

History and Faith in Pope Benedict's *Jesus of Nazareth*

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ON POPE Benedict's understanding, history and faith ought not to be separated. As a result, he wants to keep together historical exegesis and spiritual understanding. In the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, discussing events from Jesus' baptism until the Transfiguration, he insisted that "the historical-critical method—specifically because of the intrinsic nature of theology and faith—is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work."¹ The Pope wanted to "portray the Jesus of the Gospels as the real, 'historical' Jesus in the strict sense of the word" (xxii). At the same time, he made quite clear that the historical-critical method has its limits: "[B]y its very nature it has to leave the biblical word in the past," and since it looks at the human word of Scripture only as human, it is unable to recognize the unity of the various writings of the Bible (xvii). As a result, the Pope presented a plea for a Christological hermeneutic, which takes Christ as the key to the whole (xix), and he wanted to take seriously the traditional four senses of Scripture, which he maintained were "dimensions of the one word that reaches beyond the moment" (xx). In short, the Pope's attempt was "to offer a properly theological interpretation of the Bible" (xxiii).

The second volume attempts much the same.² Dealing with Holy Week, this volume again begins by insisting that scholarly exegesis must

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xv. Page numbers hereafter in parentheses in the text.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011). Page numbers are in parentheses in the text.

“see itself once again as a theological discipline, without abandoning its historical character” (xiv), recognizing “that a properly developed faith-hermeneutic is appropriate to the text and can be combined with a historical hermeneutic, aware of its limits, so as to form a methodological whole” (xv). Perhaps even more strongly than in his first volume, Benedict focuses on the limitations of a quest for the “historical Jesus,” which he insists “lacks sufficient content to exert any significant historical impact. It is focused too much on the past for it to make possible a personal relationship with Jesus” (xvi). The Pope repeats that historical research “can at most establish high probability” (104), while at the same time he insists that it is important to “ascertain whether the basic convictions of the faith are historically plausible and credible” (105).

To my mind, this mutual interpenetration of reason and faith—of historical and spiritual interpretation—is exactly what is required. In this essay, I want to look at various aspects of Pope Benedict’s second volume in order to analyze how he works out this combination of history and faith. Specifically, I will look at how he himself actually embarks on the task of exegesis and how he deals with the relationship between truth and power. We will see that, for the most part, Pope Benedict is deeply concerned to keep together the realities of history and of faith in a sacramental relationship.

This sacramental relationship between this-worldly realities and the realities of faith comes to the fore when the Pope discusses the purification obtained through the Old Testament rituals. He comments:

Just as the old sacrifices pointed toward the future that was awaited, receiving light and dignity from that eagerly anticipated future, so too the whole question of ritual purity associated with this worship was likewise—as the Fathers would say—“*sacramentum futuri*”: a stage in the history of God with men, and of men with God, straining forward to the future, but obliged to step aside once the hour of the new had actually come. (61)

In 1950, the expression *sacramentum futuri* was the title of one of Jean Daniélou’s most well known books, translated ten years later into English as *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*. Two aspects of Daniélou’s work come through clearly in Benedict’s statement. First, the relationship between Old and New Testament does not concern two completely separate realities. Instead, the old sacrifices receive light and dignity from the anticipated future. The light of the old sacrifices is not their own, but is borrowed light, we could say. The Old Testament sacrifices are merely the sacramental anticipations (*sacramenta*) that receive

whatever reality they have from the reality (*res*) of the Christ event. As Daniélou put it: "In the liturgical and catechetical tradition of the early Church the Law is a text charged with mysteries, *sacramenta*, which figuratively reveal to us the whole plan of the Gospel and the future Kingdom."³ Second, because the Old Testament events are only sacramental anticipations of a future reality, they have to be let go once the reality comes. Or, as Benedict himself puts it, they are "obliged to step aside once the hour of the new had actually come." Also here, the Pope's remark is close to the view advocated by Daniélou, who appeals to Romano Guardini (a theologian who has influenced Joseph Ratzinger, as well) to argue that in Scripture a "forerunner" (such as Melchizedek) is a sacramental type who must disappear once the antitypical reality has come: "A forerunner is a man sent by God to lay down the road for someone else. When that someone himself appears, then the forerunner's mission is done and he must give way."⁴

Whether or not the Pope has Daniélou in mind at this point, I am not sure. What is clear, of course, is that he has been deeply influenced by Henri de Lubac, Daniélou's teacher, and by other theologians representing the approach of the mid-twentieth-century *nouvelle théologie*.⁵ Each of these theologians—most notably de Lubac—argued for a sacramental relationship between the realities of history and of faith, and therefore also between historical exegesis and spiritual interpretation.⁶ It seems to me that we see something quite similar in the work of Pope Benedict. A clear example is the way in which he speaks of the end of the Temple. The Pope indicates that with the destruction of the Temple, only two ways of reading the Old Testament remained possible: "the reading in the light of Christ, based on the Prophets, and the rabbinical reading" (33). The Temple and its sacrifices were clearly abolished, according to the early Church. The Pope emphatically points out that while there were various issues that the early Christians had to struggle through, "strangely there is not a hint to be found anywhere of a dispute over the Temple and the necessity of its sacrifices" (38). Precisely because the risen Lord

³ Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Wulstan Hibberd (London: Burns & Oates, 1960), 11.

⁴ Jean Daniélou, *The Advent of Salvation: A Comparative Study of Non-Christian Religions and Christianity*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Paulist Press, 1962), 62.

⁵ See especially Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition after Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003); idem, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶ See Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 149–90.

was the new Temple, in whom God and man met one another, it was clear to all Christians that the Temple building no longer functioned.⁷

The same sacramental understanding of reality comes to the fore when Benedict discusses Jesus' high-priestly prayer, and along with it, the Feast of Atonement. Using sacramental language, he comments: "The ritual of the feast, with its rich theological content, is realized in Jesus' prayer—'realized' in the literal sense: the rite is translated into the reality that it signifies" (77). Similarly, when discussing the missionary character of Jesus' sending of the disciples, the Pope briefly alludes to the early Church's acceptance of apostolic succession and adds: "The continuation of the mission is 'sacramental', that is to say, it is not self-generating, nor is it something man-made, but it is a matter of being incorporated into the 'Word that existed from the beginning' (cf. 1 Jn 1:1)" (98). Apostolic succession, for Pope Benedict, is the sacramental unfolding of the reality of Christ himself. Finally, such sacramental "presence" of course requires an understanding of time that is more than the merely chronological succession of historically distinct moments. Through the words of consecration at the Eucharist, insists the Pope, "our 'now' is taken up into the hour of Jesus" (139). The hour of Jesus is the reality of faith in which our historical existence gets taken up through the celebration of the Eucharist.

Pope Benedict's sacramental understanding of reality shapes his actual exegesis. He repeatedly appeals to the Church Fathers' insight into certain passages, reflecting on the deeper spiritual meaning of the text. For example, Jesus' tunic over which the soldiers cast the lot becomes for Benedict an expression of the unity of the Church (217). In the outpouring of blood and water from Jesus' side, the Pope sees a reference to Eucharist and Baptism, as well as a reference to the creation of Eve and thus to the birth of the Church (226). And the boat in which Jesus joins his disciples during the storm becomes the boat of the Church that "travels against the headwind of history through the turbulent ocean of time" (285). Furthermore, the Pope presents at several well-chosen moments beautiful theological exposés on themes derived from the text. Various expositions on atonement, a lengthy analysis of the relationship between truth and power,

⁷ In this light, it seems to me that the Pope's approach to Judaism seems somewhat oddly out of place. He appears convinced that the Church should not concern herself with the conversion of the Jews (45) and that Israel "retains its own mission. Israel is in the hands of God, who will save it 'as a whole' at the proper time, when the number of the Gentiles is complete" (46). The Pope's insistence that we need the Christian and Jewish ways of reading the biblical texts "into dialogue with one another" (33–34) strikes me as oddly vague, considering his own strong understanding of the ending of the Temple and its sacrifices.

a discussion of the twofold will of Christ, and the question of the historical character of the resurrection event are among them. This book presents more than just history. There are, however, places in which the German care for detail and precision—*Deutsche Gründlichkeit*—shines through in fairly lengthy analyses of historical questions. The question of the dating of the Last Supper (106–15) is perhaps the clearest example of such historical precision. Even here, however, Benedict points out the theological implications of the chronology of the Last Supper.

The Pope's caution with regard to historical criticism's ability to ferret out the details of the past is reflected in his understanding of truth itself. While not rejecting the classical definition of correspondence between mind and reality (*adaequatio intellectus et rei*), the Pontiff makes clear that human beings do not have a full grasp of the reality. We grasp "only a small fragment of reality—not truth in its grandeur and integrity," claims Pope Benedict (192). The reason for this is that God himself is the ultimate and first truth, so that truth in this world is "true" only "to the extent that it reflects God" (192). Furthermore, the Pope goes on to say, the world "becomes more and more true the closer it draws to God. Man becomes true, he becomes himself, when he grows in God's likeness. Then he attains to his proper nature. God is the reality that gives being and intelligibility" (192). These reflections on truth seem to me profoundly important. The question of whether or not truth should be understood as *adaequatio intellectus et rei* has a controversial history in twentieth-century Catholic thought, particularly through Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange's accusations of relativism in the direction of Maurice Blondel because of the latter's denial of truth as *adaequatio intellectus et rei*. While Benedict retains the definition, he clearly reverts to a more patristic (and perhaps more authentically Thomist) participatory understanding of truth. For Benedict, it is only by participation in God's being and truth that we ourselves have being and truth. Human statements of truth, we could say, are sacraments of which the eternal Word is the mysterious reality itself. Also in this regard, Benedict appears to stand in the tradition of Blondel, de Lubac, and the tradition of *nouvelle théologie*.

This is not to say that for Benedict truth becomes completely subject to the whims of history. While we may not have a full grasp of truth itself (that is, God himself), we do genuinely participate in it. It is this sharing in God's truth that allows us to remain free from Pontius Pilate's pragmatism and power play—and from his obvious inability to discern truth at all. "Let us say plainly," insists Pope Benedict, "the unredeemed state of the world consists precisely in the failure to understand the meaning of creation, in the failure to recognize truth; as a result, the rule of pragmatism is imposed,

by which the strong arm of the powerful becomes the god of this world” (193). These reflections would seem to be quite relevant today, as many wish to immerse the question of truth so radically in history itself, and thereby to unmoor it so completely from God, that it becomes impossible to discern moral truth—except through the arbitrary imposition of dominant secular agendas.

It is for this reason somewhat puzzling that Pope Benedict advocates a strict separation between politics and faith. He does not merely suggest a separation between Church and state—something that in itself would already seem to require careful delineation before it can be accepted—but he seems to suggest that religion as such should stay out of politics. In fact, he argues that this “separation of the religious from the political” is “what truly marks the essence of his [i.e., Jesus’] new path” (169). The Pope argues that this separation of politics from faith is possible precisely through the Cross, which implies the loss of all external power (171). It appears that Benedict’s motivation is to keep Church and faith free from all domination and power, so that the truth can speak for itself. Jesus’ kingship is the rule of truth, not the rule of dominion or power (190–91). While I appreciate the fear of truth being warped by pragmatic power plays, it seems to me that a strict separation between faith and politics is nonetheless a serious problem, a problem introduced not by Jesus but by the Enlightenment. The problem with such a separation is at least twofold. It means that politics would go its own way, apart from considerations of faith. That is to say, we would surrender politics to ideologies alien to the Christian faith; and questions of religion and morality would, at best, be relegated to the private sphere. Furthermore, such a separation does not seem to do justice to the intimate relationship between history and faith, something which Pope Benedict himself rightly advocates. If also in politics there is a provisional participation in the truth of God, then politics and faith would seem to go together—although I would by no means refuse to acknowledge a clear distinction (rather than separation) between the two. Despite this criticism, it remains clear that throughout the book, Pope Benedict is concerned to keep history and faith together, in a sacramental relationship.

The main message of the second volume of *Jesus of Nazareth* does not, however, concern the sacramental connection between history and faith—important though the connection may be. What Benedict wants to do in this book is what any good theologian wants to do: point people to Jesus. “I have attempted to develop a way of observing and listening to the Jesus of the Gospels,” writes the Pope, “that can indeed lead to a personal encounter, and that, through collective listening with Jesus’

disciples across the ages, can indeed attain sure knowledge of the real historical figure of Jesus" (xvii). The aim of all theology is the mystagogical purpose of a personal relationship. That is to say, readers of this book are privileged to sit at the feet of a catechist who leads his audience into the presence of Jesus, who is at the same time the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the faith of the Church. **N V**