obedient Son of the Father—a filial identity lived out in every moment of His earthly mission and most clearly revealed in His suffering and death.⁸⁴

This filial identity, as Collins emphasizes, is not a secondary feature of Jesus’ person but its very core. Ratzinger develops a pivotal insight in his Christology: the Christian understanding of the Logos has passed through historical and theological stages, moving from *ratio* (the ordering principle) to *verbum* (the spoken Word), and finally to *verbum* embodied as *prosōpon* (person). This progression naturally leads to recognizing the Word most fundamentally as *filius*, the Son. In Ratzinger’s mature thought,

Son of the Father” is not merely one Christological title among many; it is the privileged lens through which the entire mystery of Jesus is to be understood. As Benedict XVI observes, “Jesus is only able to speak about the Father in the way he does because he is the Son, because of his filial communion with the Father. The Christological dimension—in other words, the mystery of the Son as revealer of the Father—is present in everything Jesus says and does⁸⁵.

The Gospels reveal this filial life most profoundly through prayer. Ratzinger repeatedly points out that Jesus’ communion with the Father is not a background feature but the center of His earthly mission. Before every pivotal moment—calling the Twelve, revealing His glory at the Transfiguration, entering into agony on the Mount of Olives, and surrendering Himself on the Cross—Jesus withdraws in intimate prayer, addressing God as “My Father,” a title expressing His unique Sonship.⁸⁶ While humans are created in God’s image and can call God “Father,” only Jesus bridges the infinite distance between humanity and God. Through Him, the Father becomes known, approachable, and loving, and through prayer, humanity is drawn into the very relationship that defines Him. DeClue emphasizes that the Sonship of Christ shapes every moment of Jesus’ life, even during His public ministry. In *Behold the Pierced One*, Ratzinger notes that Jesus’ constant dialogue with the Father precedes every pivotal act: choosing the Twelve, questioning the disciples about His identity, the Transfiguration, and His prayer on the Mount of Olives at the start of His Passion.⁸⁷ This intimate communion transforms every aspect of His life, from teaching and healing to embracing suffering and death—into an act of love and glorification of God.

⁸⁴ See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 81.

⁸⁵ RATZINGER, Joseph (BENEDICT XVI). *Jesus of Nazareth*. Vol. 1, 2007, p. 7; see also COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 83.

⁸⁶ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 189-190; See RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 293.

⁸⁷ See RATZINGER, Joseph. *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*. Trans. Graham Harrison. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986, p. 15. See also DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 193-194.

Jesus' filial identity also brings to completion the revelation begun in the Old Testament. God had already revealed His name to Moses, building a relationship with humanity and communicating His will through the Law, with Moses acting as mediator between God and Israel. In His high priestly prayer, Jesus emphasizes that He reveals the name of the Father (cf. Jn 17:6, 26), fulfilling what began with Moses.⁸⁸ As de Gaál observes, Benedict XVI carefully highlights both the continuities and distinctions between Moses and Jesus. Drawing on John 1:16–18—“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ; no one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made Him known”—Ratzinger demonstrates that while Moses delivered the Law, it is Jesus who embodies God's grace and truth, making divine love and mercy tangible to humanity. Jesus is not merely a lawgiver or moral teacher but the living manifestation of the Father, revealing both who God is and how God relates to humanity.⁸⁹

This theological vision extends to a broader understanding of Christ as the Logos-made-flesh. As Ratzinger explains, the task of theology is to hold the polarities of “being” and “doing,” of the “God of philosophers” and the “God of biblical faith,” in creative tension. By looking at the figure of Christ as the Logos incarnate, the Word is recognized as that which holds all being together. Yet, precisely because of the Cross, the Word is communicated not merely as meaning or relationality but as love itself—a radical, personal giving of oneself for another.⁹⁰ Collins also notes that Ratzinger cautions against separating the theology of the Incarnation from that of the Cross, a temptation observed even during the Second Vatican Council. While some readings of *Gaudium et Spes* leaned toward an uncritical optimism in human progress, using the Incarnation to support confidence in human achievement, Ratzinger insists that salvation is grounded not in human effort but in the divine act of love revealed through the Cross. A full understanding of Christ requires holding the Incarnation and Cross in dynamic tension, recognizing that God's self-revelation is both joyful and costly.⁹¹ By keeping the Incarnation and Cross in dialogue, humanity is drawn into the profound truth that God's work in the world is measured by love, sacrifice, and redemption, not by human achievement alone. The Cross itself is the ultimate revelation. According to Ratzinger,

the Cross is revelation. It reveals, not any particular thing but God and man. It reveals who God is and in what way man is... and the truth about man is that he is continually

⁸⁸ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 193.

⁸⁹ See RATZINGER, (BENEDICT XVI). *Jesus of Nazareth*. Vol. 1, 2007, p. 236.

⁹⁰ RATZINGER, *Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology*, *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17, no. 3, 1990, p. 443–447; Cited in COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 83.

⁹¹ See COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 84; see also, Wicks, *Prof. Ratzinger at Vatican II*, 12.

assailing truth; the just man crucified is thus a mirror held up to man in which he sees himself unadorned. But the Cross does not reveal only man; it also reveals God. God is such that he identifies himself with man right down into this abyss and judges him by saving him. In the abyss of divine love. The Cross is thus truly the center of revelation, a revelation that does not reveal any previously unknown principles but reveals us to ourselves by revealing us before God and God in our midst⁹².

The Crucifixion thus unveils both God's mercy and humanity's sinfulness. By identifying with sinners and taking their place, Jesus fulfills the role of the "Just One," exposing divine compassion and the human need for redemption. The Cross does not stand isolated from the rest of Jesus' mission. From the Incarnation to miracles, forgiveness, parables, and solidarity with the poor, Christ continually reveals the Father, but the Cross manifests this self-giving love in its full clarity.⁹³

On Calvary, the filial identity that shaped Jesus' life is fully revealed: the beloved Son offers Himself to the Father in a supreme act of obedient love. The Resurrection confirms that this love cannot be overcome by death; rather, it transforms human destiny, opening the way to eternal life. The Paschal Mystery—Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection—becomes the interpretive key to understanding the entirety of divine revelation. DeClue observes that Christ's Sonship—His eternal relationship with the Father—shapes every moment of Jesus' life, including His public ministry. As Ratzinger emphasizes in *Behold the Pierced One*, the center of Jesus' life is His constant communion with the Father, a dialogue that precedes every pivotal act: choosing the Twelve, questioning the disciples about His identity, the Transfiguration, and His prayer on the Mount of Olives at the outset of His Passion. Jesus repeatedly withdraws to pray, demonstrating that His ministry flows from a profound alignment of His will with the Father's.⁹⁴ As de Gaál notes,

the face of Jesus was revealed whenever he spoke and acted in the name of the Father. Jesus was never alone. There was reciprocity between the Father and the Son...Jesus' teaching is not his own, but from the Father. His words are the words of the Father and his works are the works of the Father. Jesus is the Word of the Father. Hence, Jesus revealed the Father in all the aspects of his life on earth⁹⁵.

His entire mission—from teaching and healing to embracing suffering and death—is rooted in this intimate communion, transforming even His death into an act of love and glorification of God. The Incarnation, therefore, is not limited to His conception; it encompasses His entire life, culminating in His journey toward death, through which He fully assumes

⁹² RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 292–293.

⁹³ RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 262–264; see also, DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 189.

⁹⁴ See RATZINGER, *Behold the Pierced One*, 1986, p. 15.

⁹⁵ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 193–194; see also RATZINGER, Joseph (BENEDICT XVI). *Jesus of Nazareth*. Vol. 1, 2007, p. 283.

humanity and restores it to God. Jesus' death, unique and victorious, leads to the Resurrection, completing His saving work. Because He is truly God and truly man, every moment of His life, death, and Resurrection becomes efficacious for our salvation, offering the remission of sin and the gift of new life in grace.⁹⁶

Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy deepens and clarifies his vision of Christ as the definitive revelation of God in history. Rejecting the modern tendency to divide the "historical Jesus" from the "Christ of faith," Ratzinger argues that this split distorts both Scripture and the Church's living tradition. The Jesus examined by historians is the very same Jesus proclaimed by faith—the eternal Son who fully reveals the Father. Each volume of the trilogy highlights a different dimension of this revelation: Jesus' public ministry, His Paschal Mystery, and His hidden and early life. Together, they show that every moment of Jesus' earthly existence, from His conception to the Cross, manifests His divine identity and saving mission. As DeClue, citing Ratzinger, states, "the death of Christ simply fulfills what began at the Incarnation. The Son has taken up what is human and now carries it back to God"⁹⁷. And as DeClue added, the discussion of the Incarnation, life, death, and Resurrection of Christ leads to the topic of soteriology: Christ's saving work. "It is precisely as God-become-man that Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection lead to the remission of sin and a new life of grace for humankind"⁹⁸. Although these saving events occurred in history, Ratzinger emphasizes that revelation is not confined to the past; it remains alive. Through Scripture, tradition, and above all the sacraments, Christ continues to act and speak within the life of the Church. The Eucharist, in particular, makes the sacrifice of the Cross present again, drawing believers into the same love revealed on Calvary. Revelation, therefore, is not merely something to be studied, it is a living encounter.

In Ratzinger's integrated vision, the Incarnation and the Cross form the inseparable heart of God's self-disclosure. Jesus is the Word made flesh, the crucified and risen Savior, the Son who draws humanity into communion with the Father, and the mediator through whom we are invited to enter into divine love. Through Him, each person is called to live as a son or daughter in the Son, participating in the filial love that defines both the life of Christ and the ongoing work of salvation in the Church. This vision unites theology, Scripture, and Christian life in a coherent and profound understanding of God's self-revelation, demonstrating that divine love is at once personal, historical, redemptive, and transformative.

⁹⁶ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 193–194.

⁹⁷ RATZINGER, Joseph. *The New Covenant: A Theology of Covenant in the New Testament*, trans. Maria Shradly, *Communio* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 643; cited in DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 194–195.

⁹⁸ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p.195.

3.6 Christology, Soteriology, and Eschatology in Joseph Ratzinger: A Unified, Christocentric Vision

In this final section of the third chapter, the focus shifts to presenting a holistic view of Joseph Ratzinger's Christocentric vision of revelation, which consistently places Christ at the very heart of God's self-disclosure. Building on the preceding discussion, it becomes evident that Ratzinger's theological project rests on a single, defining conviction: Christianity stands or falls with the person of Jesus Christ. For him, Christ is not merely the bearer of revelation, the agent of salvation, or the herald of the final kingdom; rather, He is revelation itself, salvation itself, and the kingdom itself in person. This radical Christocentrism is not a matter of devotional preference but a structural principle that unifies all Christian doctrine, providing the interpretive key that links Christology, soteriology, and eschatology into a coherent whole. Significantly, Ratzinger underscores that the work of Christ is firmly rooted in history; yet this historical grounding simultaneously fosters a renewed eschatological consciousness, one shaped by the way the Church, in her concrete historical existence, interprets and embodies Christ's presence in time.⁹⁹ Central to this vision is the Incarnation itself, which testifies to how precious humanity is to God and how deeply God loves us. Without Christ, humanity drifts into selfishness, valuing things over solidarity, having over being. Through the Incarnation and Redemption, we are invited to restore our dignity by returning to God, thereby recovering what it truly means to be human. This mystery—the union of heaven and earth, divine and human in the Person of Christ—is the greatest event in history, bridging the gulf between God and humanity in a concrete, tangible way.¹⁰⁰

Against this backdrop, in a theological landscape often marked by fragmentation and the compartmentalization of doctrinal themes, Ratzinger offers a compelling alternative: the mysteries of the faith can be fully grasped only when approached from their center—the

⁹⁹ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 107–108.

¹⁰⁰ BENEDICT XVI. *Homily of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, Our Lady of Loreto Square, Loreto*. October 4, 2012. Available in, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20121004_loreto.html. Accessed December 1, 2025. See also, Schall, James V., S.J. *The Purpose of the Incarnation and Redemption: On Benedict XVI in Loreto*. Pope Benedict XVI presents Christ as the pivotal bridge between God and humanity. The Incarnation is the moment when the divine Word took on human flesh, uniting heaven and earth in a tangible, historical reality. As Benedict explains, the purpose of the Incarnation and Redemption was to unite in a real fashion heaven and earth. That unity could only take place if there were in the universe beings who were free, who could know and act. Through Mary's free consent, she became the dwelling place of God, making Christ both fully divine and fully human, the concrete intersection of the divine and human. This union is the foundation of Redemption, inviting humanity to participate in God's life through the free acceptance of His initiative. In this sense, Christ is both the center of human history and the conduit through which God reconciles the world to Himself. See., *Catholic World Report*, October 5, 2012. Available in, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2012/10/05/the-purpose-of-the-incarnation-and-redemption-on-benedict-xvi-in-loreto/>. Accessed December 1, 2025.

incarnate Son of God—whose historical and eschatological presence restores coherence, depth, and vitality to the Christian vision, while revealing the profound value and destiny of humanity in God’s plan.

3.6.1 Christ as the Center of Revelation and Redemption

Ratzinger’s Christocentric focus did not remain confined to his academic career but continued throughout his magisterial teaching as Benedict XVI. As de Gaál highlights, his encyclicals and apostolic exhortations—*Deus Caritas Est*, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, *Verbum Domini*, and *Spe Salvi*—consistently invite believers to encounter the living Christ through Scripture, the sacraments, and prayer. “During his pontificate, Benedict penned a number of exhortations and encyclicals. Some of these writings demonstrate his Christocentric theology and the person of Jesus as the definitive revelation”¹⁰¹. These documents do not introduce doctrinal novelties but articulate, in a pastoral and accessible mode, Ratzinger’s lifelong insistence that Christianity is fundamentally a relationship with Christ. As he famously wrote, “person and work are identical” in Jesus: Christ does not merely proclaim God’s truth; He is God’s truth made flesh.¹⁰²

Jesus Christ is the visible manifestation of God’s love. Drawing on the New Testament, Benedict emphasizes that Christ freely gives Himself to humanity, seeking us like a shepherd searching for his lost sheep. God’s saving action becomes concrete and dramatic in Jesus’ solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, and sinners, and in His self-gift on the cross, God reveals His love in its most radical form, lifting humanity back to Himself. Ratzinger reiterates that although “no one has ever seen God as he is,” God is not inaccessible; He has made Himself visible by sending His Son into the world so that “we might live through him” (1 Jn 4:9), and in Jesus, we are able to see the Father (cf. Jn 14:9).¹⁰³ In encountering Christ, the faithful encounter God Himself, for in Christ’s human nature the love of the Father becomes tangible and accessible. Faith, then, is not simply intellectual assent to propositions but the acceptance of God’s self-gift, which invites believers into intimate communion with Him and transforms their lives. This encounter is dynamic: it is not merely a static recognition of Christ’s identity but an invitation to participate in the ongoing mystery of God’s love revealed in history.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 194.

¹⁰² RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 203, p. 210; See also DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 195.

¹⁰³ BENEDICT XVI, *Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est: On Christian Love*. December 25, 2005. Art. 1, para. 17. Available in, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html. Accessed December 2, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ See DE GAÁL, *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance*, 2018, p. 195-195.

This Christocentric perspective naturally underscores the inseparability of Christology and soteriology. Ratzinger emphasizes that salvation involves the healing of ruptures caused by sin—ruptures that are relational as well as moral, for sin fractures communion with God, with others, and within the self. Redemption, therefore, requires not only divine action but divine presence: God must enter the very depths of human existence to restore it. As Ratzinger explains, in the historical development of theology, Christology and soteriology often became artificially separated:

In the course of the historical development of faith in Christ, two aspects of it, which people became accustomed to call 'Christology' and 'Soteriology', visibly parted company. The former term came to denote the doctrine of the being of Jesus, which was treated more and more as a self-contained ontological exception and thus transformed into an object of speculation concerning something special, incomprehensible, and confined to Jesus alone. Soteriology then came to denote the doctrine of the redemption: after dealing with the ontological crossword puzzle—the question of how man and God could in Jesus be one—people went on to inquire quite separately about what Jesus had really done and how the effect of his deed impinges on us¹⁰⁵.

For Ratzinger, the Incarnation is not a mere prelude to redemption but essential to it: Christ is the living bridge between God and humanity, the communion that restores what sin has shattered.¹⁰⁶ Salvation is not an external act performed by God but participation in Christ's own filial relationship to the Father. Humanity is drawn into God's life not simply by moral instruction or doctrinal assent, but through direct participation in Christ's being and mission.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, Ratzinger insists that Christology cannot separate Jesus' identity from His mission. The Christology "from above" (focusing on identity) and "from below" (focusing on mission) must converge. A Christology centered solely on Jesus' divine identity risks abstracting Him from His historical context and human reality, while one focused only on His mission risks reducing Him to a prophet or moral exemplar. The unity of identity and mission culminates in the paschal mystery: the Incarnation anticipates the cross, for the eternal Son's entry into human history is itself an act of self-emptying, and the cross reveals His eternal identity, manifesting perfect obedience and love for the Father. This interconnection demonstrates that Christ's entire life, from birth to resurrection, is revelatory: it discloses both who God is and how God redeems humanity. As Ratzinger explains, "A properly understood Christology of being and of the Incarnation must pass over into a theology of the Cross...; conversely, a theology of the Cross that gives its full measure must pass over into the

¹⁰⁵ RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 230-231.

¹⁰⁶ RATZINGER, *Behold the Pierced One*, 1986, p. 88.

¹⁰⁷ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 197.

Christology of the Son and of being”¹⁰⁸. The resurrection completes this unity, confirming that the crucified Jesus is the eternal Son and that His death is the definitive act of redemptive love. In Christ, revelation and redemption are inseparable, and the faithful are drawn into the intimate communion between humanity and God that He makes possible.

Ultimately, for Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, the whole of Christian life is oriented around a single, decisive reality: Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, the visible revelation of the Father’s love, and the definitive mediator of salvation. To encounter Christ is to encounter God Himself, and to share in His life is the only true path to communion with the divine. Every dimension of theology, liturgy, and moral teaching draws its meaning from this Christocentric vision, which makes Christ not only the heart of faith but the center of all Christian existence. This orientation, in turn, directs the believer toward the final and ultimate *communio* between God and humanity in the eschaton. As Ratzinger expresses it, “Jesus Christ opens the way to the impossible, to communion between God and man, since he, the incarnate Word, is this communion. He performs the ‘alchemy’ which melts down human nature and infuses it into the being of God”¹⁰⁹. In this sense, the Incarnation is inseparable from soteriology, for it is the Son’s assumption of human nature that unites Him with all humanity, and it is God’s union with humanity in Christ that constitutes salvation. Salvation, therefore, comes only through union with Christ, who is, in His very being, the enduring and irrevocable communion of God and man.¹¹⁰

3.6.2 Eschatology¹¹¹: The End as Encounter with Christ

Christology and soteriology flow naturally into Ratzinger’s eschatology, which is thoroughly Christocentric and grounded in the conviction that Christ is both the origin and the fulfillment

¹⁰⁸ RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2004, p. 230.

¹⁰⁹ RATZINGER, *Behold the Pierced One*, 1986, p. 90.

¹¹⁰ See DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 198.

¹¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger’s book *Eschatology* (1977) grew out of a series of lectures he delivered between 1957 and 1975, and it was published in the same year he became Archbishop of Munich and Freising. This work is significant because it is the only complete dogmatic treatise Ratzinger ever wrote, making it his fullest and most systematic treatment of Christian teaching on the “last things”—death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Scholars around the world consider *Eschatology* one of the most important theological studies on these themes in the twentieth century, not only because of its depth and clarity, but also because Ratzinger brings together Scripture, tradition, and modern questions in a way that is both faithful to the Church and intellectually compelling. In this single volume, Ratzinger offers a comprehensive account of Christian hope, the meaning of death, the resurrection of the body, and the ultimate destiny of humanity, which is why the book has become a landmark in contemporary theology and a foundational text for understanding his broader theological vision. During the pontificate of Benedict XVI, the sixth, expanded edition was reprinted twice with a new preface by the pope. See. HOPING, Helmut. *Eschatology*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Ratzinger*, ed. Daniel Cardó and Uwe Michael Lang, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, 244–45; see also, Joseph Ratzinger (BENEDICT XVI), *Eschatologie: Tod und ewiges Leben*, 6th ed. Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1990; reprinted 2007, 2011; *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007. Joseph

of creation (cf. Col 1:16), so that the omega of history is also its true center. Helmut Hoping observes,

Ratzinger's Eschatology is developed on the basis of reflections on hermeneutical questions, placing Jesus Christ and communion with him as the starting point... Eschatology deals with God's relationship to time, with the future of man opened up by God's revelation in Jesus. Starting from the revelation in Jesus, we speak of the future in images, since it is about a completion of historical man beyond physical space-time¹¹².

While modern readers often interpret New Testament expectations of an imminent end as historical miscalculations, Ratzinger distinguishes between culturally conditioned imagery (schema) and theological reality, showing that in Christ the end of history has already entered time. The resurrection marks the moment when eternity breaks into temporal history; thus, the eschaton is already present in Christ. This Christocentric perspective also stands in deliberate contrast to hermeneutical proposals advanced by thinkers such as Bultmann and Rahner, who approached eschatology primarily through existential or symbolic lenses. For Ratzinger, the future promised by God can only be understood through revelation in Christ, whose Incarnation and Resurrection open humanity to a destiny beyond space and time. Consequently, the last things—resurrection, judgment, and eternal life—are not literal predictions but expressions of human completion in Christ. The Creed's confession of Christ's return provides eschatology with its content, and authentic Christian hope begins by “looking to the Lord” in the face of death, making eschatology ultimately the question of personal salvation.¹¹³

Ratzinger teaches that Jesus Christ is the true goal and decisive limit of history, and that the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment are inseparable from His return as the risen and glorified Lord at the Father's right hand. Although Christ is already present in the Eucharist, this presence is oriented toward His eschatological coming in glory, so that each Eucharist is both a real encounter with the Lord and a forward-looking anticipation of the Parousia. One of the central concerns of Ratzinger's eschatology is to show the “internal unity of Christology and eschatology”¹¹⁴. Because Christ alone brings history to its fulfillment, Christian hope rejects any notion that the world can reach perfection within history. Resurrection, judgment, and eternal life express humanity's completion in Christ, not merely temporal or literal events.

Ratzinger's collected works contain his Eschatology with smaller contributions on topics of eschatology and the theology of hope: see *Auferstehung und ewiges Leben: Beiträge zur Eschatologie und zur Theologie der Hoffnung*, in JRGS 10 Freiburg: Herder, 2012.

¹¹² HOPING, *Eschatology*, 2024, p. 245; see also RATZINGER, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein, 2007.

¹¹³ See HOPING, *Eschatology*, 2024, p. 245–246.

¹¹⁴ RATZINGER, *Eschatology*, 2007, p. 196; p. 212.

From this perspective, Christ is not only the proclaimer of the kingdom—He is the kingdom itself, the *autobasileia*, as Origen described. Final judgment is not primarily a moment of terror but a moment of truth, a personal encounter with the One who died and rose out of love. For Ratzinger, the last judgment reveals the full truth of each person’s life in the light of Christ; Christ does not impose condemnation, but human beings can freely reject God’s love and thereby exclude themselves from communion with Him. Early Christians could hope for judgment because the Judge was the Savior who had died for them, and even medieval Christianity preserved this hope through the communion of saints and the Church’s intercession.¹¹⁵ Human longing for final justice is one of the strongest reasons to believe in eternal life.¹¹⁶

Christ transforms death from within. As Collins notes, “the Word speaks into death and draws the dead out of their silence,” and Ratzinger writes, “Death, which by its very nature is the end, the destruction of every communication, is changed by him into an act of self-communication... death becomes the place where meaning communicates itself”¹¹⁷. The resurrection shows that death is no longer the boundary of meaning but the site where divine meaning is revealed.

Following the intrinsic unity of Christology and eschatology, Ratzinger understands purgatory not as a temporary hell but as a profoundly personal and transformative encounter with Christ. Drawing on 1 Corinthians 3:15, and as DeClue explains, Ratzinger insists that purgatory can be understood “in a properly Christian way” only when it is understood christologically:¹¹⁸ the purifying fire is nothing other than Christ himself, who removes from the soul whatever remains incompatible with heavenly glory. Purgatory is therefore “the Lord himself as the judging fire which transforms us and conforms us to his own glorified body,”¹¹⁹ revealing the truth of one’s life and renewing it in love. Freed from outdated imagery, this purification, though painful, constitutes the necessary passage into heaven for those still in need of healing and sanctification. In this process, the faithful on earth may offer intercessory prayers, directed primarily to Christ and also to the saints, especially Mary, who participate in the communion of love, though never prayed *for*, since they already share fully in God’s glory.

¹¹⁵ RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p. 108; see also COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 152.

¹¹⁶ See RATZINGER, *Eschatology*, 2007, p. 203-207.

¹¹⁷ COLLINS, *The Word Made Love*, 2013, p. 142. See also. RATZINGER, *Behold the Pierced One*, 1986, p. 24.

¹¹⁸ DECLUE, *The Mind of Pope Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 320.

¹¹⁹ RATZINGER, *Eschatology*, 2007, p. 229.

In this light, purgatory manifests both the gravity of divine judgment and the enduring Christian hope for complete union with the risen Lord.

Ratzinger's eschatology is also thoroughly concerned with heaven and hell as anthropological and Christological realities. While God respects human freedom—allowing some to definitively reject Him—Christian hope must remain active and real, not reduced to a certainty of universal salvation. Hell reveals the genuine possibility of opposing God, emphasizing the seriousness of moral life and divine revelation. Heaven, by contrast, is personal communion with Christ, who “stands in a continuous posture of self-giving to His Father... The paschal sacrifice abides in Him as an enduring presence. For this reason, heaven, as our becoming one with Christ, takes on the nature of adoration”¹²⁰. The Church's liturgy prefigures this reality, which will reach its fullness when all who belong to Christ share in God's glory, and the perfection of Christ's body in the *pleroma* of the whole Christ brings cosmic completion. Divine eternity, understood as an eternal present grounded in the temporality of the resurrected Christ, ensures that judgment, hope, heaven, and hell are inseparably linked, human freedom is respected, and eternal life is realized in perfect communion with Christ.¹²¹

Ratzinger concludes his eschatology by emphasizing that the ultimate peace God promises is not a distant and abstract eternity that begins only after the end of the world, but a peace already inaugurated within the temporal world—one marked by suffering and violence—where God reveals how creation could and should have been according to His divine plan. This reality ushers in a “breath of a new age,” in which the longing for the glory of the world to come is inseparable from a profound love for the present earth. The Church, while awaiting its future fulfillment, is called to active love in the present, cultivating the Kingdom of God through the faithful practice of Christ's law of love. Faith, hope, and love remain the enduring virtues that guide Christian existence, with love standing as the greatest, shaping human hearts even before the final realization of God's plan: “So there remain faith, hope, and love, these three. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13)¹²². This vision is rooted in Ratzinger's conviction that salvation is fundamentally relational rather than merely individual or spiritual. As he explains,

indeed, if the primary duality in Christianity is not that of body and soul, then the eternal destiny of the human person cannot be understood primarily in terms of the soul's own eternal persistence. Rather, it must be understood through the relationship between Creator and creature. Thus, instead of the self-sufficient monologue of the spirit, we have the dialogue between God and humanity, the culpable interruption of which signifies the ‘second death,’ while its greatest possibility is to become the eternal dialogue of love that constitutes the true center of all the beatitudes of heaven. In this way, all previous forms of wholeness that transcend the narrowness of the

¹²⁰ RATZINGER, *Eschatology*, 2007, p. 234.

¹²¹ See RATZINGER, *Eschatology*, 2007, p. 299–234; see also HOPING, *Eschatology*, 2024, p. 259–260.

¹²² RATZINGER, *Theology of History in Bonaventure*, 1971, p.163.

individual soul are themselves surpassed by this ultimate and, at the same time, primordial reality: the dialogical orientation toward God. Up to this point, it has become clear that the whole of human salvation is founded upon a ‘resurrection,’ upon an act of God’s grace, and never simply upon the logical outcome of a person’s life, as though salvation were merely an internal consequence arising from one’s own achievements and needing only to be acknowledged. No, at its deepest level, salvation is always grounded in grace, in the wondrous gift of God’s merciful love¹²³.

Ratzinger’s eschatology speaks of the ultimate personal fulfillment of communion with God, though with a theological rigor that should not dishearten the everyday believer, as it really arises in inescapable life questions. Faith, hope and love are precisely Beatitudes, which condense the human path, the encounter with the living Christ, and are themselves the result of God’s divine grace, Ratzinger had clarified, stressing the importance of the future, and how important it would be to live now and to take the critical steps, to try to achieve them. He also spoke about how this disappears and has no meaning if it does not end in ‘that transfiguration of existence, where it will be possible to speak of the ultimate fulfillment of creation: God with us.

Conclusion: The Coherent Unity of Ratzinger’s Christocentric Theology

For Ratzinger, the soteriological implications of such a vision are paramount: if revelation is understood as the divine self-communication in the person of Christ, then salvation is understood as a transformative encounter with this revelation. He goes on to describe eschatology precisely in these terms as a personal encounter with the risen Lord: In the first place, eschatology means the meeting with the risen Lord. If we then place Christ alongside the idea of salvation—this leads to an inseparable Christology, soteriology, eschatology—and the “return of Christ” becomes a pertinent Johannine expression for the matter at hand—then it fits. Eschatology denotes meeting the risen Lord. Who ‘is’ Christ, if not the one who returns to meet us? Thus, the One who was there and is no longer present since his death, or his disappearance, is now there again: this is what the term eschatology means in a simple but profound way: it means meeting the risen One. Only through the filtered lens of personal encounter can Ratzinger

¹²³ RATZINGER, *Dogma e Anunciação*, 1977, p. 234. “De fato, se a dualidade primária no cristianismo não se chama corpo-alma, a sorte eterna do homem também não pode ser entendida em primeiro lugar a partir da duração eterna da alma espiritual que vem dela mesma, mas deve ser compreendida por meio desta oposição entre criador e criatura. Logo, em vez do monólogo auto-suficiente do espírito, temos o diálogo de Deus com o homem, cuja interrupção culposa significa “a segunda morte” e cuja grande possibilidade é tornar-se o diálogo eterno do amor que é a parte central propriamente dita de todas as bem-aventuranças do “céu”. Assim, todas as totalidades anteriores, que superam a estreiteza da alma individual, ainda são superadas por este elemento último que, ao mesmo tempo, é o primeiro, a ordenação dialógica para Deus. Até agora deixamos claro que toda a salvação do homem se funda numa “ressurreição”, numa ação da graça de Deus, não representando nunca simplesmente o resultado lógico do balanço próprio da vida de um homem, resultado este que como consequência interna vem dela mesma e no fundo apenas precisa ser constatado. Não, a salvação, no mais fundo, sempre se baseia na graça, na dádiva maravilhosa do amor misericordioso de Deus.”

ascribe the events of the Christian narrative a soteriological dimension: if the events of the fourth Gospel first concern the question of creaturely communion with the Creator, then the question of ‘how can we be saved’ only emerges from the previous search for the answer to the question concerning communion with God. But as the mystery of the Word made flesh demonstrates, one cannot access the former question without addressing the latter first.

Within this framework, Ratzinger emphasizes that the final destiny of humanity—heaven—is fundamentally relational and communal. As he notes, “heaven excludes isolation; it is the open communion of the saints and, as such, the perfection of all human community, not in rivalry with the vision of God but as its very fruit”¹²⁴. This means that the horizontal communion of believers flows directly from their vertical communion with God through Christ, the God-man who unites both dimensions. Heaven, therefore, reflects the very life of the Trinity, for the Trinity is communion. In this shared participation in divine life and love, the saints form a single, interwoven fellowship. As Pablo Blanco explains, Ratzinger insists that Christian beatitude is Trinitarian, Christological, and ecclesiological: the blessed live in definitive union with the Trinity through Jesus Christ and within the communion of the Church. These dimensions, together with the personal and existential aspects of his thought, form a single, integrated vision of humanity’s ultimate fulfillment.¹²⁵

Ratzinger’s ecclesiology, his interpretation of the church is entirely Christocentric. It presents Jesus Christ as the “universal mediator”, causing an ecclesial communion through the Holy Spirit which will ultimately find its consummation in the eschaton. As such, Ratzinger provides the contemporary church with a unifying corrective in his theology which seeks communion with the risen Lord. In light of the contemporary crisis of the church, this Christocentric understanding of revelation, salvation, and eschatology is important above all else. The faith, hope, and love present within communion are understood as the modes of encountering Christ, whom Ratzinger describes as the ever-present definite reality of our faith. This faith, hope, and love come together to display the final goal of eternal communion, the divine reality of our faith. This communion foreshadowed within the church happens through the Triune God, who relates to humanity, each other, and the world. Ratzinger refers to this communion as: Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

¹²⁴ RATZINGER, *Eschatology*, 2007, p. 235.

¹²⁵ BLANCO SARTO, *La Teología de Joseph Ratzinger*, 2011, p. 284; Cited in DECLUE, *The Mind of Benedict XVI*, 2024, p. 324.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how Joseph Ratzinger understands divine revelation as a dialogical event fulfilled in Jesus Christ and to explore the significance of this understanding for the life and mission of the Church. Through an analysis of his theological development, his understanding of revelation, and his Christological vision, it has become evident that revelation occupies a central and unifying place in his theology. Far from being conceived as the communication of abstract doctrines or isolated truths, revelation is understood by Ratzinger as God's personal self-disclosure, a living event in which God enters human history and invites humanity into communion with Himself. The research question that guided this study can therefore be answered by affirming that, for Ratzinger, revelation is fundamentally dialogical in structure, ecclesial in reception, and Christological in fulfillment.

The first chapter demonstrated that this vision did not emerge in isolation but was deeply rooted in Ratzinger's personal, intellectual, and ecclesial formation. His early experiences in Bavaria, his encounter with the upheavals of twentieth-century Europe, and his engagement with Augustine, Bonaventure, and the Fathers of the Church all contributed to a theological outlook that sought to unite faith and reason, history and theology, continuity and renewal. These influences shaped his conviction that revelation is not merely information communicated by God but God's saving presence made known within history. His participation in the Second Vatican Council, particularly in the development of *Dei Verbum*, provided an important context in which this conviction matured and found broader ecclesial expression.

The second chapter showed that the dialogical nature of revelation constitutes one of the most distinctive features of Ratzinger's theology. Revelation is not complete apart from reception; it involves both God's initiative and the human response of faith. Scripture, Tradition, and the life of the Church are therefore not separate realities but interconnected dimensions of the one event through which God continues to address humanity. Within this perspective, the Church is understood not simply as the guardian of a doctrinal heritage but as the living community in which God's Word is heard, celebrated, interpreted, and transmitted. Revelation remains a living reality because the dialogue between God and humanity continues within the life of faith under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The third chapter brought this discussion to its theological center by demonstrating that Jesus Christ is the fullness and definitive expression of revelation. In Christ, God does not merely speak a final word; He gives Himself completely. The Incarnation reveals that revelation

is ultimately personal because it is embodied in the eternal Word made flesh. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the deepest meaning of creation, history, and salvation becomes visible. Christ is not simply the messenger of revelation but its content, fulfillment, and living center. Consequently, revelation, salvation, ecclesial communion, and humanity's final destiny converge in the person of Jesus Christ, through whom humanity is drawn into communion with the Triune God.

Taken together, these findings reveal the profound coherence of Ratzinger's theological vision. Although he never produced a systematic theology in the classical sense, his writings display a remarkable unity grounded in the mystery of revelation. The present study has argued that revelation provides a privileged key for understanding this unity because it illuminates the relationship between Christ, the Church, Scripture, Tradition, faith, and salvation. Ratzinger's theology resists the fragmentation that often characterizes modern theological discourse by insisting that all theological questions ultimately converge in God's self-communication through Christ.

This study also highlights the continuing relevance of Ratzinger's theology for contemporary theological reflection. In a cultural context frequently marked by skepticism, individualism, and a separation between faith and lived experience, his understanding of revelation offers a compelling alternative. By presenting revelation as an encounter rather than merely a concept, and communion rather than merely information, Ratzinger reminds the Church that Christianity begins with the initiative of a God who speaks, calls, and invites. Faith is therefore not primarily adherence to an idea but participation in a relationship that transforms human existence.

At the same time, this research does not claim to exhaust the richness of Ratzinger's theology of revelation. Many themes deserving further study remain beyond the scope of the present work, including the relationship between revelation and liturgy, the role of beauty in divine self-disclosure, the theological significance of his eschatology, and the implications of his theology of revelation for contemporary evangelization and interreligious dialogue. These areas offer promising avenues for future research and demonstrate the enduring fertility of his thought.

In conclusion, the present study has shown that Joseph Ratzinger understands revelation as God's personal and saving self-disclosure in history, fulfilled definitively in Jesus Christ and continually received within the life of the Church. Revelation is neither a static deposit of truths

nor a merely subjective religious experience; it is the living encounter between God and humanity that reaches its fullness in the incarnate Word. By placing Christ at the center of revelation and understanding the Church as the community in which this revelation is continually heard and lived, Ratzinger offers a theological vision marked by coherence, depth, and spiritual vitality. Ultimately, his theology invites believers not merely to know about God, but to enter into communion with the God who reveals Himself and continues to speak in the history of the world.

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