

Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, on Biblical Interpretation: Two Leading Principles

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THE BASIC principles governing Joseph Ratzinger's understanding of biblical hermeneutics can be reduced to two under which many other aspects of his approach can be subsumed. In this short study of his teaching on the understanding of the Bible, I will concentrate on these two principles, which can be expressed as: (1) The subject of biblical interpretation is the Church, the Whole Christ; (2) Scripture is a privileged instrument of Divine Revelation, which means that it mediates supernatural knowledge to those who approach it with faith. In this essay I will try to develop briefly the thinking of Benedict XVI on these two principles. In each case I will describe his position and then reflect on it theologically and philosophically. I offer this as a contribution that can help elucidate his thought as well as honor a theologian who has striven his whole life long to serve Jesus, the Word of God.

The First Principle: The Subject of Interpretation

A Brief Presentation of Joseph Ratzinger's Thought

In concluding his address of May 10, 2003, commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Cardinal Ratzinger, its president, made the following statement that expresses both principles I have isolated for consideration in this essay:

Faith itself is a way of knowing. Wanting to set it aside does not produce pure objectivity, but comprises a point of view which excludes a particular perspective while not wanting to take into account the accompanying conditions of the chosen point of view. If one takes into account, however, that the Sacred Scriptures come from God through a subject which lives continually—the pilgrim people of God—then it becomes clear rationally as well that this subject has something to say about the understanding of the book.¹

In another essay dedicated to “The Spiritual Basis and Ecclesial Identity of Theology,” Ratzinger further discusses the Church as the subject of theology thus opening up its interior mystery:

The Church, moreover, is not an abstract principle but a living subject possessing a concrete content. This subject is by nature greater than any individual person, indeed than any single generation. Faith is always participation in a totality and, precisely in this way, conducts the believer to a new breadth of freedom. On the other hand, the Church is not an intangible spiritual realm in which everyone can pick what suits him. She is endowed with a concreteness rooted in the binding Word of faith. And she is a living voice which pronounces itself in the organs of faith. . . .

But how exciting exegesis becomes when it dares to read the Bible as a whole. If the Bible originates from the one subject formed by the people of God and, through it, from the divine subject Himself, then it speaks of the present. . . . Without the living subject, either one must absolutize the letter, or else it vanishes into indefiniteness.²

“Subject” as the term is being used here may be defined as “the locus of agential receptivity and active engagement.” Employed this way the primary reference must be to a person, predicated analogously of divine and human persons.³ There is also the use of the term to apply to collective entities as “subjects,” the state, a family, a race, and so forth, which can be loci of receptivity and engagement but whose unity is found in a bond that is external to the persons who make it up. There is, however, a third way of being a subject, and this is the way of the Church, the Body of

¹ “Relationship Between Magisterium and Exegetes,” address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *L'Osservatore Romano* (English), July 23, 2003.

² Joseph Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Essays to Orient Theology in Today's Debates*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 61, 64–65.

³ For a brief but clear treatment of “person” in theological predication, see Josef Ratzinger, “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” *Communio* 17 (1990): 439–54.

Christ that is neither a person, defined as “the incommunicably proper existence of spiritual nature,”⁴ nor a collectivity. In Thomas Aquinas’s opinion, the Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, may be considered as a “quasi person” united to Christ, its Head.⁵ It is this “mystical person” that is the subject of Revelation and its interpreter.

In a 1997 essay Joseph Ratzinger addressed the issues of Revelation, Christology, the role of office in the Church, and the notion of the Church as subject:⁶

For the believer, however, the Church is not a sociological subject created by human agreement, but a truly new subject called into being by the Word and in the Holy Spirit; and precisely for that reason, the Church herself overcomes the seemingly insurmountable confines of human subjectivity by putting man in contact with the ground of reality which is prior to him.⁷

The Second Vatican Council teaches the historical continuity between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church in the now-famous paragraph 8 of *Lumen gentium*: “This Church constituted and organized as a society in the present world subsists [*subsistit*] in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him, although outside of her structure, many elements can be found of sanctification and truth which, as gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ, impel toward catholic unity.”⁸

If belief “in the body” of the Church is taken away, the Church’s concrete claims regarding the content of the faith disappear along with her bodiliness. . . . *Subsistere* is a special case of *esse*. It refers to existence in the form of an individual subject. That is exactly what it means here. The council wanted to say that the Church of Jesus Christ, as a concrete subject in the world, is found in the Catholic Church.⁹

⁴ “Spiritualis naturae incommunicabilis existentia.” Richard of St. Victor, cited in *ibid.*, 449.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 49, c.: “Sicut enim naturale corpus est unum, ex membrorum diversitate consistens, ita tota Ecclesia, quae est mysticum corpus Christi, computatur quasi una persona cum suo capite, quod est Christus.” (ST III, q. 19, a. 4, c.: “Grace was in Christ, . . . not simply as in an individual man, but as in the Head of the whole Church, to whom all are united as members to the head, forming a single mystical person.” Also, ST III, q. 48, a. 2, ad 1: “The head and members form as it were a single mystical person.”)

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, “*Deus Locutus Est Nobis in Filio*: Some Reflections on Subjectivity, Christology, and the Church,” in *Proclaiming the Truth of Jesus Christ: Papers from the Vallombrosa Meeting* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

In the same essay Cardinal Ratzinger goes on to state that in the Catholic Church the subsistence of the one subject of the Church is the work of God alone, and it continues to be true “despite the discrediting failures of the members of the Church.”¹⁰ The sin and disunity of the Church hinders and obscures Christ’s action in his body, namely unity of faith, which speaks both to the faith by which one believes and faith as that which is believed. As people mature in their progressive and personal faith assimilation to Christ, the shadows of their personality give way to the light of truth and the energy by which they yield and cling to revealed reality becomes more personal and less idiosyncratic. This is a process that is never complete but it does bring about a deep spiritual unity in those who are being moved by the same Spirit. The result is that there is unity as well at the meeting point of faith, that is, God himself and a knowledge of his plan of salvation.¹¹

The Church is a mystical Person, a mystery as well as an agent. The Scriptures have been entrusted to the Church as a source of life, the life that consists of a transforming knowledge of Jesus Christ, “the leader and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:2). Such a faith vision is expressed by Thomas Aquinas, who, while he does not use the word “subject,” expressed the same truth: “The formal objective of faith is the First Truth as this is made known [*manifestatur*] in Sacred Scripture and in the teaching of the Church which proceeds from the First Truth” (ST II–II, q. 5, a. 3, c). Or again in the same question, “Faith adheres to all the articles of faith because of one reason [*medium*], namely because of the First Truth proposed to us in the Scriptures understood rightly according to the teaching of the Church [*secundum doctrinam Ecclesiae*]” (ST II–II, q. 5, a. 3, ad 2). And to cite but one more text: “The formal role [*ratio*] of object in faith is the First Truth made known through the teaching of the Church” (*De caritate*, q. 13, ad 6).

In the three texts from St. Thomas we have just seen, we may note that the Church is described as the active, that is, the mediating subject of Revelation. Before continuing to consider this aspect in the thinking of Joseph Ratzinger, we should consider his understanding of a prior truth, namely, that of the Church as receptive subject of Revelation. Joseph Ratzinger approaches this question primarily in terms of the relation between Reve-

¹⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹¹ See Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, no. 2: “It pleased God in his goodness and wisdom to reveal Himself and to make known the mystery of his will (see Eph 1:9) by which men have access in the Holy Spirit to the Father, through Christ, the Word of God made flesh, and become sharers in the divine nature (see Eph 2:18; 2 Pet 1:14).”

lation, Scripture, and Tradition.¹² In his 1964 study, published along with a study by Karl Rahner, Ratzinger considers the question in just these terms, proceeding in part by a series of five “theses.”¹³

The first thesis, “Revelation and Scripture,” begins by stating that the fact that “tradition” exists derives from the non-identity of “Revelation” and “Scripture.”¹⁴ The non-identity lies in the fact that Revelation is more than Scripture to the extent that the reality exceeds its verbal expression, and also because there can be Scripture without Revelation as when a non-believer reads Scripture. “For Revelation always and only becomes a reality when there is faith. . . . It is a living reality which calls for the living man as the location of its presence.”¹⁵ Ratzinger expresses the same principle elsewhere by saying that for St. Bonaventure, “*Revelatio* refers not to the letter of Scripture, but to the understanding of the letter; and this understanding can be increased.”¹⁶

In the second thesis Ratzinger discusses the Old and New Covenants and the writings of each stage, maintaining that for the New Testament “Scripture” refers to the Old Testament. This position probably needs to be nuanced in the light of some recent studies that point to indications that the Gospel writers were aware of continuing the Scriptures.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is still true that the Old Testament “can only subsist within the spiritual reality of Jesus Christ.”¹⁸ The third thesis examines “Christ, the Revelation of God,” which means that “The actual reality which occurs in Christian Revelation is nothing and no other than Christ himself.”¹⁹ Thus, “faith is equivalent to the indwelling Christ”²⁰ (this is expressed in Eph 3:17), which implies that by faith “the individual encounters Christ and in him enters the sphere of influence of his

¹² This is, in fact, the title of an article he wrote in 1958: Joseph Ratzinger, “Offenbarung–Schrift–Überlieferung,” *Trierer theologische Zeitschrift* 67 (1958): 13–27.

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger, “Revelation and Tradition,” in idem, *Revelation and Tradition* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1966).

¹⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵ Ibid., 36.

¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971, 1989), 68.

¹⁷ D. Moody Smith, “When Did the Gospels Become Scripture?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000): 3–20; Francis Moloney, “The Gospel of John as Scripture,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005): 454–68.

¹⁸ Ratzinger, “Revelation and Tradition,” 39.

¹⁹ Ibid., 40.

²⁰ This statement can find a remarkable echo in the work of some Lutheran theologians who maintain that this is Luther’s position as well. See Karl Braaten and Robert Jensen, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

saving power.”²¹ On a broader scale it also means that the Pauline expression “Body of Christ”

implies that the community of the faithful, the Church, represents Christ’s continued abiding in this world in order to gather men into, and make them share, his mighty presence. . . . It also follows that the presence of Revelation is essentially connected with the two realities “faith” and “Church,” which themselves, as is now clear, are closely connected.²²

The fourth and most fully developed thesis has to do with “the nature of tradition.” The basic principle stems from the fact that the reality of Revelation is in excess (*Überhang*) of Scripture.²³ Revelation itself, the explicitation of the Christ reality, has its double yet single enduring presence in faith and in the Church; and it occurs in the preaching that is an unfolding of what is presented, first in the Old Testament and then in the New Testament: It is also an interpretation of the Christ-event itself on the basis of the Pneuma. “But it is precisely in this Church that Christ is living and present; in the Church which is his Body in which his Spirit is active.”²⁴ The move to include the Gentiles, thus moving from “Kingdom” to “Church,” “opened out that new interpretation of the message of Christ which is the essential message of the Church.”²⁵ After discussing the “Old Testament theology of the Old Testament” (a series of new readings of older texts),²⁶ the “New Testament theology of the Old Testament” (basically its “spiritual sense”),²⁷ and the “New Testament theology of the New Testament” (established by looking at successive expressions of the Mystery), Ratzinger arrives at what he calls the “Church theology of the New Testament.” By this latter he means the continuation of that successive process already begun in the New Testament itself but now no longer

²¹ Ratzinger, “Revelation and Tradition,” 41.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 45.

²⁴ Ibid., 42.

²⁵ Ibid. For an appreciation of this initiative of the Holy Spirit, see F. Bovon, *De Vocatione Gentium: Histoire de l'interprétation d'Act. 10:1–11:18 dans les six premiers siècles*, vol. 8 of *Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1967); and Brant Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile: Restoration Eschatology and the Origin of the Atonement* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck/Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

²⁶ For an excellent account of this procedure, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

²⁷ See Francis Martin, “The Spiritual Sense (*Sensus Spiritualis*) of Sacred Scripture,” in *Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word*, Francis Martin (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2006).

canonical. Ratzinger calls this “dogmatic theology” and then goes on to specify that “in a precise sense we could designate only dogma as such as the Church’s theology of the New Testament.”²⁸

Finally, the essay develops here the three “sources” (*Wurzeln*) of tradition. The first we have already seen: The excess of the reality of Revelation over Scripture. The second is: “The specific character of New Testament Revelation as *pneuma* as opposed to *gramma* and, consequently, what one might call in Bultmann’s terminology the impossibility of objectifying it.”²⁹ From this comes the fact that the Rule of Faith has a guiding priority in interpretation. The return to this position, notably on the part of several evangelical scholars, challenges the opinion that the Scriptures can be understood from within any context provided that the correct methods are rigorously applied. This challenge is multiform. It comes from those who appeal to the Rule of Faith as the ultimate, interpretive norm,³⁰ or more generally, to the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church,³¹ or finally to the multiform presence of the Word in the Church.³² The third source is given as:

The character of the Christ-event as present and the authoritative enduring presence of Christ’s Spirit in his Body the Church and, connected with this, the authority to interpret Christ yesterday in relation to Christ today, the origin of which we have observed in the Church’s reinterpretation by the apostles of the message of the kingdom.³³

Ratzinger goes on to enumerate the “levels” of tradition:

1. the original *paradosis* made by the Father of his Son who continues this action as judgment and gift of salvation and remains in the whole of his mystery in the Church. This superabundant *tradition* remains “the decisive fundamental reality which is antecedent to all particular

²⁸ Ratzinger, “Revelation and Tradition,” 45.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ For example, see Robert W. Wall, “Reading the Bible from Within Our Traditions: The ‘Rule of Faith’ in Theological Hermeneutics,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 88–107.

³¹ David S. Yeago, “The Bible, The Church, and the Scriptures: Biblical Inspiration and Interpretation Revisited,” in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, ed. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 49–93.

³² Leo Scheffczyk, “Sacred Scripture: God’s Word and the Church’s Word,” *Communio* 28 (2001): 26–41.

³³ Ratzinger, “Revelation and Tradition,” 45.

expressions of it, even those of Scripture, and which represents what in fact what has been handed down.”³⁴

2. The presence in faith of the indwelling Christ.
3. The organ of tradition is the authority of the Church, that is, those who have authority within it: These are the “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers” spoken of in Ephesians 4:11 whose authority is diverse but real.
4. The expression of tradition as the Rule of Faith.

Finally, we must consider exegesis, or interpretation, whose basic principle is that “Revelation becomes present through preaching” and therefore that “tradition by its very nature is always interpretation, does not exist independently, but only as exposition, interpretation ‘according to the scriptures.’”³⁵ In another place, commenting on *Dei Verbum*, Joseph Ratzinger has this to say about tradition:

We can see here how little intellectualism and doctrinalism are able to comprehend the nature of Revelation which is not concerned with talking *about* something that is quite external to the person, but with the realization of the existence of man, with the relation of the human “I” to the divine “thou,” so that the purpose of this dialogue is ultimately not information but unity and transformation.³⁶

This must, of course, be balanced by the insistence that the Church’s witness is linked to an exegesis that “investigates the literal sense, and so guards the link with the *sarx* of the Logos in opposition to all *gnosis* . . . defending the *sarx* of history against the caprice of *gnosis* which perpetually seeks to establish its own autonomy.”³⁷ The Church performs this function in virtue of the right of *prescriptio*: The Church is the rightful owner of Scripture (Tertullian). This raises the issue of the delicate balance between the Rule of Faith, and the historically ascertainable literal sense of Scripture in confrontation with those types of *gnosis* that seek either to claim a “higher” knowledge on the basis of modern historical study or to bypass such historical work in the name of a “spiritual” understanding. The key is a restored understanding of human cognition and of faith as a

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 47.

³⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, “Revelation Itself,” commentary on chapter 1 of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 175.

³⁷ Ratzinger, “Revelation and Tradition,” 48, 49.

way of knowing. Some approaches to this were made by *Dei Verbum*, but the crucial question of how the Church uses Scripture to correct the exuberances of “tradition” has yet to be thoroughly considered.³⁸

The Church as “I”

There is, moreover, one other aspect of the Church as subject that must be considered here, and that is the relation between the individual “I” and the “I” of the Whole Christ. Perhaps the best place to appreciate this aspect of Ratzinger’s thought is the essay we have considered already: “The Spiritual Basis and Ecclesial Identity of Theology.”³⁹ In that essay, the starting point is Galatians 2:20, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,” whose meaning is expanded as follows:

It is a death-event. In other words, it is an exchange of the old subject for another. The “I” ceases to be an autonomous subject standing in itself. It is snatched away from itself and fitted into a new subject. The “I” is not simply submerged, but it must really release its grip on itself in order then to receive itself anew in and together with a new “I.”⁴⁰

The new “I” spoken of here is the *una persona mystica*. It is the Christ who, through baptism, is “put on” with the result that now “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is not male and female, for you are all one [singular masculine] in Christ” (Gal 3:8). This “one man” can be called “the Christ”: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with the Christ” (1 Cor 12:2, see also 1:13). This one man both possesses and receives the form (*typos*) of teaching to which we are entrusted and to which we give obedience from the heart (Rom 6:17). Jesus Christ is the one who as God incarnate is the Source of the Body’s life, he is the one who animates our prayer and understanding, and who prays for us. As Augustine declares:

³⁸ Though it is not our matter here, it is worthwhile pointing out that Ratzinger appreciates the fact that Vatican II did not advance the discussion as to how tradition can be criticized: “On this point Vatican II has unfortunately not made any progress, but more or less has ignored the whole question of the criticism of tradition.” (Ratzinger, “Revelation Itself,” 185). In another study, I have tried to point out that, in fact, Vatican II did redirect tradition but without offering any theoretical basis. See “*Dei Verbum*: Revelation and Its Transmission” to appear in *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

³⁹ In Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission*, 45–72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

When we speak to God, praying, we do not separate the Son from Him; and when the Body of the Son prays, it does not separate its head from itself. Thus it is he, the one Savior of his Body, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who prays for us and prays in us and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our Head, he is prayed to by us as our God. Let us then, recognize our voice in his and his voice in ours.⁴¹

In bringing this section to a close, I wish to give here a striking paragraph, found as the concluding statement to the remarkable study by Emile Mersch, *The Whole Christ*. It is, as far as I can judge, a perfectly adequate way of expressing Joseph Ratzinger's understanding of the Church, and the Church as the subject of biblical understanding:

The message is this: in the Church, which is the continuation of Christ, there exists between the Incarnate Word and each Christian more than any bond of love, however ardent, more than relation of resemblance, however close, more than the bond of total dependence that binds to their one Savior all men who have received the grace of pardon and sanctification. There is something more than the union of subjects to any king, more than the insecure incorporation of members in an organism, more than the closest moral union. There is a "physical" union, we should say, if the very term itself did not appear to place this bond in the category of mere natural unions. At all events it is a real, ontological union, or, since the traditional names are still the best, it is a mystical, transcendent, supernatural union whose unity and reality exceed our powers of expression; it is a union that God alone can make us understand, as He alone was able to bring it into being.⁴²

The Church as Subject in the Letter to the Ephesians

It will be useful at this point to turn briefly to a New Testament writing that speaks of the Church, the Body of Christ, in terms that can reinforce the teaching of Joseph Ratzinger and help us to understand the Church as a knowing subject. I will concentrate on the first sixteen verses of chapter 4 of the Letter to the Ephesians since it is there particularly that we can be instructed on the intimate relation between Revelation and unity.

Ephesians 4:7–16

This passage is the second paragraph in a major section (Eph 4:1–6:20) titled by Rudolf Schnackenburg, "Realising Christian Existence in Church

⁴¹ In Psalm 85, 1 (*Corpus Christianorum Latinorum* 39, 1176 [Turnholt: Brepols, 1956]).

⁴² Emile Mersch, *The Whole Christ: The Historical Development of the Doctrine of the Mystical Body in Scripture and Tradition*, trans. John R. Kelly (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1938), 584.

and World.”⁴³ The passage we are going to consider (4:1–16) is titled “The Church as the Sphere of Christian Existence.” Its first part (4:1–6) addresses the urgent question of Church unity, which it ultimately grounds in the Trinity itself. The second part, which we will reflect upon (4:7–16), speaks of the variety of gifts bestowed on the Body by the ascended Christ, then of the danger of division as well as its remedy: arriving “at the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, unto the Perfect Man, unto the measure of the stature of the Fullness of Christ” (v. 13).

Ephesians 4:7–16 applies the Trinitarian foundation of Church unity, set forth in Ephesians 4:1–6, to the multiplicity of gifts in a way similar to the development in 1 Corinthians 12:7–30. However the accent here is on the resurrected Christ being the source of the gifts and his action in bringing about unity through joining all believers more closely to himself. The text begins with a principle: “To each of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (v. 7). It goes on to unveil for us the source of that donation of life-giving activity:

Therefore it says: “Going up to the height, he captured captives, he gave gifts to men.” This, “he went up,” what is it except that he also descended to the lower part of the earth? The one who descended is also the one who went up, above all the heavens, that he might fill all things. (vv. 8–10)

The “grace” mentioned in the enunciation of the principle, it is generally agreed, refers to those special graced endowments given to each believer for the building of the Body. They are distributed by Christ himself according to the measure he wills. In order to explicate how Christ distributes these and other blessings, Paul appeals to the authority and fruitfulness of the transformed Christ, now “divinized” in his humanity by the resurrecting power of the Father: “the surpassing greatness of his power, for us the believers, in keeping with the operation of the might of his strength which he carried out in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in heaven” (Eph 1:19–20). We celebrate this ineffable mystery on the feast of the Ascension.⁴⁴

⁴³ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Commentary*, trans. Helen Heron (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 5.

⁴⁴ For a study of the mystery of the humanity of Christ now present to God in a new way, see Pierre Benoit, “The Ascension,” in idem, *Jesus and the Gospel*, vol. 1 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1973). For another understanding of this text, see W. Hall Harris, *The Descent of Christ: Ephesians 4:7–11 and Traditional Hebrew Imagery* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996).

Paul presents the risen Jesus as the source of “grace” in the Church by adapting a Jewish interpretation of Psalm 68:19. The notion of ascending on high and thus being able to confer gifts on men is contained explicitly in the targum on this psalm verse: “You ascended the firmament, prophet Moses, you took captivity captive, you learned the words of the law; you gave them as gifts to the sons of man.”

The actual text of the *targum* of the Psalms is late, probably fourth or fifth century, but some form of this *targum* must have been known to Paul who cites it nearly verbatim. Moreover, a text that so perfectly corresponds to the Christian use made of it by Paul and other parts of the New Testament can hardly have been forged or even retained by Judaism unless it were already firmly fixed in the tradition.⁴⁵ The tradition concerning Moses going up to heaven to receive the law is a development of the biblical notice (Ex 19, 32, 32–34) that relates Moses’ special meetings with God that resulted in his coming down from the mountain with the gift of the law.⁴⁶ It is this tradition that forms the basis for the targumic text just cited, and that is utilized in Romans 10:6–8. The same image lies behind Acts 2:33 whose theme is close to that here in Ephesians: “Exalted to the right hand of God, receiving the promise, the Holy Spirit, from the Father, he poured him out: that is what you see and hear.”

The explanation of the use of this Jewish tradition is given now by Paul, using the two key words “ascend” and “descend.” Jesus’ ascension according to Paul is not from the foot of a mountain, but from the abode of the dead: “[W]hat is it except that he also descended to the lower part of the earth?” (Eph 4:9). Thus is it that the ascension is not to the top of a mountain but “above all the heavens” (v. 10). The consequence is not a carrying back of the gift of the Torah but “that he might fill all things” (v. 10). This allusion to the theme of *plērōma*, refers to the fact that in Ephesians, the Church, the Body of Christ, is the recipient of the divinizing activity of the Risen Christ: It is the place of union and action. In

⁴⁵ For instance, TgNe of Dt 30, 12–14, reads: “The law is not in the heavens, that one should say: Would that we had one like Moses the prophet who go up to heaven and fetch it for us, and make us hear the commandments that we might do them. Nor is the law beyond the great sea that one should say: Would that we had one like Jonah the prophet who descend into the great sea and bring up the law for us, and make us hear the commandments that we might do them. For the word is very near to you, in the word of your mouths and in your hearts, that you may do it” (compare Rom 10:5–10).

⁴⁶ There are some developments of this tradition, in which it is said that God “inclined the heavens and came down” to speak to Moses (See Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities*, 15, 6; 4 Esd 3:18).

brief it is the subject, the receiver of and active participant in, Christ's action as both God and man.

And it is he who gave some [to be] apostles, some [to be] prophets, some [to be] evangelists, some [to be] pastors and teachers, with a view to equipping the holy ones for the work of service, for the building of the Body of Christ until we all arrive at the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, unto the Perfect Man, unto the measure of the stature of the Fullness of Christ.

So that we might be children no longer, wave-tossed and carried along by every wind of teaching through men's trickery, in [their] cunning ability for the scheming of error. Rather, being truthful in love, let us in every way grow unto him who is the Head, Christ; from whom the whole Body being fitted together and connected through every joint which gives it support, in keeping with the effective action, done in the measure of each individual part, is bringing about the growth of the Body, for its own upbuilding in love. (Eph 4:11–16)

The Graces Conferred by Christ

It is extremely important to note that the five "graces" mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 all have to do with what Joseph Ratzinger calls "the organs of faith": apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. The object of these ministries is "to equip the holy ones for the work of service," each person having their own endowment "for the building of the Body of Christ."⁴⁷ Thus, from the outset there is order in the Body of Christ and ministerial gifts that have a directive role in regard to the activity of the whole Body. This "building" activity of the risen Christ continues until we all arrive at the unity of faith; the knowledge of the Son of God; the Perfect Man, unto the measure of the stature of the Fullness of Christ. This corresponds to the description in *Dei Verbum*, article 8, which, as we have seen describes the "progress" of the Apostolic Tradition taking place by contemplation, study, and experience on the part of the whole Church, and the particular role of the successors of the apostles.

The atmosphere created by the unity of faith produces the second effect: "knowledge of the Son of God." The process of coming to this knowledge on both a personal and ecclesiastical level is traced out in the

⁴⁷ Several commentators wish to see in the notion of "equipping" and "building" an extension of the original ministry of the five expressly named leaders rather than a description of the *effect* of their activity in regard to the rest of the community. This is not necessary, makes it difficult to understand why the author says that this activity continues "until *we all* arrive . . .," and renders the expression in verse 16, that the Body is "building itself up in love," difficult to understand.

concluding lines of the first part of the letter, Ephesians 3:14–21, especially the first six verses in which Paul speak of his prayer to:

The Father from whom every family, in heaven and on earth, is named, that he give to you, in keeping with the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power through his Spirit unto the inner man; that Christ dwell, through faith, in your hearts, rooted and grounded in love; so that you may be strong enough to comprehend, with all the holy ones, what [is] the width and length and height and depth; thus to know the love of Christ surpassing knowledge, that you may be filled unto all the Fullness of God. (Eph 3:14–19)

The prayer is to the Father from whom every family is named, accenting his all powerful will to confer life. The object of the prayer is twofold: that we be strengthened interiorly⁴⁸ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that Christ dwell in our hearts by faith; thus enabling us to be rooted and grounded in love. The passage speaks of “power” because this is the means by which our wounded and weak nature is actually transformed as we yield to the interior action of the Holy Spirit. As Cardinal Ratzinger says: “It is here that the poles of human subjectivity and the uniqueness of the person of Christ are resolved in the concrete subject of the Church.”⁴⁹

A further goal of the action of the holy ones mentioned in Ephesians 4:13 is that we, as Church, arrive at being “the Perfect Man, unto the measure of the stature of the Fullness of Christ.” In terms of the prayer in Ephesians 3:19, it means that we come to know the love of Christ surpassing knowledge and to be filled unto all the Fullness of God. The phrase in Ephesians 4:13, “the stature of the Fullness of Christ,” refers to becoming fully Church, an eschatological reality when the Church will receive all the divine life and gifts that flow into it from its Head, Christ. The phrase in Ephesians 3:19, “be filled unto all the Fullness of God” looks at the same reality from the viewpoint of Christ himself who is “the Fullness of God,” the divine and infinite recipient of the gift the Father makes of himself within the life of the Trinity. Now, by the mystery of the incarnation, Jesus Christ himself is in some mysterious way the Fullness (*Plērōma*) of the Father, as the one in whom the *Plērōma* of the Deity dwells bodily (Col 2:9), and the Church, his Body, is the created recipient of that divine life.

The final two verses of this section portray, on the other hand, the role of truth in bringing the whole Church to maturity.

⁴⁸ A determination of the exact meaning of *esō anthrōpos* exceeds our needs in this present context.

⁴⁹ Ratzinger, “*Deus Locutus Est*,” 23.

Rather, being truthful in love, let us in every way grow unto him who is the Head, Christ; from whom the whole Body being fitted together and brought into connection, through every sustaining juncture according to the action, [done] in the measure of each individual part, is bringing about the growth of this [same] Body, unto the building of itself up in love. (Eph 4:15–16)

The participle *alētheuontes*, translated as “being truthful,” refers on one level to truthful speech and action that flows from union with Christ. It is here contrasted with the falsehood that is keeping Christians immature and divided. The full meaning of the phrase *alētheuontes en agapē* refers to a deep yielding to “the truth in Jesus” (Eph 4:21),⁵⁰ and letting him actually become the living source of our energy and life. The nature of that activity is now described by a partial comparison between the activity of the head in a human body, as this was then understood, and the action of Christ as head of his Body. Going beyond the physiology of the day Paul speaks of a causality that flows from the risen Christ (see already Phil 3:21) that confers growth on the Body, that provides life and movement though in such a way that it is working “within each individual part.” Maturity, therefore, is the work of the Spirit conferred by Christ upon each believer bringing each one into a deeper union with the risen Son of God in such a way that the Body builds itself up in love. Mystical awareness of this process is what Paul means by “knowledge of the Son of God.” Such a knowledge belies in its own way the non-transcendent bias of much modern reflection on cognition, and it is to that aspect of Joseph Ratzinger’s thought that we now turn.

The Second Principle: Faith Is a Way of Knowing

“The act of faith essentially consists in an act of knowing; that is its formal or specific perfection; this is clear from what its object is.”⁵¹ This splendidly dense statement of Aquinas may be made clear by the remark of

⁵⁰ J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd ed. (London: MacMillan and Co., 1922), 107: “Paul uses the name ‘Jesus’ by itself when he wishes emphatically to point to the historic personality of the Christ. And this is plainly his intention in the present passage. The message which he proclaimed was this: The Christ has come: in the person of Jesus—the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus—He has come, not only as the Messiah of the Jews, but as the hope of all mankind. In this Jesus is embodied the truth: and so the truth has come to you. You have learned the Christ; him you have heard, in him you have been taught, even as the truth is in Jesus.”

⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 2, ad 10: “Ad decimum dicendum, quod actus fidei essentialiter consistit in cognitione, et ibi est eius perfectio quantum ad formam vel speciem; quod patet ex obiecto, ut dictum est; sed quantum ad finem perficitur in affectione, quia ex caritate habet quod sit meritoria finis.”

Joseph Ratzinger that, "To know the person of Christ is the foundation of theology."⁵² Applied to the topic at hand, we see that the understanding of Scripture is the work of faith seeking understanding; and that is something that far exceeds that kind of biblical criticism that is, to use George Steiner's expression, "words about words."⁵³

Dei Verbum, article 8, presupposes that "faith is a way of knowing" and at the same time places this principle in the context of the growth of Tradition the growth of which, as has been already observed, it understands to be a combination of the increased knowledge of all the members of the Body of Christ and the preaching of those with the episcopal charism.⁵⁴ It is important to note in this text how Vatican Council II places this reality within the life of the Whole Christ that is presented as the subject of interpretation:

The Tradition which is from the Apostles makes progress in the Church under the assistance of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵ There is a growth in understanding, both of the realities as well as of the words that have been handed on. This takes place as a result of the contemplation and study of the believers who ponder these things in their heart (see Lk 2:19, 51), as well as by the intimate knowledge of the spiritual realities which they experience, and by the preaching of those who have received with episcopal succession, the sure charism of truth. Thus, as the centuries advance, the Church continually moves toward the plenitude of divine truth until the words of God reach their fulfillment in her. (*Dei Verbum*, no. 8)

The ministries enumerated in Ephesians 4:11 as "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers," ultimately derive from, are sustained by, serve, and direct that whole body of the faithful whose growth in understanding, achieved through "contemplation and study" and an "intimate knowledge of the spiritual realities which they experience" is the source of the growth of Tradition.

⁵² Ratzinger, "*Deus Locutus Est*," 21.

⁵³ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 1991). Elsewhere in the same study he says, "It is the break of the covenant between word and world which constitutes one of the very few genuine revolutions of spirit in Western history and which defines modernity itself" (93).

⁵⁴ It will be helpful here to return to Ratzinger's statement to the effect that, "Tradition then exists concretely as presence in faith, which again, as in the indwelling of Christ, is antecedent to all its particular explicit formulations and is fertile and living, thus developing and unfolding throughout the ages." *Revelation and Tradition*, 46.

⁵⁵ See Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*, ch. 4 (Denz. 1800 [3020]).

I wish now to reflect briefly on what is meant by the words “understanding” (*perceptio*), “intimate knowledge” (*intima intelligentia*), and “experience” (*experiuntur*). All of these expressions are a forthright rejection of that theological attitude once described by Romano Guardini as “a liberalism kept in check by obedience to dogma,”⁵⁶ and which are indebted to a Kantian understanding of cognition. The council has reiterated the fact that faith is a way of knowing, and this obliges us to look more deeply into the questions of knowledge and language. I will first present a few lines in order to elucidate Joseph Ratzinger’s frequently reiterated position that “faith is a way of knowing,” and then proceed to look at knowledge as both imitation and word, that is, as the reality itself transposed through the act of knowledge and communication. In order to accomplish this, I will reconsider the ancient understanding of knowledge as this has been recovered and advanced in the modern appreciation of language and knowledge.

Ratzinger on Modern Cognition Theories and Biblical Interpretation

One of Joseph Ratzinger’s most trenchant criticisms of the cognition theories that lie at the root of much biblical interpretation is to be found in his 1989 essay, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” published the same year in German and in English. The occasion for the English text was the Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church.⁵⁷ Early in his presentation, Ratzinger observes that historical criticism of the Bible labors under many of the erroneous presuppositions of modern historical investigation, especially the notion that history is a “science” in the same way as the empirical sciences.⁵⁸ A diachronic analysis of the results of the method can show unmistakably that, after two centuries, contrary to the positive sciences, there are few if any assured results that have become a common basis for progress.⁵⁹ In addition, modern fascination with an understanding of history as temporal linear succession has eliminated the biblical vision of history as the working out of God’s plan of salvation:

⁵⁶ Romano Guardini, *Berichte über mein Leben: Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1984, 4th edition), 33, cited by Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission*, 47, n. 5.

⁵⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and the Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

If we are to understand modern exegesis and critique it correctly, we simply must return and reflect anew on Luther's view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In place of the analogy model which was then current, he substituted a dialectical structure.⁶⁰

We must also note that, while there has been a continuity in the historical analysis of the biblical text, it lies not so much in a settled body of agreed upon results as in the perdurance of philosophical presuppositions at work in what is called historical reason.⁶¹

The real philosophic presupposition of the whole system seems to me to lie in the philosophic turning point proposed by Immanuel Kant. According to him, the voice of being-in-itself cannot be heard by human beings. Man can only hear it indirectly in the postulates of practical reason, which have remained, as it were, the small opening through which he can make contact with the real, that is, his eternal destiny.⁶²

In theological terms, this means that Revelation must recede into the pure formality of the eschatological stance, which corresponds to the Kantian split. As far as everything else is concerned, it all needs to be "explained." What might otherwise seem like a direct proclamation of the divine can only be myth, whose laws of development can be discovered. It is with this basic conviction that Bultmann, along with the majority of modern exegetes, read the Bible. He is certain that it cannot be the way it is depicted in the Bible, and he looks for methods to prove the way it really had to be. To that extent there lies in modern exegesis a reduction of history into philosophy, a revision of history by means of philosophy.⁶³

I recognize, of course, that many exegetes would object that they do not practice their scholarship under the aegis of a Kantian epistemology. Some, through loyalty to the Church tradition, have intuitively gone beyond the limits and presuppositions of their method, but they have not directly confronted the challenge offered here in Joseph Ratzinger's assessment. One reason, perhaps, is that the whole field of cognition theory has itself been dominated by Kantian thinking as well as reactions to it that do not manage to shake themselves free from the image of the knower as

⁶⁰ Ibid., 12. On the importance of the ancient understanding of the "spiritual sense" of Scripture and the view of history it implies, one might consult Martin, "The Spiritual Sense."

⁶¹ Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 14.

⁶² Ibid., 15. For an account of Marburg neo-Kantianism and its influence on Bultmann, see Roger A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing: Philosophy and Heterology in the Theology of Rudolph Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

⁶³ Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 16.

an isolated unit responsible for the forging of personal meaning.⁶⁴ Another reason is the vastness of the enterprise:

The scholarly search to find a better synthesis between the historical and critical methods, between higher criticism and Church doctrine is hardly a recent phenomenon. This can be seen from the fact that hardly anyone today would assert that a truly pervasive understanding this whole problem has yet been found. . . . At least the work of a whole generation is necessary to achieve such a thing.⁶⁵

In the few lines that follow I wish to contribute to this work of a generation by reflecting on two realities that have suffered a false separation, namely knowledge and language and by proposing that knowledge is not effected by a determining subject knowing a passive object, and that consequently language is not the naming of a private acquisition.

Knowledge as Imitation

Because God's "motive" in creating is *agapē*, there is present in creation what Jacques Maritain calls "the basic generosity of existence."⁶⁶ Aquinas reflects this intuition when he states that, "From the very fact that something exists in act, it is active."⁶⁷ In a remarkable passage, obviously indebted to Denys's treatise on *The Divine Names*, Aquinas moves from the observation of the "generosity" of all beings to an understanding of the generosity of their Source. Note how this vision of reality follows upon the biblical teaching that God's act of creation is totally free and adds nothing to God:⁶⁸

For natural things have a natural inclination not only toward their own proper good, to acquire it, if not possessed, and if possessed, to rest therein; but also to diffuse their own goodness among others as far as possible. . . . Hence if natural things, insofar as they are perfect, communicate their goodness to others, much more does it pertain to the divine will to communicate by likeness its own goodness to others as far as possible.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ See, for instance, Kenneth Schmitz, "Postmodern or Modern-Plus?" *Communio* 17 (1990): 152–66.

⁶⁵ Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 5–6.

⁶⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 90.

⁶⁷ *Summa contra Gentiles*, 2, 7.

⁶⁸ In this section I am using material that can be found in chapter 6 of my study, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁶⁹ *ST I*, q. 19, a. 2, quoted in W. Norris Clarke, "Person, Being, and St. Thomas," *Communio* 19 (1992): 604. All quotations of St. Thomas in this section are translations of W. Norris Clarke from his article.

If we apply this notion to the act of knowledge, we may say that the very act of existing is a communicable perfection that is bestowed on the knower by what is known. This understanding of the manner in which all entities can imitate God not only eliminates the isolation of foundationalism, which leaves to the knowing subject the sole task of conferring intelligibility, it also shows the universe to be a place characterized by relation: "Communication follows upon the very intelligibility [*ratio*] of actuality. Hence every form is of itself communicable."⁷⁰

There is a certain generosity in effective activity; it is sharing, not coercion. This is especially noticeable in the act of knowing. The mind is not a dominating principle imposing intelligibility from its own resources, nor is the object known through an act by which it coerces the mind to produce its "representation." There is a "nuptial relation." Truth is not primarily in the proposition, but rather in the "original concord between thing and intellect," in the "resonant symmetry of knower and known."⁷¹ Rather, knowing takes place in the receptive and creative imitation of reality effected by the mind. Being shares in the generosity of God, it is diffusive of itself. Mind, while it fashions the entity according to its own energy, can only do so as fecundated by the entity itself, which, far from passively receiving intelligibility, actively imparts its reality to the mind. There is no "foundation" either in the subjectivity of the knower, deriving all certitude from a seemingly unassailable experience, or in the thing known that requires to be known in order to be actually intelligible. Both are principles communicating actuality, and both are receivers needing union in order for truth to exist.

The original truth, spoken of previously, the union between the mind and what is known, is only possible because what is known is "imitated" by the mind. To imitate is to transpose a reality to another plane of existence. If, in response to a request that I imitate the chair in my room, I make another chair, I have not imitated—I have reproduced. To imitate the chair I must transpose it to the level of word or line and color or some other and different mode of being. Thus, in the act of knowledge, the energy by which being is imitated derives both from the dynamism

⁷⁰ SCG 3, 64. As W. Norris Clarke expresses it: "It turns out, then, that relationality and substantiality go together as two distinct but inseparable modes of reality. Substance is the primary mode, in that all else, including relations, depend on it as their ground. But since 'every substance exists for the sake of its operations,' as St. Thomas has just told us, being as substance, as existing *in itself*, naturally flows over into being as relational, turned *toward others* by its self-communicating action. *To be is to be substance in relation.*" Clarke, "Person, Being," 607, original emphasis.

⁷¹ Kenneth Schmitz, "Neither With Nor Without Foundations," *Review of Metaphysics* 42 (1988): 15.

of the substance in relation and that particular way in which I, as a knower, share in the dynamic light of God, a light that, even apart from faith, St. Thomas does not hesitate to call “a certain imprint of the divine light.”⁷² It should also be noted that, while this action takes place in the mind, it is the whole body person who knows, who imitates.

Thus, from the two points established, the dynamic and relational character of being, on the one hand, and the mutually active and receptive nature of the act of knowing, we are able to appreciate that knowledge is neither with nor without foundations. The bias to replace commonality by a systemic totality swallows the irreducible nature of the individual in context by making it correspond to a prefabricated structure. Furthermore, the bias to replace being by thought sacrifices a confidence in creation to the anxiety of isolation. When these biases are surrendered, logic’s need for a starting point is recognized as both valid and limited, but it is clearly recognized as pertaining to second-order discourse. Clarity in this regard has been achieved not in spite of, but precisely because of the turn to the subject. It is a metaphysical achievement nurtured by a biblical sense of the manner in which all that is created shares in the dynamism and generosity of the Creator. The act of knowledge is thus, under this aspect, an imitative sharing in the creating act of God. But there is more, it is, in a profound sense an imitation of the procession of the Word: “The Word of God comes to man everyday, present in the human voice.”⁷³

Knowledge as Word

“When the *verbum cordis* is constituted the intellect actively thinks what it knows; the internal word is knowledge come to life in the mind. A still further dimension is reached in external speech, the audible use of language, whose function is to express publicly the *verbum cordis*.”⁷⁴ This statement of Robert Sokolowski contains most of the key notions necessary for the reestablishing of what, as we have seen, George Steiner referred to as “the covenant between word and world.”⁷⁵ In the preceding section, I analyzed knowledge as an imitative act performed by the person in and through the mind. I now wish to look more closely at the

⁷² *ST* I, q. 12, a. 11, ad 3; I–II, q. 91, a. 2.

⁷³ Hugh of St. Victor, *The Word of God*, I, 2–3 (Paris: Sources Chrétiennes, 155, 60).

⁷⁴ Robert Sokolowski, “The Agent of Truth: Phenomenology of the Human Person” (2006). This section of my own study is deeply indebted to Sokolowski’s, and I thank him for allowing me to use and cite his work, still in copyrighted manuscript, as I attempt to apply his insights to the task of biblical exegesis.

⁷⁵ George Steiner, *Real Presences*, 93.

act of imitation itself and observe how this act is intrinsically linked to language, to word.⁷⁶

General Considerations

Building upon his own understanding of the Platonic principle that “good is diffusive of itself,” St. Thomas reasons that since the act of existence is the foundation of all other perfections, indeed “the actuality of all acts and the perfection of all perfections,”⁷⁷ the diffusiveness of the good is rooted in the existence of a being; and it is thus that whatever exists manifests itself in the act of its existing.⁷⁸ Disclosure, therefore, involves both the created reality manifesting itself in and through the act of its existence and the creative receptivity of the mind that receives the act of the reality and gives it intelligibility, transposing it to the level of the knower. This energy, the capacity to receive and transpose, is what the ancient thinkers meant by the light of the mind. As we have already noted, Aquinas says of this interior light of reason that it is itself a “certain participation in divine light” (*ST* I, q. 12, a. 11, ad 3); it is, in fact, “nothing else but the imprint of the divine light in us” (*ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 2). He also says that the intensification and elevation of this light, which is the heart of *sacra doctrina*, the reception and transmission of prophetic knowledge, is also “a certain imprint of the divine knowledge” (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 3, ad 2).

From the side of the mind itself, according to Aquinas, there are three dimensions of our knowing that can be manifestations of God. The first of these is the knowledge implicit in every act of knowing: “All knowing beings implicitly know God in whatever they know. For just as nothing is desirable except as it bears a likeness to the First Goodness, so nothing is knowable except as it bears a likeness to the First Truth.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ In the paragraphs that follow I am utilizing material that can be found in my article, “Revelation as Disclosure: Creation,” in *Wisdom and Holiness, Science and Scholarship*, ed. Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, forthcoming).

⁷⁷ *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9. Translation is from W. Norris Clarke, “Action as the Self-Revelation of Being: A Central Theme in the Thought of St. Thomas,” in his *Explorations in Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 45–63.

⁷⁸ Later in the same essay (“Action as the Self-Revelation,” 63, n. 11), Clarke cites Karl Rahner: “Our first statement which we put forward as the basic principle of an ontology of symbolism, is as follows: all beings are by their very nature symbolic, because they necessarily ‘express’ themselves in order to attain their own nature.” Quoting Karl Rahner, “Theology of the Symbol,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 221–52.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 2, ad 1.

The second dimension of knowledge is intuition or *intellectus*. It consists in the presence of the thing known to the knower. In the very first article of *De veritate*, Aquinas, who is asking the question, “*Quid sit veritas?*” discusses the relation of being to the intellect. He makes the following statement:

True [*verum*] expresses the correspondence [*convenientia*] of being to the knowing power [*intellectus*], for all knowing is produced by an assimilation of the knower to the thing known, so that assimilation is said to be the cause of knowledge [*assimilatio dicta est causa cognitionis*]. Similarly, the sense of sight knows a color by being informed with a species of the color.⁸⁰

The first reference [*comparatio*] of being to the intellect, therefore, consists in its agreement with the intellect [*ut ens intellectui correspondeat*]. This agreement is called “the conformity of thing and intellect” [*adaequatio rei et intellectus*], and in this conformity is found the formal constituent of the true [*et in hoc formaliter ratio veri perficitur*], and this is what the true adds to being, namely, the conformity or equation of thing and intellect [*conformitatem seu adaequationem rei et intellectus*]. As we said, the knowledge of a thing is a consequence of this conformity [*ad quam conformitatem, ut dictum est, sequitur cognitio rei*]; therefore it is an effect of truth, even though the fact that it is a being is prior to its truth [*Sic ergo entitas rei praecedit rationem veritatis; sed cognitio est quaedam veritatis effectus*]. (*De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1. c.)

“Assimilation is the cause of knowledge.” And again, “knowledge of a thing is a consequence of the conformity of thing and intellect.” And since truth is precisely the “assimilation of the knower to the thing known,” it follows that “knowledge is a certain effect of truth.” It is at the ontological level that the act of knowing imitates, in a created manner, the procession of the Word in the Trinity, with this difference: In the Trinity, the Father produces the Word totally from within himself, he is the *principium Deitatis*,⁸¹ whereas the human being must first receive before

⁸⁰ It is important to advert to another principle of Aquinas: “*veritas fundatur in esse rei magis quam in ipsa quidditate*” (*In I Sent* d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, sol.). As David Bentley Hart remarks: “the adequation that truth is consists in an assimilation of the esse of any given thing, whereby it accepts each thing as it is.” David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 247.

⁸¹ For a discussion of this and similar expressions, see Yves Congar, “The Father, the Absolute Source of Divinity,” in *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 3 (New York: Seabury, 1983).

producing a word, for, as we have just seen, beings give themselves to us and modify us, thus establishing us in truth whose effect is knowledge.⁸²

The third dimension of knowledge is, then, reasoning (*ratiocinatio*), which is a movement of the mind made in the power of the original intuition by which new truth is acquired and consciously assimilated in judgment. It is a movement from what is less determinate to what is more determinate; from a determination of actuality to a determination of form. But this must not be understood as a unidirectional movement. What is acquired by reasoning can itself become another *intellectus*, for, as Aquinas says elsewhere, *intellectus* is not only the principle of reason, but also its term or goal.⁸³

Word

Robert Sokolowski has correctly observed that the act of knowing transpires as a *linguistic* act. Thus, by the fact that knowing takes place in and through a commonly held medium, namely, language, it is of its nature a public performance. The establishing of this fact and its relevance to the modern problem of cognition is one of the bases of Sokolowski's whole study. I will use some of his fundamental notions in order to untie the Kantian knot, which, as we have seen in Ratzinger's analysis, is the principal obstacle to a "synthesis between the historical and critical methods, between higher criticism and Church doctrine,"⁸⁴ that is, between an integration of the manner in which the Church as interpreting subject understands and lives Scripture and the proposals of modern historical reason. The key, as I understand it, is to show that words are not labels we give to an interior possession most often called "concepts." This understanding of "concept" leaves us with the insoluble problem of explaining the relation between these interior entities and the world in which we live. In terms of exegesis this split between word and world licenses one to interpret the word of the text as bearing all the meaning, while the "event" remains in the unknowable territory of the past, or is reinterpreted according to the reconstruction of the commentator. In this view, the account of the death and resurrection of Jesus, for instance, can be interpreted by the evangelists who express their interpretation based on their preoccupations and prejudices, and we have the right to do the same: Matthew or Crossan, take your pick.

⁸² Thus, it would seem that that knowledge which is the effect of truth must first be considered as *intellectus*, as Aquinas says in the *Summa contra Gentiles* (1, 57): "That which is supreme in our knowledge is not reason, but intellectus which is the source of reason."

⁸³ *In III Sent.* d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, sol. 2: "Intellectus est rationis principium et terminus."

⁸⁴ Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 5.

It is essential, then, as one of the first steps in integrating the ancient expressions of biblical reality with our historical reason to resolve the Kantian understanding of the act of knowledge, and its influence on much of the neo-scholastic interpretation of Aquinas. We have already ascertained that knowledge is a “nuptial event”: It involves the imparting to the knower something of the being of the other and the reception of that gift by the knower in an initial act. “For all knowing is produced by an assimilation of the knower to the thing known, so that assimilation is said to be the cause of knowledge. Similarly, the sense of sight knows a color by being informed with a species of the color” (Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1. c.). This “assimilation” is what Aquinas calls elsewhere *species intelligibilis*.

Besides being potential as receptive, the intellect is potential in the sense of being capable of acting, that is, it can generate an internal word. It needs, however, to be enabled to do so by being informed by an intelligible species. . . . Once it has been so formed the intellect can form its own conception or word: *formatus format*. The intellect therefore, is potential in being both receptive and active.⁸⁵

The key in understanding Aquinas’s teaching on knowledge is to grasp his attribution to the intellect of an energy by which what has been received and to which the intellect is assimilated achieves its reality of knowledge by being *worded*. This word, however, is not protolanguage; it is language: It is a statement formed by syntax that expresses a form of being. At the level of assimilation, there is presence, but not, strictly speaking, knowledge. For this to exist, there must be what Aquinas, following Augustine, calls a *verbum interius* or *verbum cordis* (also called a *conceptus* or *conceptio*). It is at this point that there is language and communicability, though all the activity is as yet immanent: “The internal word of the heart is what is signified by the exterior word. But the exterior word does not signify the intelligible species.”⁸⁶ The reason for Aquinas’s distinction regarding what the exterior word signifies lies in the difference in the mode of being of the internal word and the intelligible species: Knowledge takes place in and through an expression that has syntax, that is, one in which there is expressed explicitly or implicitly the notion of “to be.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Sokolowski, “The Agent of Truth,” 209.

⁸⁶ Quodlibet V, q. 5 a. 2, sc. This whole paragraph is indebted to Sokolowski, “The Agent of Truth,” 205–7.

⁸⁷ It should be noted that the “word” need not be merely a simple statement, it may be an abundant reality either actually expressed by several statements or virtually containing them as occurs in a significant insight.

Having forged a union once again between word and world—thanks to the teaching of Aquinas and others regarding the manner in which being gives itself to the knower who receives it and who gives it a properly human existence as word—we should turn our attention now to the modern contribution made by an understanding of syntax as such, since the “word” of which we speak is precisely the reality given a human level of existence because of syntax. With this step we will be enabled once again to receive the word of Scripture as communicating to us in a human way the divine realities that give life.

Syntax

In elaborating his understanding of syntax, Robert Sokolowski acknowledges the important influence of the work of Derek Bickerton.⁸⁸ After observing the four levels of language—protolinguistic, normal word use, declarative, and philosophical—Sokolowski notes, “Protolanguage is speech deprived of syntax, or speech that has not attained syntax. It is what we call ‘baby talk.’ In it the speaker indicates things, but only episodically.”⁸⁹ One of the characteristics of protolanguage is the paucity of verbs and thus of the linguistic markers that indicate and effect a specific intelligibility. Syntax, on the other hand, is the means by which reality in all its multiple and layered complexity presents itself to be known: It is not represented by concepts that are in turn represented by verbal expression, it is rather revealed in and through words. I wish to present now a long passage in Sokolowski’s study, with its passages from Bickerton, because this text can convey an intuitive understanding of how reality is mediated through language and serve as a response to the aporia created by subject-dominated cognition theory.

Language is an entirely different thing from protolanguage. It is not the case that protolanguage is only a more primitive stage of language; it is something else, an alternative to language, and not a simpler version of it: “The faculties of protolanguage and language are disjoint,”⁹⁰ Bickerton says, and “there can be no plausible intermediate stage between the two.”⁹¹ The difference between protolanguage and language is discrete

⁸⁸ Derek Bickerton, *Language and Species* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Derek Bickerton, *Language and Human Behavior* (Seattle: University of Seattle Press, 1995); William H. Calvin and Derek Bickerton, *Lingua ex Machina: Reconciling Darwin and Chomsky with the Human Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

⁸⁹ Sokolowski, “The Agent of Truth,” 22.

⁹⁰ Bickerton, *Language and Species*, 118.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 165.

and decisive: "Between protolanguage and language we find nothing."⁹² The major difference between them lies in the fact that language incorporates syntax and protolanguage does not: "Syntax is the magic key that unlocks the floodgates of language. . . ."⁹³ It is "the Rubicon."⁹⁴ Moreover, syntax is not just linear concatenation; what is special about it is its hierarchic and nesting structure: "The really crucial relationships in language are not horizontal but vertical. . . ."⁹⁵ Through syntax, phrases can be embedded inside other phrases, not just strung along one after the other. This embedding, this Russian-doll structure, permits the exquisite articulation that is radically different from the "one by one" sequencing of protolanguage. . . . In language, "phrases are not as they might appear to be, strung together serially, like beads on a string. Phrases are like Chinese boxes, stacked inside one another."⁹⁶ And Bickerton rightly concludes this remark by saying, "The importance of this point cannot be overestimated." In protolanguage we have sequences of ideas; but in language we have thoughts, and thoughts occur as embedded in larger thoughts.⁹⁷

If faith is a way of knowing, then faith is a way of wording. By returning to a more solid understanding of cognition and deepening this through an appreciation of the role of syntax in human-language expression, we have articulated, in regard to the Scriptures, what every believer knows by experience: that in all genuine, verbal communication what is mediated is the reality itself, not a notion of the reality. The stage is now set for a beginning in the work of synthesis called for by Joseph Ratzinger. To conclude, I would like to reflect on what lies ahead in this effort.

Concluding Reflections

The act of knowing is an instance of the "generosity of existence," by which creation participates in the nature of God and is, in its own way, *diffusivum sui*. Created reality thus calls out, as it were, to be known, not only by its Creator, but also by its fellow creatures. Man, through the whole activity of his spiritual/physical being, receives this call and, by a mysterious alchemy, accepts the gift of other creatures, transforms it by a process of imitation into something of himself, and then gives another

⁹² Bickerton, *Language and Human Behavior*, 71.

⁹³ Calvin and Bickerton, *Lingua ex Machina*, 52.

⁹⁴ Bickerton, *Language and Human Behavior*, 65. Calvin and Bickerton, *Lingua ex Machina*, 24: "In fact, as was apparent nearly two decades ago, the real Rubicon, unpalatable as it may be to the philosophically minded, is syntax not symbols."

⁹⁵ Calvin and Bickerton, *Lingua ex Machina: Reconciling Darwin and Chomsky with the Human Brain*, 140.

⁹⁶ Bickerton, *Language and Species*, 60.

⁹⁷ Sokolowski, "The Agent of Truth," 23.

level of being to what he knows through an act of wording, in an act by which, like Adam, the creature's being and identity are named and placed in the interlocking net of all being.

If this were not enough, God, who willingly allows himself to be known in this way and thus to enter the world of his creatures, has raised man to faith, to the ability to share, though darkly for now, in the knowledge God has of himself, and which he shares ineffably with the blessed.⁹⁸ The challenge that faces us now is to apply what has been gained in the area of knowing and wording, to the revelation God makes of himself in Christ, and in his Body, the Church, instructing us constantly through our share in the divine light that we call faith.

Since biblical interpretation is a matter of understanding the realities mediated to us by a text, we must attend to the *public* nature not only of discourse, but of the very act of wording itself which takes place by language. Understanding the thoroughly public nature of the process by which the worded reality reaches us in an act of communication remains a primary task of biblical interpretation, and provides insight into the fact that the Whole Christ is the subject of interpretation.⁹⁹ We must, moreover, remember that God teaches us uniquely through the Scriptures. Commenting on 2 Timothy 3:16, Aquinas asks why only the Scriptures should be considered divinely inspired since, according to Ambrose, "anything true, by no matter whom said, is from the Holy Spirit." His response is that God works in two ways, one that is immediate and this pertains to him alone (such as is the case with miracles), and one that is mediate, that is through the mediation of lesser causes (as is the case with natural operations). He then says: "And thus, in man, God instructs the intellect both immediately through the sacred letters and mediately through other writings."¹⁰⁰

There is further the very model of all "wording" in which by the grace of the "mission" of the Word, he proceeds in a participated way within us. It will be important in the future to imitate Augustine and Aquinas and look to what we can become in our knowing in order to understand knowledge itself, especially our knowledge of revelation. Think, for instance, of how our understanding of cognition is stretched when the word that proceeds in us is the Word himself.

It is necessary that the soul be conformed or assimilated to that Person (who is sent) through some gift of grace. . . . The Son, for his part, is the

⁹⁸ See *ST* I, q. 1, a. 2.

⁹⁹ I have hardly touched upon this important aspect of Sokolowski's contribution.

¹⁰⁰ In *1 Tim* 3, lect. 3 (Marietti ed. §812).

Word—and not just any word but a Word breathing forth love. Thus Augustine (bk. 9 of *De Trinitate*) says that “the Word we intend to make known is a knowledge filled with love.” For it is not by just any perfection of the intellect that the Son is sent, but only of that instruction by which it bursts forth in an affection of love as it says in John 6:45, “Whoever has heard from the Father and accepted his teaching comes to me.” . . . Augustine plainly says that the Son is sent when he is known and perceived. The word “perceived” signifies a kind of experiential knowledge.¹⁰¹

And finally, let us consider this text of Henri de Lubac when reflecting on what is available to us in the gift of the Sacred Scriptures:

Since Christian mysticism develops through the action of the mystery received in faith, and the mystery is the Incarnation of the Word of God revealed in Scripture, Christian mysticism is essentially an understanding of the holy books. The mystery is their meaning; mysticism is getting to know that meaning. Thus, one understands the profound and original identity of the two meanings of the word *mystique* that, in current French usage, seem so different because we have to separate so much in order to analyze them: the mystical or spiritual understanding of Scripture and the mystical or spiritual life are, in the end, one and the same.¹⁰²

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¹⁰¹ ST I, q. 43, a. 5, ad 2. I suspect that this teaching of Augustine is one of the places from which Aquinas drew, and because of which, in contradistinction to Aristotle, he posited the notion of wording in every act of knowledge, in much the same way as, in his teaching on our knowledge of God, (ST I, q. 12) he concentrates on beatific knowledge.

¹⁰² Henri de Lubac, “Mysticism and Mystery,” in idem, *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 58.