

The Crisis of Faith and the Crisis of the Church

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THE CRISIS IN THE CHURCH is becoming more and more evident. Therefore, right at the beginning, a thesis should be presented which describes one of the main problems connected with it. Then further explanations and analyses will be presented in order to justify the following thesis: Many in the Church have begun to turn away from God, pretending to turn to man.

This thesis contains some explosive power in itself regarding several aspects, above all because the turning to man is considered as positive, and at first glance there does not seem to be any compelling reason why a turning away from God must be associated with it. Rather, the love of God put into practice—as Scripture testifies—leads to a more perfect love of neighbor (see Matt 22:37–40). But evil rarely occurs in its pure form, rather it often presents itself as something “good.” This problem is addressed, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew, where it says: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but underneath are ravenous wolves” (Matt 7:15). The situation is similar with regard to this thesis put forward. The turning to man is indeed desirable and supposed to be something positive, but it leads to disastrous consequences if it should mark the point where the faithful are lead away from God and the Truth revealed in Jesus Christ. In this case this “turning” would be a Trojan horse to alienate man from God.

Such a decoupling process has been going on for many years and has brought “believers” away from God, which is shown above all in the fact that the Revelation of God, witnessed in Scripture and Tradition, is losing or has already lost its significance and normativity. The procedure is subtle, because the appearance of “piety” is preserved and people are left to believe that they are still “Catholics,” although they are turning away or already have turned away from the truth revealed in Jesus Christ. This can be seen, for example,

in the fact that basic beliefs are no longer known and/or are no longer accepted or believed.

Even with regard to fundamental beliefs, this rejection is becoming more and more evident. Nevertheless, it is considered taboo to state that these “non-believers” have lost their faith. In the 1950s Joseph Ratzinger had already warned in an essay that paganism would spread in the heart of the Church, a statement for which he was criticized at the time.¹ Since then this development has accelerated further, whereby the warning of the apostle Paul in the Second Letter to Timothy gains new actuality: “As they make a pretence of piety but deny its power” (2 Tim 3:5). True piety is a gift of the Holy Spirit and leads to the fear of God, the beginning of wisdom (see Sir 1:14). In other words, true piety is guided by that wisdom which comes from God and which is foolishness according to human knowledge (see 1 Cor 1:18–20). The semblance of piety is based on purely human criteria; it is ultimately a house built on sand (see Matt 7:24–27).²

Using theological terminology, this process of “turning to man,” which has different facets and accents, is usually referred to as the “anthropological turn.” This term is inseparably connected to the name Karl Rahner.³ It has quickly gained great influence in its effort to think of God from the human perspective and has become the mainstream of Catholic theology. It has taken on ever more radical traits and has ultimately become an anthropocentric turn in which man is at the center.⁴ Wherever such a

¹ See Joseph Ratzinger, “Die neuen Heiden und die Kirche, in: ders., Kirche—Zeichen unter den Völkern. Schriften zur Ekklesiologie und Ökumene,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8/2 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2010), 1143–158. This process has also affected many priests. See also: Ralph Weimann, “Die Krise der Kirche als Krise des Klerus,” *NOrd* 73 (2019): 244–56.

² See John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), §83.

³ Karl Rahner has introduced this concept into theology; see “Theologie und Anthropologie,” in *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 7 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1966), 43–65, at 43. A critical evaluation is presented by Cornelio Fabro, *La svolta antropologica di Karl Rahner*, 3rd ed. (Segni: EDIVI, 2011), 83–136. See also Peter Eicher, *Die anthropologische Wende: Karl Rahners philosophischer Weg vom Wesen des Menschen zur personalen Existenz* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1970), 330–31. Even if not without a certain polemic, Giovanni Cavalcoli made it clear that Rahner was the trigger of a theological revolution based on a new anthropology and thinking theology; see *Karl Rahner: Il Concilio tradito* (Verona: Fede & Cultura, 2009), esp. 170–76. A similar conclusion is presented in David Berger, *Karl Rahner: Kritische Annäherungen*, *Quaestiones non disputatae* 8 (Siegburg: Schmitt, 2004).

⁴ Philip Trower has analyzed this development in a detailed study, bringing to evidence that such an approach is mainly based on philosophical concepts. Cf. Philip Trower, *The Catholic Church and the Counter-Faith: A Study of the Roots of*

turning to the subject “man” is consistently applied, a turning away from the revealed faith is the necessary consequence, because the new criterion for “faith” is the human person with his/her ideas and preferences.

Dead Ends and Difficulties

The dimensions which this process has already assumed can be seen from numerous developments within the Church. The so-called “synodal way” in Germany is just as inspired by this as the “Initiative Maria 2.0,” which in its call of May 2019 describes its own goals as follows: “We women want a genuine renewal of our church. We want to participate in shaping and setting the tone.”⁵ Parts of the *Instrumentum laboris* of the Amazon Synod reflect the same thrust with even more drastic statements. In §126d, for example, the proposal is made that communities should receive from the episcopal conferences the authority to “adapt the Eucharistic ritual to their cultures.”⁶

Man defined and determined by his culture takes the place of the revealed truth. The faith would be deprived of its universality and unity if such an approach were to prevail. These statements show how far this process has already come. In the same *Instrumentum laboris* this human-centered understanding of religion is extended even to ecology. In §19 the demand is made that the territory (Amazonia) be declared a theological place, “where faith is lived, and also a particular source of God’s revelation: epiphanic places where the reserve of life and wisdom for the planet is manifest, a life and wisdom that speaks of God. In the Amazon, the ‘caresses of God’ become manifest and become incarnate in history.”⁷ In other words, the place itself is declared a source of God’s revelation, which would contradict the Christian concept of revelation and relativize it to be in line with various other experiences of God.

In all these approaches, man is apparently at the center, but basically, he is deprived of the most precious thing: his faith and his relationship with God. The Second Vatican Council had strongly warned of this when it rejected in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* a false autonomy of temporal things and concluded: “When God is forgotten, however, the

Modern Secularism, Relativism and de-Christianisation (Oxford: Family Publications, 2006), esp. 67–81.

⁵ Aktion Maria 2.0, mariazweipunktnull.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Maria20AufrufAktion.pdf. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.

⁶ The Synod of Bishops, “The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for Integral Ecology,” *Instrumentum laboris*, Vatican City, June 17, 2019, §126d.

⁷ Synod of Bishops, “The Amazon,” *Instrumentum laboris*, §19.

creature itself grows unintelligible.”⁸ And yet exactly this tendency has paved its way into theology.

The question arises how this more or less horizontal view of man could come about and why divine revelation increasingly has lost its normative power? Surely it would be wrong to want to simplify this complex process too much, and yet it seems to have become possible—to express it in the words of Ratzinger—because paganism has arrived at the heart of the Church. When the Christian is no longer fundamentally rooted in God, who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, everything else becomes “crooked.” This also has implications for the belief that God is truly present in the sacraments of the Church and it has strong repercussions regarding the moral life.

The question that everything boils down to is a very personal one. Is faith in salvation and eternal life in the community of the Triune God really the treasure for which one is ready to sell everything (see Matt 13:44–46)? Faith and the supernatural sense of faith connected to it have often been replaced by a horizontal vision of man in which the human person becomes the measure of all things. To stick to the biblical image, the “modern Christian” seems to claim to have bought the field with the treasure in order to be able to dispose of the treasure at will, since he believes himself to have it in his possession. But this is precisely the problem, for we can neither possess God nor subject him to our criteria, but—as the apostle Paul says—“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor 4:7).

Modern times with their premise of feasibility and under the dominance of technology—like the sirens of Greek mythology—have led many Christians away from God. This is evident in the rejection of the traditional faith, which—even by some Church representatives—is openly opposed with aversion, contempt, and prohibitions. Thus, a process is repeated, which already Basil the Great described in a letter to the bishops of Italy and Gaul about the Arian persecution. He complains bitterly that “the persecutors themselves bear the name ‘Christians.’ The conscientious observation of the fathers’ traditions is now being punished as a terrible crime. The God-fearing are expelled from their homeland and banished to the wastelands.”⁹ Those who are not prepared to submit to the “new” and to adopt its princi-

⁸ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, §36. This is a poor translation of the Latin: “Immo, per oblivionem Dei ipsa creatura obscuratur.”

⁹ Basil the Great, Letter to the Bishops of Italy, in *Lektionar zum Stundenbuch*, vol. 1/7 (Trier: Pustet, 1979), 233–35, at 233–34.

ples often experience what Saint Basil had described in the fourth century.

This roughly describes the dead ends in which parts of the Church are now to be found. It is not just a matter of different views, but the *raison d'être* of the Church is at stake. Is it still possible to convey what the Church actually stands for? The high number of Christians leaving the churches in Europe points in a different direction.¹⁰ In consequence, the Church is perceived as a merely human organization which needs to be changed entirely, because of the abuses and the bad publicity and because the Church does not match up to the standards of the so-called *Zeitgeist*, which is above all man-centered. The essentials are not even seen, such as: What is the cause of the abuses and the actual crisis? Or even what is the actual task/purpose of the Church? Related to these questions is that of which hermeneutic should be used in order to approach the topic. Is a man-centered perspective sufficient? A theological answer will only be possible if it is given based upon revelation and faith, through which—and only through which—the Church receives and retains its *raison d'être*. Benedict XVI, in his letter on the abuse scandal, made this evident, when he wrote: “A society without God—a society that does not know Him and treats Him as non-existent—is a society that loses its measure.”¹¹ The same has to be applied even much more with regard to the Church.

Ecclesiological and Theological Dimension in the Context of the Anthropocentric Turn

Before possible solutions and ways out of the crisis can be delineated, it will be necessary to recall some fundamental points for the understanding of the Church and faith, without, however, being able to deal with this topic exhaustively. Again, a thesis is to be laid down at the beginning: The Church is from God or she is not. This “either–or” does not sound good in the ears of modern people and in the age of dialogue, tolerance and relativism. Should we not think of the Church from a “human perspective”; thus, are “we” not Church? In this context the different theological theories on “Church” do not need to be cited, but it will be helpful to refer briefly to the Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.

This document is called a dogmatic constitution because the fathers of the Council have thus sought to express a particular meaning and the

¹⁰ See: German Bishops Conference, *Katholische Kirche in Deutschland: Statistische Daten 2018* (Bonn: Deutsche Bischofskonferenz, 2019).

¹¹ Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, “The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse,” *Corriere della Sera*, April 11, 2019 (trans. Anian Christoph Wimmer for Catholic New Agency).

value of this text. The first paragraph reads: “The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”¹² This quotation makes it clear that the Church is not of itself, nor does it stand within itself; nor does it reflect its own light or the desires and ideas of people, but the Church is the Church from God. The Church has a sacramental dimension,¹³ because she has her origin and her roots in God and receives herself from him. Should this connection be damaged or should it lose its significance, then the Church would be transformed into a non-profit organization or political party; she would ultimately become a plaything of arbitrariness.¹⁴

But this is exactly what has happened due to the anthropocentric turn—the overemphasis on the horizontal dimension. A process has begun which, in extreme cases, leads or has led to an “emancipation” from the revealed truth, which is Jesus Christ himself. Put simply, the gaze has been so strongly focused on man that the gaze on the mystery of God has been blocked. If the Revelation of God no longer specifies the way, if Christ is no longer recognized as the way and the truth (cf. John 14:6), and if the Church does not indicate the way that leads to God, then man—more precisely some people, those who set the tone—will invent new ways, which of course do not correspond to what God had revealed. In these cases, the projection theory of Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach proves to be true, according to which the knowledge of God is the self-knowledge of man. In his polemical thesis he assumed that man projected his own ideas onto God, who consequently did not really exist. This thesis, which was strongly challenged at Feuerbach’s time, has become widely accepted. Today, quite a few believers live and act in exactly the way that this thesis postulates. Many who call themselves “believers” no longer seem to notice that in reality they follow their own projections and create a church and a faith according to their own standards. Such tendencies can be seen above all in theology, especially since, as the Pope Emeritus explained in September 2019, the “word God in theology seems to be ever often on the margins.”¹⁵ When the point of reference is lost, there will be no absolute moral law or norm.

¹² Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §1.

¹³ See the work of the German theologian Karl-Heinz Menke, *Sakramentalität: Wesen und Wunde des Katholizismus*, 3rd ed. (Regensburg: Pustet, 2018).

¹⁴ In his first homily, Pope Francis warned against these tendencies. Cf. Francis, “Missa Pro Ecclesia,” Sistine Chapel, March 14, 2013.

¹⁵ See Benedict XVI, “1968 und der Missbrauch: Antwort auf Birgit Aschmann,” *Herder-Korrespondenz* 73, no. 9 (2019): 51.

This process has been evolving for decades. In the Church one has become accustomed to look almost exclusively at man and quite subtly the gaze has turned away from God. This is particularly evident in the celebration of the Eucharist *versus populum*, which turned the priest toward the people and caused them to be looking at each other. This practice contradicts the tradition of the Church in West and East and cannot itself invoke the Second Vatican Council.¹⁶

The celebration *versus populum* has become the most visible sign of the anthropocentric turn. This has far-reaching consequences, especially since the Church lives from the Eucharist, as Pope John Paul II has stated in accordance with the Tradition.¹⁷ A great change has been made in this most central of all religious practices, and it has had a great impact on the life of the Church. If the *lex orandi* (the way of prayer) changes, then also the *lex credendi* (faith).¹⁸ What has happened in the field of the liturgy has had an impact on all levels of ecclesial life and is also related to the ongoing crisis of morals. Not infrequently the turning to man has made him become the yardstick for faith. It is no longer a question—as the Gospel unambiguously puts it—of making disciples of all nations and teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded (see Matt 28,19f), but of asking what people think, what they want to believe. But in this manner, the Church would have lost her *raison d'être*, because she no longer follows the mission of Jesus Christ or teaches the revealed message of salvation, but “following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths” (2 Tim 4:3–4). The drama to which this process leads becomes particularly clear in the most central event of faith: the redemption granted by God alone. Through anthropocentrism it would be degraded to a man-made

¹⁶ See Joseph Ratzinger, “The Spirit of the Liturgy,” in *Theology of the Liturgy: The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence*, ed. John Saward, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 44–51. In the new preface to his work, Benedict has emphasized this aspect even more clearly and also listed more recent literature on this subject. He concludes: “The notion that priest and people should look at each other while praying appeared only in the modern era and was completely foreign to ancient Christendom. After all, priest and people pray, not to each other, but to the one Lord” (“On the Inaugural Volume of My Collected Works,” in *Theology of the Liturgy*, xv–xviii, here xvii). See also the comments by Kurt Koch, “*Summorum Pontificum* als Weg innerkatholischer Verständigung und als ökumenische Brücke,” in *Zehn Jahre Summorum Pontificum: Versöhnung mit der Vergangenheit—Weg in die Zukunft*, ed. M. Graulich (Regensburg: Pustet, 2017), 55–85, esp. 70–73.

¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), esp. §§5, 6, 12, and 34.

¹⁸ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1124.

self-redemption or “self-acceptation.” As a consequence, theology would, step by step, disappear in the conflict of differing opinions and views and finally dissolve itself, because it would only be about human wisdom and opinions. “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God” (1 Cor 3:19).

Therefore, it is necessary to return to that objective standard, which is not made up by men or based on changing opinions, but revealed by Christ through the apostles. This brings us to the core of the problem.

Objectivity of the Church's Annunciation

The anthropocentric turn was sometimes inspired by good intentions, as dialogue with the people and with the world can be important to win people for God. However, with regard to faith, which is always the faith of the Church, this approach has often proved destructive and has led to alienation. According to the Tradition of the Church, two constitutive elements are necessary for faith: faith consists, on the one hand, of an individual-subjective dimension (*fides qua*), since faith in Jesus Christ includes a personal choice. On the other hand, faith includes an ecclesiastical-objective dimension (*fides quae*); it guarantees that faith corresponds to revelation as it took place in Jesus Christ. *Only* a healthy balance between these two dimensions can guarantee the truth of faith. Pope Francis's encyclical *Lumen Fidei* explains this:

It is impossible to believe on our own. Faith is not simply an individual decision which takes place in the depths of the believer's heart, nor a completely private relationship between the “I” of the believer and the divine “Thou,” between an autonomous subject and God. By its very nature, faith is open to the “We” of the Church; it always takes place within her communion.¹⁹

Through the anthropocentric turn—the radical turn toward man—the subjective-individual dimension was given more and more weight, while the ecclesiastical-objective faith norm of revelation withdrew and lost its normative importance. This led to an alienation from the Church, to which is entrusted the task of passing on the truth of faith which she herself has received (see 1 Cor 11:23). If in the Church everything was focused on man, then she could not pass on what she herself has received, but would be led by what people want to believe. This shows how far the Protestant axiom of an *autopistia* of faith, a knowledge based on one's own

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (2013), §39.

ideas, has found its way into Catholic theology.

This process was already present in the 1970s and was expressed in a concise way in the formula: “Jesus yes—Church no.” Many felt “mature” enough to be “Christians” without or against the Church. Thus, the erroneous opinion could arise that there is a faith detached from the Church or the ecclesiastical norm. With it a process of dissolution began, because if one’s “I” becomes the criterion of faith, then the Church and the Church’s faith become superfluous. Just as the constant drop hollows out the stone, so gradually the supernatural sense of faith has been softened or even dissolved.²⁰ This process of decay can currently be clearly seen, especially when someone dares to call to mind any ecclesiastical-objective norms regarding faith and morals.

In summary, it must be reaffirmed that ecclesiastical teaching contains an objective norm based on Scripture and Tradition. It prevents Christians from slipping into error and guarantees the way of salvation. It is the task of every Christian to accept the ecclesial-objective norm and to put it into practice.

Deficits in Receiving the Church’s Announcement

An honest analysis must include pointing out a failure of Church teaching. Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, in particular, have repeatedly underlined the importance of the objective ecclesial dimension of faith through important doctrinal writings, in order to avoid a drifting apart between the Church’s teaching and a self-referential faith, which would lead into Gnostic self-knowledge.²¹ But these efforts were often not (sufficiently) supported by the local churches. In this context, Paul VI’s 1968 *Humanae Vitae* (*On the Regulation of Birth*) needs to be mentioned, which was rejected, combated, and ridiculed especially by the clergy.²²

²⁰ See Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §12. Already in the 1980s Ratzinger noticed a dissolution of this *sensus fidei*; see “Zur Lage des Glaubens,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 13/1 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2016), 88.

²¹ The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith warned of these tendencies in its letter *Placuit Deo*, February 16, 2018.

²² Ralph McInerny has shown that the violent protests against *Humanae Vitae* originated above all from the clergy (*What Went Wrong with Vatican II?* [Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 1998], 42–48). This is all the more surprising since the clergy is not affected by the use of artificial contraception. On this topic, see also: Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Die Enzyklika Humanae Vitae: ein Zeichen des Widerspruchs* (Regensburg: Habbel, 1968); Konrad Hilpert and Sigrid Müller, eds., *Humanae vitae – die anstößige Enzyklika: Eine kritische Würdigung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2018); Martin M. Lintner, *Von Humanae vitae bis Amoris laetitia: Die Geschichte einer umstrittenen Lehre* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2018); Helmut Prader,

Pope John Paul II experienced a similar situation when he published the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (*On Some Fundamental Questions of Ecclesiastical Morality*).²³ These fundamental doctrinal writings—to name only two—have not only been ignored, but have also experienced violent opposition. It was John Paul II who drew attention to the core of the same problem with regard to ecclesiastical moral doctrine by clearly rejecting an autonomous morality.

To put it simply, the so-called “autonomous morality” is an expression of the anthropocentric turn, which grants the individual a moral autonomy according to which everyone can determine for himself what is good and evil. When everything is equally valid, everything becomes indifferent. As a result, the objective ecclesial norms lost their importance, which led to the dissolution of the faith—on the one hand because the norms are no longer known, and on the other hand because they were relativized. This has led to the collapse of morality and the refusal of any objective moral norm. The rejection of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as an expression of that objective ecclesial norm of faith is a further indication of how far this process has progressed.²⁴

At this point, the reasons why “believers” claim their rights and are vehemently opposed to objective doctrinal norms become clear. It should be noted that those who demand tolerance most strongly for themselves and their positions usually do not tolerate the least contradiction. The moral doctrine of the Church, unknown to most Catholics for years and decades, is suddenly declared “outdated.” Anyone who dares to speak of

ed., *50 Jahre Humanae vitae* (Kisslegg: Christiana-Verlag, 2019).

²³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993); see the criticism of the encyclical in Dietmar Mieth, ed., *Moraltheologie im Abseits? Antwort auf die Enzyklika Veritatis splendor*, Quaestiones Disputate 153 (Freiburg: Herder, 1994).

²⁴ Only two works need to be mentioned in this context, which reflect a far-reaching rejection of the Catechism at the theological faculties. See Ulrich Ruh, *Der Weltkatechismus: Anspruch und Grenzen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1993). See also the book of the “Ratzinger-Schüler”: Hansjürgen Verweyen, *Der Weltkatechismus: Therapie und Symptom einer kranken Kirche?* (Düsseldorf: Pamos, 1993). Karl Rahner’s opposition to publish a Catechism valid for the whole world must not be underestimated, especially since his theological principles have become the norm for most theological faculties. In his probably best-known work, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, he argues that attempts to introduce a universal world catechism have failed, are met with unanimous resistance by preachers and theoretical catechists, and will never prevail (Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* [Freiburg: Herder, 2005], 432). Such statements underline that Rahner must be correctly described as the creator of an “anthropocentric theology.”

objective norms gets to feel this immediately, often through crude defamations. Not only the moral doctrine of the Church, but also many other important topics such as “sin,” “judgment,” “hell,” “purgatory,” “devil,” “angel,” and “divine justice” are declared taboo. The more this happens, the more the nature of the Church, and thus the Church itself, becomes incomprehensible.

Also, the teaching of the Church is under the influence of the anthropocentric turn. Clear contents, based on Scripture and Tradition, are increasingly rejected and replaced by often meaningless statements. Individual case solutions are suggested, while non-negotiable values are dispensed. To renew the moral life, it is urgent to accept and preach the objective principles once again which can well be justified by Scripture, Tradition, and the magisterium of the Church. They have to be the starting point of the Church’s proclamation, so that the Church can carry out her very own task.

The Question of Hermeneutics (Interpretation)

In his pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI placed particular emphasis on a correct interpretation of the faith, as expressed, for example, in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. This became clear already in his first Christmas address to the Roman Curia in 2005.²⁵ Ratzinger/Benedict was very familiar with this problem. Shaped by his time as archbishop of Munich-Freising, as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and finally as pope, he saw it as a priority to guarantee a truthful interpretation based on the normative ecclesial dimension of faith. In this important project the question of “how” arises; a key to interpretation is needed. Basically, there are two approaches: (1) starting from man, his life realities and ideas, what would correspond to the anthropocentric turn; (2) starting from—to put it simply—a theocentric interpretation, which opens the way starting from divine revelation.

Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, has given directions in this respect. It says that God in his goodness has decided to reveal himself “through Christ, the Word made flesh, [that] man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature.”²⁶ The principle of Incarnation determines the way, for the Word precedes human thought. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The

²⁵ See also Ralph Weimann, *Dogma und Fortschritt bei Joseph Ratzinger: Prinzipien der Kontinuität* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012).

²⁶ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, §2.

primacy of the divine Word reflects the basic structure of the Christian faith, and any non-observance would mean to turn away from the Incarnation.

An anthropocentric interpretation of faith entails the danger of depriving theology of that which is God. Such tendencies can be clearly discerned in the context of the complex phenomenon that went down in the history of theology under the term “modernism.”²⁷ The anthropocentric turn had a similar effect—time-delayed. The turn to the subject, following modern philosophy, reverses the principle of the Incarnation. The revealed truth is no longer accepted as normative, as something according to which the Christian has to direct himself, but vice versa: “In the beginning is the man,” his ideas and preferences. Already the Letter to the Romans warns against such an interpretation: “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and revered and worshiped the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever” (Rom 1:25). Whenever this very structure of Christian faith is rejected, man himself becomes the new *locus theologicus*; his own desires and subjective impressions become the new dogma, while every objective ecclesial norm is understood as a limitation of one’s own autonomy and freedom, which is to be stripped off and fought against. The dominant individualism and relativism in society additionally promotes these tendencies, whereby the philosophical axiom of René Descartes comes to the forefront: *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”). Thinking and theological reflection are centered on the subject, or more precisely on those “subjects” who now determine the new path.

The bond between faith, truth, and life is thereby broken, which often leads to a life praxis in contradiction to the faith. Here now a vicious circle develops, because no one lives well in a contradiction, and therefore efforts are made to adapt the faith to one’s own life circumstances in order to dissolve the contradiction. Faith adapts to changing fashions, while the biblical call to conversion (see Mark 1:15) becomes obsolete. The anthropocentrically oriented person seeks self-affirmation, not conversion, which must always imply a return to God.

In contrast, Pope Benedict XVI’s concern was to build bridges between the gaping distance of doctrine and practice by insisting on the unconditional recognition of the principle of the Incarnation. Therefore, he clearly rejected a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture, which “has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of

²⁷ See also Pius X, *Pascendi Domini Gregis* (1907), where the Pope describes the danger of a theological immanence (§§19–20).

modern theology.”²⁸ This refers to all those currents which construct something “new” in contradiction to Tradition, especially when the subject becomes the yardstick for faith. “On the other [hand], there is the ‘hermeneutic of reform,’ of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us.”²⁹ True and lasting renewal will be possible only if the Church remains reconciled with her own Tradition;³⁰ it will undoubtedly involve the subject and his circumstances, but the measure is and remains the Incarnate Word of God.

Conclusion and Solutions

The gap between the doctrine of the Church and society has widened. The balancing act that seemed possible until now cannot be carried on in the future anymore. In principle, two opposed possibilities remain.

One is the continuation of the anthropocentric turn in ever more radical forms, which will inevitably lead to an alienation from the revealed Truth and of the Church. Schisms, relativizations, and dissolution tendencies will then increase. The proposal of an “inclusivism” not often made in this context, according to which other religions are also valid ways to salvation, since one can be a Christian anonymously, so to speak, is no more than the theoretical possibility of the impossible. Already Hans Urs von Balthasar observed in the epilogue to his work that the Christian with this naïve conception of “apologetics” encounters an insurmountable gap. “With this summing and integrating method he indeed reaches a certain height, but suddenly he sees that, following this path (if it were feasible), he would not reach Christ but Hegel, namely to the ‘absolute knowledge’ that absorbs the Christian faith (perhaps *optima fide*) into itself.”³¹ That this does not work in practice is already visible in the daily life of most Christians.

The other possibility is a course correction by again accepting the measure of God, who revealed himself in Jesus Christ and through the Church. This way corresponds to the logic of the narrow gate and the constricted road “that leads to life. And those who find it are few” (Matt 7:14). To this end, there must be the necessary readiness to look together

²⁸ Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005 (see the Vatican website).

²⁹ Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005.

³⁰ Del Valle has pointed out the difficulties involved, particularly with regard to the history of Europe and the associated “guilt complex.” He states that real renewal will be possible only if this is overcome (Alexandre del Valle, *Il complesso occidentale: Piccolo Trattato di de colpevolizzazione* [Isola del Liri: Paesi, 2019]). See also Weimann, *Dogma und Fortschritt*, 193–227.

³¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilog* (Einsiedeln-Trier: Johannes, 1987), 11–12.

to the Lord and to recognize without reservation Jesus Christ, who “by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”³²

The Apostle’s admonition has lost none of its significance in this day and age, as he wrote in his Letter to the Colossians. “See to it that no one captivate you with an empty, seductive philosophy according to human tradition, according to the elemental powers of the world and not according to Christ. For in him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily, and you share in this fullness in him, who is the head of every principality and power” (Col 2:8).

This will only succeed if faith finds a new balance between the subjective-individual dimension of faith (*fides qua*) and the objective-ecclesiastical dimension (*fides quae*). Faith is not merely subjective, but it is also not merely objective, which is clearly shown by the central mystery of faith: salvation. Although it is achieved objectively through Jesus Christ, it will only bear fruit if it is accepted subjectively in the life of the individual. This symbiosis makes faith become performative, “which shapes our life in a new way.”³³

In the search for a new balance, it has to be pointed out that the “objective ecclesial dimension” of faith is not an abstract doctrinal building, but is primarily about the acceptance of Jesus Christ and the gift of salvation. Modern man (and theologians) has difficulty with this assumption. But the greater the distance becomes between the objective and the subjective dimension, the greater the centrifugal forces in the Church will be. Pope Benedict XVI, with his rich theological heritage, has shown a way out of the impasse. It consists in recognizing the primacy of God and in seeking renewal in continuity with the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us. Only in this way will it be possible to remain faithful to the admonition of the Apostle Paul: “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine” (2 Tim 4:1–3). For this not to happen, it is necessary to be transformed by Christ.

N.V.

³² Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §22.

³³ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (2007), §10.