

*Christi Opera Proficiunt:*  
**Ratzinger's Neo-Bonaventurian Model  
of Social Inspiration**

AARON PIDEL, S.J.  
*University of Notre Dame*  
*South Bend, Indiana*

ON THE EVE OF THE OPENING of the Second Vatican Council, Joseph Ratzinger was invited before an assembly of German-speaking bishops to appraise *De fontibus revelationis*, the draft schema on Divine Revelation.<sup>1</sup> The Bonn professor, though not yet granted the status of official *peritus*,<sup>2</sup> felt confident enough to argue that the schema's treatment of biblical inspiration was inadequate in important respects. Its principal fault, in his estimation, was to have attempted to raise to the level of doctrine the so-called *partim-partim* theory of revelation, according to which revelation, conceived as a set of propositions, resides "partly" in Scripture and "partly" in Tradition. The *partim-partim* theory, Ratzinger argued, was not the only way of accomplishing the Council's thematic aim, namely, to present ecclesial tradition as sine qua non for a genuine understanding of Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For the text of this address in English translation, see Jared Wicks, S.J., "Six texts by Prof. Joseph Ratzinger as *peritus* before and during Vatican Council II," *Gregorianum* 89/2 (2008): 233–311, at 269–285.

<sup>2</sup> According to Ratzinger's own recollection, Cardinal Frings managed to have him appointed *peritus* only "toward the end of the first session." See *Milestones: Memoirs 1927–1977*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 121.

<sup>3</sup> According to Ratzinger, the council was targeting the position of Tübingen *Dogmatiker* J. R. Geiselmann, who favored a *totum–totum* theory. Accordingly to Geiselmann, revelation, here also understood propositionally or "materially,"

To the eyes of those with a more historical sensibility, moreover, Ratzinger argued that the *partim-partim* would always appear doubly deficient. First, there was little historical evidence showing that early, orthodox theologians ever invoked an esoteric “sayings source” in order to defend “extra-biblical” beliefs, such as the extraordinary privileges accorded to the Virgin Mary. Yet to speak of revelation’s distribution in quantitative terms, i.e., as contained *partim* in Scripture and *partim* in Tradition, was implicitly to conceive of tradition as just such a set of supplementary premises. Secondly, the *partim-partim* model departs significantly from the theologies of two of the West’s most revered doctors: Sts. Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas. After adducing a catena of texts wherein the two theologians flatly deny that non-biblical *dicta* can be ascribed to the deposit of faith, Ratzinger draws the obvious conclusion: “the proposed schema would . . . condemn . . . most of the Fathers and classical scholastic theologians, beginning with Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure.”<sup>4</sup> The council should not, in other words, risk condemning the “largest and most venerable part of the Tradition” in the name of the “average-level theology of the Latin text-books.”<sup>5</sup> His lecture thus reads almost like an *amicus curiae* brief for the Mendicant inspiration-theology of the High Middle Ages, and especially for that of Bonaventure, the subject of his *Habilitation* (1955).

But Bonaventure’s model of inspiration furnished Ratzinger with more than just a weighty authority by which to unsettle the manualist consensus. The conclusions of his research provided him, as we will argue, with a positive orientation by which to develop his own theology of biblical inspiration. Indeed, Ratzinger’s understanding of revelation can be fruitfully understood as a synthesis of the Seraphic Doctor, on the one hand, and the insights of twentieth-century exegesis, personalism, and hermeneutics, on the other. Perhaps the most significant fruit of this synthesis is Ratzinger’s thematization of what he finds implicit in Bonaventure, namely, the communal aspect of the charism of inspiration. It is the relation between Ratzinger’s early *Bonaventura-Forschungen* and his later affirmation of a corporate dimension of biblical authorship that serves as the main focus of this investigation. However, given the

---

was distributed “totally” into Scripture and “totally” into tradition. Catholic theologians, operating according to this same propositional understanding, feared that the admission of Scripture’s material sufficiency would inevitably render tradition superfluous. See “Six Texts,” 273–274; *Milestones*, 124–126.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 277–278.

fact that so-called “social models” of inspiration continue to raise the specter of Modernism, we will also treat briefly the resources Ratzinger provides for allaying doctrinal concerns.

### Bonaventure Transposed

What did Ratzinger the *Habilitation* appropriate from the Seraphic Doctor's model of inspiration? Three principal features present themselves: inspiration is (1) mystical, (2) subject-inclusive, and (3) historically cumulative. In each case we will begin with what Ratzinger discovered in Bonaventure and then proceed to his creative appropriation thereof.

#### *Mystical*

“Mystical” serves to designate the model of divine-human interaction by which Ratzinger conceives the process of Scripture's composition. Whereas the late nineteenth century tended to construe inspiration according to the Molinist pattern of “efficacious grace,” and the middle twentieth century, the years of Ratzinger's theological formation, according to the Thomist category of instrumental causality,<sup>6</sup> Ratzinger found in Bonaventure an alternative to these models. Bonaventure's use of the terms “inspiration” and “revelation,” he discovered, did not correspond to the linguistic usage they had acquired by the mid-twentieth century, such that the former designated divine assistance in composing canonical books and the latter its objectified result. Far from opposing “inspiration” to “revelation,” Bonaventure used these terms interchangeably,<sup>7</sup> referring through them to a fundamentally mystical vision, a “penetration through the peripheral-sensible to the spiritual and real.”<sup>8</sup> Understood according to this mystical coloration, inspiration could designate more than simply God's guidance in the process of biblical composition. In fact, inspiration's function could vary somewhat from epoch to epoch. In the formative period of the canonical books, for example, the visions could serve as an impetus to writing. Here the terms *inspiratio* and *revelatio* indifferently designate what later theology would

---

<sup>6</sup> James Burtchaell rates the Molinist-inspired *res et sententia* theory of the Jesuit Cardinal Franzelin as the dominant theory from 1870–1890 and the Thomist-inspired instrumental theory of the Dominican Pierre Benoit as the “classic” theory of the years following *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943). See *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810: A Review and a Critique* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 244–245.

<sup>7</sup> *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1989), 54.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

call “inspiration.” At the same time, Bonaventure held that the “veil” or “swaddling clothes” of human language could not, of itself, communicate these mystical insights.<sup>9</sup> Hence, a certain mystical elevation (*revelatio* or *inspiratio*) was necessary not only to compose but to understand Scripture properly, that is, to receive its properly theological meaning.<sup>10</sup> Ratzinger thus concluded that Bonaventure departed from later usage of *revelatio* and *inspiratio* in two senses. He used them both synonymously and more broadly, so as to include them under them the twofold process of Scripture’s composition and its reception in faith.

If his later writings are any indication, Ratzinger found himself in basic sympathy with Bonaventure’s mystical model. He gives little attention, for example, to the divisions of faculty psychology or the subtle distinctions within the sphere of grace so characteristic of nineteenth- and twentieth-century debates on inspiration. Instead, he often traces the origins of biblical traditions back to seminal religious encounters, which he evokes in personalist categories of relationship and dialogue.<sup>11</sup> Abraham is portrayed as a mystic of the highest order,<sup>12</sup> for example, and the whole religious tradition of Israel, the womb in which the Old Testament gestated, as nothing other than a participation in the “broadening of the horizon which was granted to him.”<sup>13</sup> Christ in turn takes up this Abrahamic tradition, receiving and “inspiring” it in virtue of the filial relationship that constitutes the core of his identity.<sup>14</sup> Through his “most profound dialogue with God,” Jesus “knows Scripture more deeply than anyone else.”<sup>15</sup> Again, Jesus has “spiritualized the letter” of

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>11</sup> For Ratzinger’s reflections on the interdependence of individual religious genius and communal religious traditions, see *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 60.

<sup>12</sup> “Abraham heard God’s call, he enjoyed some kind of mystical experiences, a direct eruption of the divine, which pointed his way for him. This man must have had something of the seer about him, a sensitivity to being, which enlarged his perception beyond the bounds of what is accessible to our senses. This extension of the realm of perception, which men in all ages ... have sought to acquire by artificial means, was obviously enjoyed by him, as by all religious geniuses, in a pure, effortless, and original manner.” See *Faith and the Future* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1971), 33–34.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, 34.

<sup>14</sup> For the motif of Christ as the renewing and universalizing interpreter of the tradition of Israel—including its Scriptures—see *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to Spiritual Christology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), esp. 30–31.

<sup>15</sup> *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sr.

Scripture “in terms of his relationship with God.”<sup>16</sup> The same holds for those who follow in Jesus’ wake, that is, for the hagiographers classically conceived. In his Commentary on *Dei Verbum* Ratzinger observes that the “resonance of the voice of the apostles and prophets throughout Scripture is important to it because the voice itself resounds with the Holy Spirit, because in them we encounter the dialogue of God with men.”<sup>17</sup> In short, though perhaps not everyone familiar with God is inspired, everyone inspired is deeply familiar with God.

Ratzinger thus agrees with the manualist consensus inasmuch as he describes inspiration as a charism attributable to special individuals. He diverges from the manualist consensus, however, inasmuch as he makes inspiration’s paradigmatic agents not literary authors but mystical tradents. By shifting inspiration’s center of gravity in this way, Ratzinger reveals—despite his preference for the language of personalist philosophy—an ongoing affinity for Bonaventure’s approach to inspiration.

### *Subject-Inclusive*

From these considerations on the mystical character of inspiration, it follows that “Holy Scripture” (as opposed to Scripture *qua* written artifact) is for Bonaventure a complex whole comprising both subject and text. Since Scripture remains a dead letter until its meaning has been mystically perceived, it follows that the believing subject belongs to the very concept of inspired Scripture. Scripture in its naked verbalness serves only as the “instrument” or “material principle” of *revelatio* or *inspiratio*, whereas Holy Scripture comprises an ensemble of text-plus-believing-subjects. Revelation thus exists only *in act*. But how then, Ratzinger asks rhetorically, does such a model not “destroy the objectivity of revelation in favor of a subjective actualism?”<sup>18</sup> The answer: for Bonaventure, mystical insight into Scripture admits of degrees, the lowest of which is simply the vision of Christian faith. Such faith, however, is not merely the private attitude of the individual believer, but the faith of

---

Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 32.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>17</sup> “Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, trans. William Glen-Doepl, vol. III (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 262–272, at 263. In a mid-career essay, Ratzinger, referring explicitly to Bonaventure’s mystical understanding of the charism of biblical authorship, argues that, if hagiographers are indeed the model for all subsequent theologians, theology must be accompanied by contemplation and “spiritual praxis” (*Principles of Catholic Theology*, 322).

<sup>18</sup> *Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 66–67.

the Church, itself already partially objectified in the interpretations of the Fathers and the articles of the Creed. Hence, the Word of God is structured somewhat like a set of Russian dolls: the text is enfolded by the reader, who is enfolded by the faith of the Church, which is enfolded by God.

Ratzinger, for his part, remains committed to this model of understanding the “complex organism of the Word of God”<sup>19</sup> from the time of his *Habilitation* onward. Recalling more than forty years later the theological basis of certain interventions at the Second Vatican Council, Ratzinger points to the text-plus-subjects structure of Revelation found in Bonaventure:

Revelation is always greater than what can be contained in human words, greater even than the words of Scripture. As I have already said in connection with my work on Bonaventure, both in the Middle Ages and at Trent it would have been impossible to refer to Scripture simply as “revelation”, as is the normal linguistic usage today. Scripture is the essential witness of revelation, but revelation is something alive, something greater and *more*: proper to it is the fact that it *arrives* and *is perceived*—otherwise it could not become revelation . . . Revelation has instruments; but it is not separable from the living God, and it always requires a living person to whom it is communicated. Its goal is always to gather and to unite men, and this is why the Church is a necessary aspect of revelation . . . And what we call “tradition” is precisely that part of revelation that goes above and beyond Scripture and cannot be comprehended with a code of formulas.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> “Six Texts,” 277.

<sup>20</sup> *Milestones*, 127. He adds elsewhere: “I had ascertained that in Bonaventure (as well as in theologians of the thirteenth century) there was nothing corresponding to our concept of “revelation”, by which we are normally in the habit of referring to all the revealed contents of the faith: it has even become part of linguistic usage to refer to Sacred Scripture simply as “revelation”. Such an identification would have been unthinkable in the language of the High Middle Ages. Here, “revelation”, is always a concept denoting an act. The word refers to the act in which God shows himself, not to the objectified result of this act. And because this is so, the receiving subject is always also part of the concept of “revelation”. Where there is no one to perceive “revelation”, no *re-vel*-ation has occurred, because no *veil* has been removed. By definition, revelation requires a someone who apprehends it. Because, if Bonaventure is right, then revelation precedes Scripture and becomes deposited in Scripture but is not simply identical with it. This in turn means that revelation is always something greater than what is

Equivalent descriptions of Revelation surface along the length of Ratzinger's theological career.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps his most mature formulation can be found in his "Introduction" to *Jesus of Nazareth*. There Ratzinger notes that the production of the books of Scripture involve not two but "three interacting subjects"<sup>22</sup>—God, the individual author, and the Church. The Church, moreover, by virtue of its trans-historical breadth, stands in a special way the "living subject of Scripture" wherein the "words of the Bible are always in the present."<sup>23</sup>

Here we find the core of the young Ratzinger's opposition to *De fontibus*. The draft schema, by failing to recognize the interpretive role

merely written down. And this again means that there can be no such thing as *sola scriptura* ("by Scripture alone"), because an essential element of Scripture is the Church as understanding subject, and with this the fundamental sense of Tradition is already given" (ibid., 108–109).

<sup>21</sup> In earlier formulations, Ratzinger emphasizes almost exclusively the corporate subject of inspiration: "It is becoming increasingly clear that inspiration is not an individual charismatic process but, rather, an essentially ecclesial and historical process embedded in the whole process of tradition, genre history, and redaction.... The human subject of the Bible is the Church; she is at the same time the place of the transition from human spirit to *Pneuma*, to the Spirit of the common Body of Jesus Christ and, thus, generally the place in which inspiration is possible" (*Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Living*, unabridged edition, ed. Michael J. Miller, trans. Michael J. Miller and Matthew J. O'Connell [San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011], 22–23). Again: "It is only at this point that we can begin to understand the nature of inspiration; we can see where God mysteriously enters into what is human and purely human authorship is transcended.... Certainly Scripture carries *God's thoughts* within it: that makes it unique and constitutes its 'authority.' Yet it is *transmitted by a human history*. It carries within it the life and thought of a historical society that we call the 'People of God,' because they are brought together, and held together, by the coming of the divine word. There is a reciprocal relationship: This society is the essential condition for the growth of the biblical Word; and, conversely, this Word gives the society its identity and its continuity" ("What in Fact is Theology," in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: Church as Communion*, ed. Stephan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür, trans. Henry Taylor [San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005], 29–37, at 33). Italics original. More recently, Ratzinger has begun to present individual and corporate contributions more evenly: "At this point we get a glimmer, even on the historical level, of what inspiration means: *The author* does not speak as a private, self-contained subject. He speaks in a living community, that is to say, in a living historical movement not created by him, nor even by the collective, but which is led forward by a greater power that is at work" (*Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker [San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007], xx). Italics mine.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., xi.

of Scripture's living subject, and by electing to supplement Scripture with Tradition understood as a "code of formulas," ran the risk of condemning Bonaventure and Thomas, both of whom often presented Scripture as Revelation's sole material source. A noteworthy corollary of Ratzinger's defense of the constitutive role of the receiving subject is his acceptance of an ongoing current of inspiration—at least in the stipulative, Bonaventurian sense of reception-inspiration.

### *Historically Progressive*

Ratzinger's qualified endorsement of ongoing inspiration, in fact, leads him to take a further step. He comes to affirm not only the Church's indispensable role in the actualization of Scripture's latent meaning, but history's role in the progressive enrichment of this meaning. Here again the precedent is Bonaventure, who detected in the Bible complex periodizations of world history that Ratzinger dubs "schemata." According to these schemata, each event of the Old Testament prophesied an analogous event in the age of the Church or, using Bonaventure's own image, represented a "seed" that would flower in the course of history.<sup>24</sup> By Bonaventure's reckoning, some of these event-prophecies had already found fulfillment: Ezekiel corresponded to Charlemagne, for instance;<sup>25</sup> and the schism of the Eastern and Western Churches recalled the division between the Northern and Southern tribes of Israel.<sup>26</sup> Bonaventure became convinced, however, that some Old Testament episodes adumbrated events still to come: history was still awaiting a great Christian king corresponding to Josiah, for example, as well as a period of great tribulation corresponding to the Babylonian exile.<sup>27</sup> By ascribing such a patterned intelligibility to history, Bonaventure implied that post-canonical historical events could cast a backward light on Scripture, progressively unveiling its meaning.

According to Ratzinger, moreover, this open-ended hermeneutic reflected the Seraphic Doctor's broader cosmology. Breaking with Aristotelian physics, which treated time as an accident of movement, and thus history as an unintelligible concatenation of particulars, Bonaven-

---

<sup>24</sup> *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, XIII, 2; cited in *Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 7–8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 30. With respect to Bonaventure's specific predictions, Ratzinger relies heavily on *Collationes in Hexaemeron* XVI.29.

<sup>26</sup> "Offenbarung, Schrift, Überlieferung," *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 67 (1958): 13–27, at 18.

<sup>27</sup> *Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 30.

ture recasts temporality as a structural element of the cosmos and the measure of creation's return to God.<sup>28</sup> Christ gives the temporal process its orientation and inner logic,<sup>29</sup> such that cosmos, history, and revelation—without ever progressing beyond Christ—can nevertheless be said to exhibit a forward movement.<sup>30</sup> Ratzinger's conclusion: Bonaventure, a doctor of the Church, both affirms a post-apostolic enhancement of revelation's meaning and presents the experience of particular historical events as its indispensable precondition.<sup>31</sup>

While Ratzinger does not endorse Bonaventure's strict isomorphism of historical eras in his constructive theology, he does nevertheless repeatedly affirm what he takes to be the essence of Bonaventure's insight: Scripture accrues its full meaning only in the course of history.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 138–143. Ratzinger notes that Bonaventure lies between Aristotle and Augustine in terms of his understanding of time. With Aristotle, he makes time a function of the movement of the heavenly spheres rather a purely psychological *distentio animi*. However, with Augustine, Bonaventure makes time anthropocentric inasmuch as he envisions that the heavenly spheres will continue to move only until the full number of God's elect have been gathered. See "Der Mensch und die Zeit im Denken des Heiligen Bonaventura," in *L'Homme et son destin d'après les penseurs du moyen âge* (Louvain and Paris: Neuwelaerts, 1960), 473–483, at 481.

<sup>29</sup> "Indem Bonaventura in diesem Prozess aus dem Logos den in der Menschenwerdung geschehenen Prozess des Logos selbst in die Geschichte einzeichnet und den mit ihm anhebenden »regressus« der ganzen Menschheit zu ihrem Gott, indem er dies tut, ist im Grunde die Logisierung der Geschichte vollzogen" (*Gesammelte Schriften: Offenbarungsverständnis und Geschichtstheologie Bonaventuras*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Müller [Freiburg: Herder, 2009], 245).

<sup>30</sup> *Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 117–118.

<sup>31</sup> Subsequent scholarship has tended to criticize Ratzinger's *Habilitation* for exaggerating Bonaventure's antiaristotelianism and implying Bonaventure's direct dependence on Joachim of Fiore. Oktavian Schmucki, O.F.M.Cap, traces this reception history, but concludes that Ratzinger's interpretation has been nuanced rather than overturned: "Soweit der Schreibende in den kontroversen Fragestellungen zu urteilen befugt ist, dürften die von J. Ratzinger vorgelegten Deutungen der bonaventurianischen Quellentexte unanfechtbar bleiben. In der Bewertung des realen Einflusses Joachims auf den Seraphischen Lehrer wird es immer von einander abweichende Nuancen geben. Die Tatsächlichkeit selber kann keinem Zweifel unterliegen" ("Joseph Ratzingers "Die Geschichtstheologie des hl. Bonaventura": Nachwirken in der Forschung und der Folgezeit," in *Gegenwart der Offenbarung: Zu den Bonaventura Forschungen Ratzingers*, Ratzinger Studien 2, ed. Marianne Schlosser and Franz-Xaver Heibl [Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2011], 344–359, at 359).

<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that Ratzinger, by stripping Bonaventure of the element of historical isomorphism, actually begins to approximate the Thomist position on

In an essay dating to 1972, he continues to invoke Bonaventure as an authority for the possibility for the progress of revelation: "Bonaventure . . . coins a striking phrase: *Christi opera non deficiunt, sed proficiunt* . . . the seed of apostolicity waxes through the ages unto the fullness of Christ."<sup>33</sup> Returning more recently to the Bonaventurian image of the seed in his "Introduction" to *Jesus of Nazareth*, Ratzinger observes that older texts are incorporated into Scripture through a "process in which the word gradually unfolds its inner potentialities, already somehow present like seeds, but needing the challenge of new situations, new experiences and new sufferings in order to open up."<sup>34</sup> His mid-career work *Eschatology*, without using Bonaventure's own language, nevertheless hearkens back to the language of his *Habilitation* on Bonaventure. It presents the biblical text as a "schema" that gains its full meaning from the "harvest of historical experience," filling itself with the "reality of subsequent history."<sup>35</sup>

This reference to the "reality" of subsequent history points to yet another transposition: Bonaventure's cosmic vision finds its counterpart in Ratzinger's mid-career enthusiasm for Teilhardian process-Christology, which conceives history, cosmos and humanity evolving together toward the "omega" of Christ.<sup>36</sup> Ratzinger too can hold that Scripture

---

the influence of historical experience on dogmatic development. According to F. Marín Sola, O.P., Thomas's sensitivity to the role of new cultural situations in explicating the deposit is obscured by the fact that he included them under the "minor premises of reason": "Lo que hoy llamamos contacto de la revelación con las diversas filosofías y civilizaciones lo llamaban los escolásticos contacto de las mayores [premisas] de fe con las menores de razón"; *La Evolución homogénea del dogma católico*, 2nd ed., Sección II: Teología y Cánones 84, intro. Emilio Sauras, O.P. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1963), 352.

<sup>33</sup> *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 63–64. For the citation in Bonaventure, see *Opusculum* 12, "Epistola de Tribus Quaestionibus," s. 13.

<sup>34</sup> *Jesus of Nazareth*, xix. Italics mine.

<sup>35</sup> *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein, translation ed. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 43.

<sup>36</sup> For the unity of these elements: "We said just now that the cosmos was not just an outer framework of human history, not a static mould—a kind of container holding all kinds of living creatures which could just as well be poured into another container. This means, on the positive side, that the cosmos is movement; that it is not just another case of history *existing in it*, that cosmos itself *is* history.... Finally, there is only one single all-embracing world—history, which for all the ups and downs, all the forwards and backwards that it exhibits, nonetheless has a general direction and goes 'forward'" (*Introduction to Christianity*, 245). For their consummation in Christ: "Faith in Christ will see the beginning of a movement in which dismembered humanity is gathered together more and

accrues “reality,” even without material addition to the canon, since the “reality” that Scripture intends, namely Christ, is gradually gathering all things into His body, the Church.

In Ratzinger's presentation of the inspiration as mystical, inclusive of a believing subject, and historically progressive, one detects the unmistakable influence of the Seraphic Doctor. Ratzinger does not fail to stamp these Bonaventurian principles with his distinctive style, however, when transposing them into a hermeneutic and personalist idiom and deploying them in contemporary theological conversation

### Objections

Having shown that Ratzinger holds a “social” theory of inspiration heavily indebted to Bonaventure, we are now better situated to entertain objections. A somewhat recent article levels several charges against social theories of inspiration, of which the two most significant are the following: one, social theories inevitably open the door to a “continuous alteration in the deposit of faith;”<sup>37</sup> two, social theories tend to render Scripture the Church's servant, rather than vice-versa.<sup>38</sup> Though the article details only the positions of John McKenzie and Karl Rahner, it has a broader aim. It suggests that any model ascribing the charism of inspiration to a community would be answerable to such charges. How would Ratzinger handle such objections?

### *Integrity of the Deposit of Faith*

The concern that social theories of inspiration destabilize the deposit can perhaps be sharpened into the following question. How does Ratzinger square his particular model of stability and progress—namely, that revelation is fixed in its “material principle” (*das Materialprinzip*)<sup>39</sup> by virtue of the closed biblical canon, yet open in its formal principle by virtue of the canon's progressively unfolding meaning—with *Lamentabili*'s condemnation of the position that the “revelation that constitutes the object of Catholic faith was not completed with the Apostles”?<sup>40</sup> Having

---

more into the being of one single Adam, one single body—the man to come. It will see in him the movement to that future of man in which he is completely “socialized”, incorporated into one single being” (ibid., 179).

<sup>37</sup> Robert Fastiggi, “Communal or Social Inspiration: A Catholic Critique,” *Letter and Spirit* 6 (2010): 247–263, at 262.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>39</sup> “Offenbarung, Schrift, Überlieferung,” 27.

<sup>40</sup> The relevant condemned propositions: “Revelatio, objectum fidei Catholicae constituens, non fuit cum Apostolis completa” (Denz. 3421); “Dogmata, quae

anticipated this objection already in 1966, Ratzinger responds along the following lines:

The reality is that the individual condemnations within the decree *Lamentabili*, according to the analogy of similar episodes, cannot be rated too highly. The decree has its meaning as a whole in that it condemns a radical evolutionist and historicist orientation on which it bestows the catch-all name Modernism; this orientation expresses itself more or less in the individual propositions, none of which excludes, on the other hand, that the individual propositions, taken separately (*für sich genommen*), can also have a thoroughly sound sense (which Knox in his book on Christian enthusiasm has outstandingly demonstrated with respect to the parallel case of the condemnation of Quietism). In this respect, one can, in hindsight, ascribe to the Decree *Lamentabili* no proper statement on the question of the historicity of faith that surpasses the First Vatican Council.<sup>41</sup>

By implication, there may still be a sound sense in which one may understand revelation to be “open” in the post-apostolic age.

Moreover, Ratzinger can point to several features that distance his position from radical evolutionism. In its material aspect, of course, he does hold the canon to be fixed. And even when evoking Scripture’s formal aspect, Ratzinger recurs to the Bonaventurian trope of the plant-yielding seed—the paradigmatic image of controlled development. Just as acorns produce only oaks, biblical texts grow in meaning only

---

Ecclesia perhibet tamquam revelata, non sunt veritates e caelo delapsae, sed sunt interpretatio quaedam factorum religiosorum, quam humana mens laborioso conatu sibi comparavit” (Denz. 3422).

<sup>41</sup> *Das Problem der Dogmengeschichte in der Sicht der Katholischen Theologie*, Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein–Westfalen, no. 139, ed. Heinz Kühn and Leo Brandt [Köln Westdeutscher, 1966]: 10). A year earlier, Ratzinger cited approvingly Hans Urs von Balthasar’s observation that “the crucial theses of Baius, Jansen and Quesnel that the Church condemned can be found, almost word for word, in Augustine and to some extent in the Council of Orange (527 A.D.)” (“Das Problem der Mariologie,” *Theologische Revue* 61/2 [1965]: 73–82, at 82. English translation from *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992], 270). See also his similar “holistic” treatment of the dictum that there is no salvation outside the Church in *Das neue Volk Gottes: Entwürfe zur Ekklesiologie* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1969), 347.

by “evolving in continuity with their original sense.”<sup>42</sup> If asked what guarantees this continuity of biblical meaning, Ratzinger would doubtlessly appeal to the perduring identity of Scripture’s “living subject,” the People of God, as well as to the organs of this basic identity: apostolic succession, magisterium, the *sensus fidei*, etc. To this extent, Ratzinger can plausibly claim to respect the global orientation of *Lamentabili*. It must be admitted, however, that Ratzinger nowhere theoretically justifies how the meaning that comes to accrue to Scripture in the course may be said to be virtually precontained in the deposit. Those interested in such an account will be obliged to look elsewhere.<sup>43</sup>

### *Serving Character of the Teaching Office*

With respect to the second objection, we can ask whether Ratzinger’s model of inspiration does justice to the relationship between Scripture and magisterium formulated in *Dei Verbum*: the “teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it” (§10). In other words, does his model collapse Scripture into doctrine, biblical inspiration into magisterial infallibility? On a dyadic model of inspiration, the difference of rank tends to be explained as a difference of personal charism. Thomas himself had a great reverence for the apostles, ascribing to them a plenitude of charismatic gifts unequaled in the course of later history.<sup>44</sup> Certain neo-Thomists, focusing more on hagiographers than apostles, invoked the category of instrumental causality. Accordingly, God, while granting

---

<sup>42</sup> *Jesus of Nazareth*, xviii.

<sup>43</sup> In this respect, one does well to consult the still unsurpassed meditations of F. Marín Sola, O.P. on “lo virtual revelado,” especially his positive evaluation of Newman’s more historically and psychologically framed theory of development. See *La Evolución Homogénea del Dogma Católico*, 351f.

<sup>44</sup> See ST I-II, q. 106, a. 4, where Thomas observes that “we should not look forward to some future state in which the grace of the Holy Spirit will be received more perfectly than it has been up until now, especially (*maxime*) by the Apostles, who received the *firstfruits of the Spirit*, that is to say, received it *prior in time and more abundantly* (*abundantius*) too, as a gloss on this text puts it”; *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 30: *The Gospel of Grace* (ST 1a2ae. 106–114), trans. with intro., notes, appendices and glossary by Cornelius Ernst, O.P., 16–17. Italics original. See also Aquinas’ *Commentary on the Psalms of David*, where, expositing Ps 45[44]:17b, he observes: “The *Gloss* says that the first Christians received the Spirit more abundantly than we who have come later. Just as no other woman can be compared to the Blessed Virgin, so no other saint can be compared to the apostles”; *Thomas Aquinas: The Gifts of the Spirit*, ed. and intro. Benedict M. Ashley, O.P., trans. Matthew Rzeckowski, O.P. (New York: New City Press, 1995), 132.

the magisterium only the external and negative assistance of preservation from error, gives the hagiographers alone the internal and positive assistance to become His instrumental causes.<sup>45</sup> Infallible magisterial statements thus contain reliable words *about* God, but only Scripture qualified as the word *of* God. Appeal either to Thomas's teaching about plenitude of the apostolic charism or to the neo-Thomist category of instrumental causality could thus plausibly claim to explain the qualitative superiority of Scripture vis-à-vis dogma. Ratzinger's mystical model, by contrast, might seem to admit only of differences of degree—a more or less intense spiritual sensitivity. How does Ratzinger explain the superiority of Scripture over doctrine or even private theology?

It must be said, first of all, that Ratzinger does affirm the preeminence of Scripture. His explanations of this hierarchy, however, lead in several directions and vary in cogency. Sometimes he too implies a diminishment of charism, affirming—and here he explicitly acknowledges his debt to Bonaventure—that “what distinguishes Scripture from all later theology” is that the “writers of Holy Scripture . . . are ‘theologoi,’ those through whom God as subject, as the word that speaks itself, enters into history.”<sup>46</sup> But is the uniqueness of the hagiographers due to a “tailing off” of mystical vision, at least of the intensity of vision that could produce canonical books? Though nothing in Ratzinger's premises would exclude such a solution, he does not develop it. Whenever he does more than assert the difference, he appeals instead to functional and structural distinctions.

*Functionally*, he ranks Scripture above dogma because he thinks there is a natural hierarchy in their respective tasks. Dogma interprets Scripture. Hence, “There is a necessary mutual relationship and a priority between Scripture and dogma. The interpreter ranks not higher but lower than what is interpreted.”<sup>47</sup> The simplicity of this explanation is deceptive, however, since Ratzinger elsewhere admits that the interpretive function runs both ways. While it is true that Scripture's narrative mode requires

---

<sup>45</sup> Fastiggi reviews this classic distinction of the manualist tradition and faults Rahner and MacKenzie for blurring it (“Communal or Social Inspiration,” 260–261). Fr. Sebastian Tromp, S.J., maintained it in his influential manual up to the eve of the Vatican II. See *De Sacrae Scripturae Inspiratione*, 6th ed. (Rome: Gregorian, 1962), 111.

<sup>46</sup> *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 321.

<sup>47</sup> *Dogma and Preaching*, 51. In the same vein, he proposes that Scripture and the Fathers of the Church belong together as “word and answer.” “The two are not identical, are not of equal importance, do not possess the same normative power” (*Principles of Catholic Theology*, 147).

a dogmatic interpretation whereby the “polyvalent image-language of Scripture is translated into the univocity (*Eindeutigkeit*) of the concept,”<sup>48</sup> it is also true that the “supra-historical constancy of images (at least of the great *Ursymbole* of humanity) is greater than that of concepts.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, as the conceptual background implicit in any given dogma grows more archaic, “dogma as interpretation must be constantly read backwards with reference to what is interpreted and must be understood on that basis.”<sup>50</sup> Scripture must eventually play some role in interpreting dogma. Ratzinger argues, in fact, that proceeding as if all clarity lay on the side of dogma and all obscurity on the side of Scripture would “ultimately destroy the serving character of the teaching office.”<sup>51</sup> Scripture ranks highest both because (in the short run) dogma interprets it and because (in the long run) it interprets dogma. Hence, even though Ratzinger always subordinates the magisterium and its dogmas to Scripture, his rationales for doing so are not easily harmonized.

Ratzinger's *structural* account of magisterial subordination to Scripture gets higher marks for internal consistency than the functional account. Here he hints that the distinct functions of Scripture (the interpreted) and dogma (the interpreter) correspond roughly to the twofold structure of Revelation, which is simultaneously “once only” and “forever.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, the material closure of the biblical canon finds its justification in the historical unrepeatability of the Incarnate Word, while the open-endedness of dogmatic interpretation corresponds to the limitless diffusion of His presence by the Spirit.<sup>53</sup> Here, the gradation of

---

<sup>48</sup> *Das Problem der Dogmengeschichte*, 26. My translation. In later writing, however, Ratzinger tends to emphasize the clarification of dogma by Scripture less, observing simply that “apostolic authority ... interprets the word which is handed down and gives it unequivocal clarity of meaning” (*The Nature and Mission of Theology: Essays on Orient Today's Debates*, trans. Adrian Walker [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995], 60).

<sup>49</sup> *Das Problem der Dogmengeschichte*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>51</sup> “The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. III, 181–198, at 187. He remarks similarly elsewhere that “magisterial pronouncements have their own historicity and their own need of interpretation (*Auslegungsbedürftigkeit*) in light of their historical totality as well as of their essential ordination to their sources” (“Das Problem der Mariologie,” *Theologische Revue* 61.2 [1965]: 73–82, at 82). My translation.

<sup>52</sup> “The Question of the Concept of Tradition: A Provisional Response,” *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, ed. Peter Hünemann and Thomas Söding, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), 41–89, at 65.

<sup>53</sup> Ratzinger explains, “Incorporated into the Church's authoritative office of

authority does not reflect a gradation of mystical intensity so much as a differentiation in the historical moments that the mystic occupies. Those writings originating in the penumbra of Christ's unrepeatable life and ministry enjoy a normative privilege: "By restricting the term apostle to the Twelve, [Luke] distinguishes what happened once only at the origin from what remains in perpetuity through succession. . . . The presbyter-bishops are successors but are not themselves apostles. The 'once only' as well as the 'forever' belong to the structure of revelation and of the Church."<sup>54</sup> The structure of revelation thus mirrors the structure of the Church, which herself knows a distinction between the Apostolic and post-Apostolic Ages.<sup>55</sup>

In final analysis, then, Ratzinger clearly affirms the subordination of dogma (and thus of the teaching office) and offers several reasons for this

---

witness, which derives its rights and power from the presence of the Spirit, from Christ's contemporaneity with all our days, in which he is ever the Christ today, the office of witness that belongs to the unique word of Scripture set down once and for all will have to be restored to rights and power; that office of witness of the Scriptural word derives its enduring validity from the uniqueness of the historical act of salvation of Jesus Christ, who once gave up his crucified body" (ibid., 67). In this context the operative contrast is between Scripture historically and theologically interpreted, not precisely between Scripture and dogma. The correspondence is close enough, however, to suggest a parallel.

<sup>54</sup> *Called to Communion*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), 123.

<sup>55</sup> Rahner likewise attempted to preserve the superiority of Scripture over dogma by coordinating the mind of the inspired hagiographers specifically with the mind of the Apostolic Church, to which he ascribed a greater transparency to God than the (merely infallible) post-Apostolic Church. This is a relevant point that Fastiggi omits to mention in his criticism of Rahner. See Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 1, trans. Charles Henkey (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 47. Y. J.-M. Congar, O.P., criticized Rahner's theory on slightly different grounds, namely, that its frequent attribution of biblical inspiration to an indistinct *Urkirche* fails to account for the early Church's awareness "de ne pas posséder seulement des Écritures . . . par écrit de sa foi, mais de les avoir reçues d'hommes choisis par Dieu, spirituellement dotés par Dieu, ayant reçu mission et autorité de Dieu pour cela"; "Inspiration des Écritures canoniques et Apostolicité de l'Église," *Révue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 45 (1961): 32–42, at 41. Italics original. Ratzinger's "structural" solution does not suppose, as Congar's criticism of Rahner seems to, that the charismatic endowments of the Twelve were greater than those of all Christians who followed, but it does attach importance to what Congar sees as a dimension of the unrepeatable apostolic privilege: "le contact direct et personnel qu'ils ont eu avec le Verbe Incarné, la Parole faite chair, en leur Maître Jésus-Christ, qui n'est le nôtre que dans la mesure où, d'abord, il a été personnellement le leur" (ibid., 38).

subordination. His functional reflections, despite some internal inconsistency, suffice to explain why we *need* not maintain an open canon: if ongoing and authoritative interpretation is possible, then material addition to Scripture is unnecessary.<sup>56</sup> His structural account is weightier still, explaining why we *ought* not maintain an open canon: the once-only aspect of the Incarnation naturally privileges those writings emanating from the authority of the apostolic eyewitnesses. Dogmatic writings serve and preserve this one, originary witness for all time.

### Concluding Observations

Supposing that Ratzinger's social model is free of latent heresies, one might still ask whether there are any particular features to recommend it. In the briefest of terms, let me suggest four advantages to Ratzinger's "social" model of inspiration of particular contemporary interest.

First of all, Ratzinger's proposal seems to concur with an aspect of Scripture's self-understanding attested in 2 Peter 1:20–21: "First of all you must know this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation (ιδία ἐπίλυσις), because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." On the face of it, the assertion might seem to support a dyadic, mantic model of inspiration, inasmuch as it describes the Spirit impelling and moving prophetic individuals. As not a few exegetes have pointed out, however, the author of 2 Peter here invokes prophecy in the Spirit as the condition not only for authentic textual production but for authentic textual interpretation of both Old and New Testaments.<sup>57</sup> The same author implies reception as at least an aspect of *inspiratio* when he identifies certain sayings in Paul's letters as "hard to understand" (3:16), intervening on the basis of this obscurity. As 2 Peter's rejection of "cleverly devised myths" (1:16) and its ubiquitous condemnation of false teaching imply, moreover, inspiration finds both its criterion of authenticity in apostolic tradition and its finality in the edification of the spiritual community.<sup>58</sup> Only by such signs can prophecy be recognized

<sup>56</sup> On this point, see also *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 90–91.

<sup>57</sup> As Jerome Neyrey, S.J., remarks, "The issue in 1:20–21 ... is not the source of prophecy but its interpretation"; *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible 37C (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 182.

<sup>58</sup> In this connection, see Y. J.-M. Congar, O.P., who takes the passage in question to mean that "not only did the person who made the prophecy do so on behalf of God and not by personal choice (see v. 21), but also that the man who receives the prophecy should understand and explain it (ἐπιλύειν: cf. Mk

as more than one's "own interpretation" (ιδία ἐπίλυσις). For Käsemann, the tying of the Spirit to the apostolic tradition showed that primitive Christianity had already ossified into "Frühkatholizismus."<sup>59</sup> But what the Protestant exegete laments as the beginning of the end, Ratzinger might claim as biblical warrant for appealing to a corporate layer of authorship in addition to individual-human and divine layers. For the author of 2 Peter seems fully aware that he writes as the organ not of an episodic inspiration, but of the Spirit that stably indwells the Church.

In addition to its resonance with the biblical witness, Ratzinger's neo-Bonaventurian model enjoys the advantage already highlighted in the discussion of the debates surrounding *De fontibus*, to wit: it also squares better with the data of post-biblical history. It eliminates the need to justify doctrinal developments through recourse to an esoteric "saying source" and is more easily harmonized with the patristic and medieval Christian affirmations of Scripture's material sufficiency and formal insufficiency.

Thirdly, this communal dimension allows Ratzinger to recast an important corollary of biblical inspiration: the multivalence of Scripture. Referring to the longstanding tradition of differentiating among the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses, he argues, "The four meanings of Scripture are not individual meanings arrayed side by side, but dimensions of the one word that reaches beyond the moment."<sup>60</sup> The word reaches beyond the moment because it matures within a community that both receives special divine guidance and survives all literary authors. By embedding individual authorial intention within a broader communal intentionality, Ratzinger's "social" model provides a plausible explanation of the gradual and anonymous emergence of

---

4.34; Acts 19.39), within the Church's communion and not in a purely personal manner"; *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), 255. Jerome Neyrey, S.J., though arguing from a more sociological angle, agrees that "one cultural factor in the giving and understanding of prophecy was the way in which it functions in the building up of the life of the group;" *2 Peter, Jude*, 182.

<sup>59</sup> "Nun erhält auch V. 21 seine volle Schärfe. Die Schrift ist ganz und gar inspiriert. Geist kann aber nur vom Geist verstanden und ausgelegt werden. Der Interpret muß also den Geist haben, um die Schrift zu begreifen. ... Im Frühkatholizismus ist der Geist an das Amt gebunden"; "Eine Apologie der urchristlichen Eschatologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 49.3 (1949): 272–296, at 292.

<sup>60</sup> *Jesus of Nazareth*, xx.

“fuller” senses from the literal sense. These meanings need not have belonged to the intellectual horizon of the hagiographers or apostles considered individually.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, the communal reception of Scripture resonates—at least up to a point—with those currents in hermeneutical philosophy that seek to legitimate a textual “trajectory of meaning.” While these approaches, broadly speaking, present the act of interpretation as the reader’s appropriation of a phenomenal “world before the text,” they struggle to offer both objective controls on the reading of texts and an account of the text’s continuity of meaning. Since the significance of the “world before the text” remains largely independent of authorial aims and historical circumstance, all appropriations of the text seem to claim equal validity. The “career of meaning” thus becomes something like the aggregate impression that a classic text makes on its ongoing readership. Such a hermeneutic philosophy is clearly more vulnerable to the charge of “subjective actualism” anticipated by Ratzinger. Ratzinger, by contrast, gives a basis for the biblical career of meaning that is at once historically concrete and metaphysically “thick”: the historical pilgrimage of the People of God. The reader of Scripture may reasonably expect continuity-in-meaning because the community that accepts Scripture’s authority exhibits, thanks to her union with Christ, a continuity-in-being. This same community is uniquely authorized to regulate the interpretation of the biblical text, embracing only those meanings compatible with her founded identity.

In fine, one may say that, while respecting the parameters of the Catholic doctrinal tradition, Ratzinger manages to bring together the metaphysical realism of medieval scholasticism with contemporary insights from the disciplines of exegesis, hermeneutics, and personalist philosophy. Careful examination of Ratzinger’s neo-Bonaventurian model of inspiration reveals on every page the watermark of his theological vision—creative fidelity. N V

---

<sup>61</sup> The admission of the apostles’ limited intellectual horizon is what perhaps distinguishes Ratzinger’s theology of inspiration most significantly from someone such as Marín Sola, who recognizes in the apostles “el *privilegio* especial de haber recibido por luz infusa un conocimiento *explícito* de la revelación divina mayor que el que los teólogos todos o la Iglesia entera tienen o tendrán hasta la consumación de los siglos”; *La Evolución Homogénea del Dogma Católico*, 158. Italics original.

