

Benedict XVI's Hermeneutic of Reform: Towards a Rapprochement of the Magisterium and Modern Biblical Criticism

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Introduction

EVEN A CURSORY OVERVIEW of Pope Benedict XVI's exegetical approach reveals dramatic contrasts with magisterial teaching of previous epochs. With appropriate reservations and criticisms, Benedict strongly advocates the use of modern scholarly methods to help Christians better discern the face of Christ revealed in Scripture. In adopting many of these modern findings, however, it almost seems as if Benedict has forgotten or neglected principles enforced by the magisterium no less than a century earlier. Though one may argue that the Church's stance on modern biblical scholarship only indirectly bears upon faith and morals, the issue remains timely today insofar as a divide persists in the Church concerning the extent to which it is appropriate to incorporate the tools and findings of modern exegesis in Catholic theology. Aside from Benedict's own comments on his project, it is difficult still today to find an adequate account of how exegesis under his pontificate is reconcilable with many of the venerable traditions that preceded it and, in particular, with a magisterial approach that generally viewed modern scholarship with skepticism.¹

¹ At the opposite extremes of this divide we find those to whom Benedict refers as "progressivists" and "traditionalists," who disagree with today's magisterium but agree with each other in viewing Catholic doctrine in the post-Vatican II Church as a rupture from what preceded it.

Benedict dedicated a significant portion of his scholarly life precisely in the endeavor to combat the false dichotomy between the pre-conciliar and post-conciliar Church and to develop a balanced hermeneutic that takes seriously the presence of both continuity and discontinuity in Catholic doctrine throughout the ages.² The aim of the present work is to face head-on patent discrepancies in the Church's approach to the Bible over the past century and, so doing, to offer the principles needed for a robust *apologia* of Catholicism in its relationship with modern biblical scholarship.³ The principles needed for this account are found in Benedict's "hermeneutic of reform" and its key endeavor to discern the permanent theological core of Catholic magisterial teachings that have withstood the vicissitudes of history and the challenges of the modern scholarly world.

Leo XIII and Pius X: Rejection of Higher Criticism

To get a sense of the magisterium's past attitude concerning the extent to which one can appropriate modern biblical scholarship, it is fitting to begin by examining the writings of two Pontiffs who wrote at the height of the modernist controversy, Pope Leo XIII and Pope St. Pius X. In his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, Leo criticized the rise of modern biblical scholarship in no uncertain terms: "There has arisen, to the great detriment of religion, an inept method, dignified by the name of the 'higher criticism,' which pretends to judge of the origin, integrity and authority of each Book from internal indications alone."⁴ Leo's words are harsh but reasonable enough, for in the discipline of history, it is proper to be cautious of adjudicating issues concerning texts without any reference to the witness of how they have been

² Of course, Benedict's career also includes writings antedating his pontificate. This article at times refers to the one man Ratzinger/Benedict by his surname and at other times by his papal name in the effort to distinguish writings composed during his pontificate from those preceding it.

³ For the sake of streamlining the various expressions Benedict employs to speak of the same reality, this essay refers to what is known as the "historical method," the "historical-critical method," "higher criticism," or "critical exegesis" under the umbrella term "modern biblical scholarship." This term indicates the modern scholarly approach to the Bible in general as distinct from the patristic-medieval approach, and it includes such methods as text, form, and redaction criticism. For a more in-depth discussion of what Benedict means by this, as well as what he considers to be its strengths and weaknesses, see Matthew J. Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 53–91.

⁴ Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), §17.

received and interpreted. Leo, however, goes farther than this: "It is clear, on the other hand, that in historical questions, such as the origin and the handing down of writings, the witness of history is of primary importance, and that historical investigation should be made with the utmost care; and that in this matter internal evidence is seldom of great value, except as confirmation."⁵ Why is internal evidence prized so little by Leo? With the rise of rationalism in his day, there was a legitimate fear of a slippery slope, the fear that accepting the methods and conclusions of modern criticism would lead to a loss of the sense of the Bible's sacredness and, ultimately, to the loss of the Christian faith itself:

To look upon it in any other light will be to open the door to many evil consequences. It will make the enemies of religion much more bold and confident in attacking and mangling the Sacred Books; and this vaunted "higher criticism" will resolve itself into the reflection of the bias and the prejudice of the critics. It will not throw on the Scripture the light which is sought, or prove of any advantage to doctrine; it will only give rise to disagreement and dissension, those sure notes of error, which the critics in question so plentifully exhibit in their own persons; and seeing that most of them are tainted with false philosophy and rationalism, *it must lead to the elimination from the sacred writings of all prophecy and miracle, and of everything else that is outside the natural order.*⁶

In the discussion of Benedict XVI's approach to higher criticism later in this paper, it will become clear that Benedict's observations a century later have confirmed Leo's suspicions. Observing the exegetical landscape in our day, Benedict is keenly aware of how right Leo was in predicting the rise of "disagreement and dissension" and of the fact that biblical scholarship often represents nothing but "the reflection of the bias and the prejudice of the critics." However, it will also become evident that Benedict pointedly contrasts with Leo concerning the question of whether higher criticism can be successfully incorporated into Catholic practice or whether it will lead to the demise of the faith.

Touching more specifically on the central issues this paper will treat is a 1907 *motu proprio* of Pius X. Prefacing his letter with a commendation of his predecessor Leo's encyclical, Pius lauds Leo for

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. (emphasis added).

having “defended the divine character of [the sacred] books not only against the errors and calumnies of the rationalists but also against the false teachings of what is known as ‘higher criticism’—something which the Pontiff most wisely exposed as nothing but the commentaries of rationalism derived from a misuse of philology and related disciplines.”⁷ Immediately after this, Pius turns his attention to reinforcing the efforts of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) to stem the malignant tide of modern biblical scholarship:

We are pleased to note that the Pontifical Biblical Commission, after mature examination and the most diligent consultations, has issued a number of decisions that have proved very useful for the promotion and guidance of sound biblical scholarship in accordance with the established norms. But we have also observed that, although these decisions were approved by the Pontiff, there are some who have refused to accept them with the proper obedience, because they are both unduly prone to opinions and methods tainted by pernicious novelties and excessively devoted to a false notion of freedom—in fact, an immoderate license—which in sacred studies proves to be a most insidious and powerful source of the worst evils against the purity of the faith.

For this reason, we find it necessary to declare and prescribe, as we do now declare and expressly prescribe, that all are bound in conscience to submit to the decisions of the Biblical Commission, which have been given in the past and shall be given in the future, *in the same way as to the Decrees pertaining to doctrine, issued by the Sacred Congregations* and approved by the Sovereign Pontiff.⁸

This passage merits a number of observations, but prior to further discussion, it is important to know which decisions of the PBC are

⁷ Pope St. Pius X, *Praestantia Sacrae Scripturae* (1907).

⁸ Ibid. In commenting on this document, I have reproduced the translation found in Dean Béchard, *The Scripture Documents* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 320–21. The Latin text of the second paragraph reads: “Quapropter declarandum illud praecipendumque videmus, quemadmodum-declaramus in praesens expresseque praecipimus, universos omnes conscientiae obstringi officio sententiis Pontificalis Consilii de Re Biblica, sive quae adhuc sunt emissae, sive quae posthac edentur, perinde ac Decretis Sacrarum Congregationum, pertinentibus ad doctrinam probatisque a Pontifice, se subiiciendi.”

in question here. Between the years 1905 and 1933, the commission issued a series of sixteen *responsa* concerning deleterious views of Scripture reflected in the biblical scholarship emerging in that period. The decrees dealt with a variety of texts and centered on issues concerning the historical origin and interpretation of biblical books.⁹ With regard to the overarching question of whether Catholics could embrace the conclusions of modern biblical scholarship in these matters, the response given by the PBC was, on the whole, “Negative.” In this document Pius X manifests his will to “now declare and expressly prescribe” (*declaramus in praesens expresseque praecipimus*) that the PBC’s findings are to be considered authoritative and binding on Catholic scholars, some of whom had hitherto lacked due obedience in their regard due to an attachment that confuses authentic freedom with “immoderate license” (*licentia intemperans*).

Pius’s declaration was controversial even in its own day. In light of this article’s broader argument, it is significant to observe that, in addition to the official version of the above text published in *Acta Sanctae Sedis* on November 18, 1907, a variant unofficial draft was mistakenly printed shortly thereafter in *Civiltà Cattolica*, the Vatican’s own newspaper. This version of the text reads:

We declare and prescribe that all are bound in conscience to submit to the decisions of the Biblical Commission *that pertain to doctrine*, which have been given in the past and shall be given in the future, in the same way as to the Decrees issued by the Sacred Congregations and approved by the Sovereign Pontiff.¹⁰

⁹ The topics of the documents were as follows: implied quotations in Scripture (1905); historical narratives (1905); the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (1906); the authorship and historicity of the Gospel of John (1907); the character and authorship of the Book of Isaiah (1908); the historicity of the first three chapters of Genesis (1909); the authorship and date of the Psalms (1910); the authorship, date, and historicity of Matthew (1911); the authorship, date, and historicity of Mark and Luke (1912); the Synoptic question (1912); the authorship and date of Acts (1913); the authorship, integrity, and date of the Pauline Pastoral Epistles (1913); the authorship and manner of composition of Hebrews (1914); the Parousia in the letters of Paul (1915); certain added verses in the Vulgate (1921); and the false interpretation of Psalm 16:10–11 and Matt 15 [16]:26 / Luke 9:25 (1933). The present article will not examine all of these but rather discuss a handful of representative positions with which Benedict XVI’s exegetical principles and practice stand in clear tension.

¹⁰ *Civiltà Cattolica*, November 27, 1907, 513–18. The Latin text of this alternate version includes a small but important variation on the official text: “Quapropter declarandum illud praecipendumque videmus, quemadmodum-

Although this text was replaced with the official one in the next printing of the paper, it reveals that Pius was aware of the need to phrase this document precisely and that said phrasing would have significant ramifications. Whereas the official version gives all PBC decrees the same authority as those concerning doctrine issued from other curial offices, this unofficial text appeared to limit the authority of the PBC by considering authoritative only its decisions pertaining to doctrine. On this point, however, the alternate text more closely resembles two later—also unofficial—statements issued by key curial figures.

Discussing this case in the appendix of *The Scripture Documents*, Dean Béchard relates that two “semi-official clarifications” of Pius’s document were issued in conjunction with the final preparation of a newly revised edition of the *Enchiridion Biblicum* (1954). The statements appeared in separate journals in the form of review articles from no less important men than Athanasius Miller, O.S.B., and Arduin Kleinhaus, O.F.M., secretary and sub-secretary of the PBC, respectively. Miller’s text makes it quite clear that, contrary to the ostensible teaching of Pius X, the methods of modern biblical scholarship are appropriate so long as their conclusions do not contradict the Church’s teaching on faith and morals:

However, as long as those decrees propose views that are neither immediately or mediately connected with the truths of faith and morals, it goes without saying that the interpreter of Sacred Scripture may pursue his scientific research with complete freedom and may utilize the results of these investigations, provided always that he respects the teaching authority of the Church.¹¹

declaramus in praesens expresseque praecipimus, universos omnes conscientiae obstringi officio sententiis Pontificalis Consilii de Re Biblica, ad doctrinam pertinentibus, sive quae adhuc sunt emissae, sive quae posthac edentur, perinde ac Decretis Sacrarum Congregationum a Pontifice probatis, se subiiciendi.” This version limits the authority of PBC “sentences” to those pertaining to doctrine, whereas the official text indicates that *all* PBC decisions are to be followed in the same way one would heed decrees of other curial congregations pertaining to doctrinal matters.

¹¹ “Das neue biblische Handbuch,” *Benediktinische Monatschrift* 31 (1955): 49–50. The translation reproduced here is in Béchard, *The Scripture Documents*, 327. See also Kleinhaus, “De nova Enchiridii Biblici editione,” *Antonianum* 30 (1955): 63–65.

Bécharde comments that, since the *responsa* dealt almost entirely with historical and literary issues rather than matters of faith and morals, it was clear that “biblical scholars are not bound by these earlier teachings, which addressed the particular needs of a historical situation happily no longer existent.”¹² Further, he observes that the magisterium of the time had ample opportunity to censure these men for their words and that its silence concerning the two explanatory statements implies consent to their orthodoxy. Finally, Bécharde adds to this the fact that “many highly respected Catholic exegetes, whose teaching and published research represent the practical outcome of this semi-official clarification, have since been appointed, in recent years, to serve as consultants or members of the PBC.”¹³ As if it were not enough to see this discrepancy between prior official papal teaching and the later semi-official statements of high-ranking PBC officials, in the twenty-first century, an equally eminent president of the PBC would continue this trend—only this figure, whose writings would likely have been censored less than a century earlier, went on to become pope.¹⁴

Benedict XVI: A Divergent Appraisal of Modern Biblical Scholarship

This section will consider texts from Benedict XVI that convey in no uncertain terms the contrast he perceives between his own appraisal of modern biblical scholarship and that of his predecessors discussed above. Although many of the statements immediately below were either made in his capacity as a theologian or a curial official, rather than as pope, the problem raised is that writings from the highest of Catholic officials today often appear to conflict directly with the binding pronouncements of the PBC in a time when it served as an official organ of the magisterium.¹⁵ In this regard it will also be helpful

¹² Bécharde, *The Scripture Documents*, 327–28.

¹³ Ibid., 328–29.

¹⁴ Of course, it is important to bear in mind the respective weight due to Benedict's various writings, which depends partly on whether he is speaking in his capacity as a private theologian or, rather, as pope or as prefect of the CDF. Benedict famously wrote in the foreword to his first volume on the person of Jesus: “It goes without saying that this book is in no way an exercise of the magisterium, but is solely an expression of my personal search ‘for the face of the Lord.’ Everyone is free, then, to contradict me. I would only ask my readers for their initial goodwill without which there can be no understanding”; see Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xxiii–xxiv.

¹⁵ The discrepancy would not be nearly as significant if it were between a reign-

further below to see how Benedict maintained the same stance when he had occasion to write as a biblical theologian even after assuming the Chair of Peter.

There is no better place to begin a discussion of Benedict's biblical approach in relation to the PBC than to examine an address he gave as the commission's president on the occasion of its one-hundredth anniversary. At the very outset of his talk, Cardinal Ratzinger gives us an indication of why he has devoted so much of his career to the delicate issue concerning the relationship of the magisterium and exegesis, sharing that it was "one of the problems of my own autobiography."¹⁶ He recounts the troubled story of one of his former professors, Friedrich Wilhelm Maier, whose flowering academic career had been dealt a sharp blow by the magisterium in its 1912 Consistorial Decree *De quibusdam commentariis non admittendis*. The document forbade Maier from teaching New Testament and required that the commentary into which Maier had been pouring all his energy had to be "altogether expunged from the education of the clergy." In his work Maier had defended the controversial Two-Source Theory, which—as Ratzinger reminds his audience—is today "almost universally accepted" as an account of the Synoptic problem.¹⁷

Although the censured theologian was eventually permitted to resume his teaching, Ratzinger relates that "the wound that Maier had received in 1912 had never fully healed."¹⁸ Indeed, Maier had told his student that he would probably not live to witness the full dawning of "the real freedom of exegesis of which he dreamed," and so he yearned, "like Moses on Mount Nebo in Deuteronomy 34, to gaze upon the Promised Land of an exegesis liberated from every shackle

ing pope and the PBC today. The commission was restructured by Paul VI in 1971 so that it no longer acts as an official organ of the magisterium, but rather an advisory forum in which the magisterium and expert exegetes are to work together in the quest to illumine matters concerning Sacred Scripture.

¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, "Exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church," in *Opening Up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. José Granados, Carlos Granados, and Luis Sánchez-Navarro (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 126. See also similar comments in Ratzinger's *Milestones: Memoirs 1927–1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 52–53.

¹⁷ Ratzinger, "Exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church," 127. As commonly articulated, the two-source hypothesis proposes that the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke depended on common source material in Mark and an unidentified source dubbed "Q" (the first letter of the German word for "source"). Ratzinger also mentions the figure of Maier in *Milestones*, 50–53.

¹⁸ Ratzinger, "Exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church," 127.

of magisterial surveillance.”¹⁹ Ratzinger spends the next part of his article in the effort “to climb Mt. Nebo with him, as it were, and to survey the country that we have traversed in the last fifty years,” tracing out various milestones from the time of Pius XII forward as the magisterium’s relationship with modern exegesis approached its “Promised Land.”²⁰ He reflects on Maier’s situation with great sympathy, acknowledging, “It is perfectly understandable that, in the days when the decisions of the then Pontifical Biblical Commission prevented them from a clean application of the historical-critical method, Catholic theologians should cast envious glances at their Protestant colleagues.”²¹ As he would later state in one of his final public addresses as pope, Catholic exegetes in Maier’s day “felt themselves somewhat—shall we say—in a position of inferiority with regard to the Protestants, who were making the great discoveries, whereas Catholics felt somewhat ‘handicapped’ by the need to submit to the magisterium.”²² It is revelatory of just how much this point influenced his life that the Pontiff returned to the same theme in one of his last public statements.

The extent to which Ratzinger was troubled by the early decisions of the PBC can be seen in multiple places throughout his corpus. Writing as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), his introduction to *Donum veritatis* (Instruction Concerning

¹⁹ Ibid., 127–28.

²⁰ Ibid., 128: “The 1960s represent—to remain with our metaphor—the entrance into the Promised Land of exegetical freedom.” Other pivotal moments in this process described by Ratzinger include the publication of *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943), the PBC’s Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels (1964), the Second Vatican Council’s *Dei Verbum* (1965), the restructuring of the PBC by Paul VI’s *Sedula Cura* in 1971, the 1971 appointment of Rudolf Schnackenburg (one of Friedrich Maier’s prominent students) to the International Theological Commission, and the PBC’s *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1994).

²¹ Ibid., 131.

²² Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Parish Priests and Clergy of Rome, February 14, 2013. Reflecting on his time at the Second Vatican Council, he wrote: “Even more hotly debated was the problem of Revelation. At stake here was the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, and it was the exegetes above all who were anxious for greater freedom; they felt themselves somewhat—shall we say—in a position of inferiority with regard to the Protestants, who were making the great discoveries, whereas Catholics felt somewhat ‘handicapped’ by the need to submit to the magisterium. So a very concrete struggle was in play here: what sort of freedom do exegetes have? How does one properly read Scripture? What is the meaning of Tradition?”

the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian) speaks of “the anti-modernistic decisions at the beginning of this century, especially the decisions of the Biblical Commission of that time.”²³ His commentary on the Second Vatican Council puts the matter more bluntly, describing these as symptomatic of an “anti-Modernistic *neurosis* which had again and again crippled the Church since the turn of the century.”²⁴ As a result of this approach, he laments, the research of many scholars (like Maier above) was halted in its tracks and “much real wheat was lost along with the chaff.”²⁵ He indicates that this same

²³ Joseph Ratzinger, “On the ‘Instruction Concerning the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,’” in *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Approaches to Understanding Its Role in Light of the Present Controversy*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 106.

²⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), 11 (emphasis added); cf. *ibid.*, 23. Shortly later in the text, Ratzinger sheds further revelatory reflections concerning his time at Vatican II: “The real question behind the discussion could be put this way: Was the intellectual position of ‘anti-Modernism’—the old policy of exclusiveness, condemnation and defense leading to an almost neurotic denial of all that was new—to be continued? Or would the Church, after it had taken all the necessary precautions to protect the faith, turn over a new leaf and move on into a new and positive encounter with its own origins, with its brothers, and with the world of today?” (*ibid.*, 44). For a lucid presentation of how Catholic scholarship “sank into a biblical winter” in this period, in the context of a sketch of the milestones in Ratzinger’s writing on the nature of biblical scholarship, see Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J., “Pope Benedict XVI: Theologian of the Bible,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 110, no. 10 (2010): 66–78 (available also at <http://www.hprweb.com/2011/09/pope-benedict-xvi-theologian-of-the-bible/>). For another sharp criticism of this anti-modernistic attitude that prevailed in the Church for more than a century, see Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 258–66.

²⁵ Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, 21. Here, in stark contrast to the list of “milestones” discussed above, Ratzinger provides a brief but incisive history of the Church’s “anti-modernistic” attitude. Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors, he observes, “undoubtedly went about this with excessively one-sided zeal. This development reaches its zenith in the various measures of Pius X against Modernism (the decree *Lamentabili* and the encyclical *Pascendi* [1907], and, finally, the ‘oath against Modernism’ [1910]). . . . This historical perspective helps explain, then, that secret fear and mistrust of any theological expression of modern historical and philosophical thought. This same anxiety persisted until its last reverberation in the encyclical *Humani Generis* of Pius XII.” See also Ratzinger’s commentary in which he states that tension between the magisterium and modern exegesis “reached a new climax with the banning of professors at the Biblical Institute from teaching and with the exceptionally

attitude was present even in the initial schema on divine revelation at Vatican II: "This document pursued once more the line of thought of Pius IX and Pius X. The schemata of the theological commission . . . breathed this same spirit. The same cramped thinking, once so necessary as a line of defense, impregnated the text and informed it with a theology of negations and prohibitions."²⁶ Finally, in his PBC address discussed above, Ratzinger gets more specific as he defends faith's role in exegesis while simultaneously admitting:

It remains correct that by making the judgments that we have mentioned, the magisterium overextended the range of what faith can guarantee with certainty and that, as a result, the magisterium's credibility was injured and the freedom needed for exegetical research and interrogation was unduly narrowed.²⁷

It is striking to witness in this passage the humility and boldness of a Church official who recognizes that a frank appraisal of the limits of the magisterium is a necessary step towards arriving at a deeper understanding of its nature and relationship to exegesis. The matter would be different if this had been written by an openly dissenting scholar, but the fact is that it comes from the mouth of a man of the Church whose very vocation was devoted to defending the faith. This, then, begs the question: How does Ratzinger account for the discrepancy between his view of modern biblical scholarship and that of the magisterium before him? Before answering this question, the following section will

sharp polemic of Mgr. Romeo against modern Catholic exegesis"; quoted in Herbert Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 3:157–58.

²⁶ Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, 42–43. Ratzinger here further recalls that "the problem of the historical dimension in theology which underlay the problems of revealed truth, scripture, and tradition" had "set off a most violent controversy" among the Vatican II fathers debating these schemata. Elsewhere, he describes the initial schema as composed in a "purely defensive spirit," with "the narrowest interpretation of inerrancy" and "a conception of the historicity of the Gospels that suggested that there were no problems" (Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 3:159). If this original version had passed, "[t]he burden that this would have meant for the future course of Catholic theology was not easy to estimate: it would probably have been still more serious than the difficulties that resulted from the one-sided condemnations of modernism" (*ibid.*, 159–60).

²⁷ Ratzinger, "Exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church," 133.

illustrate Ratzinger's convictions with concrete examples of how he adopts some of the very conclusions of modern scholarship that were forbidden by the PBC just decades earlier.

Discontinuity between PBC Teaching & Ratzinger's Exegetical Practices

It is not only Ratzinger's statements *about* modern exegesis and the teaching of the past magisterium that appear to stand in open contradiction to prior Church teaching; on a number of points Ratzinger's exegetical practice itself also plainly contradicts the views mandated to be held by Catholics according to the PBC's early decrees. For the sake of brevity, I will illustrate the problem with just a few (among many possible) examples covering a range of biblical books. Note that neither my nor Benedict's point is to argue for a particular exegetical conclusion such as Markan priority or multiple authorship of Isaiah. Rather, here the concern is to address the larger question of what views a Catholic biblical scholar may hold and how to offer a robust *apologia* for the Church's change in stance regarding the same.

On the whole, the PBC decrees in question are carefully crafted so as to make their position known while avoiding categorical claims that could readily be falsified by later scholarly findings. For example, the 1908 decree *On the Character and Authorship of the Book of Isaiah* responds "Negative" to its third question:

Whether it may be admitted that . . . the second part of the Book of Isaiah (chs. 40–66), in which the prophet addresses and consoles not the Jews contemporary with himself but, as one living among them, those mourning in the Babylonian exile, cannot have for its author Isaiah himself long dead, but must be attributed to some unknown prophet living among the exiles.²⁸

In various places Ratzinger demonstrates a conviction that the Book of Isaiah is not the work of one author, but rather two or three, as he follows the standard scholarly convention of calling the author of Isaiah 40–66 "Deutero-Isaiah."²⁹ But does this amount to saying that

²⁸ Pontifical Biblical Commission (hereafter, PBC), *On the Character and Authorship of the Book of Isaiah* (1908). For this and all citations from PBC decrees, I have used the translation found in Béchard, *The Scripture Documents*.

²⁹ For just a couple of examples, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 129–30; and *Eschatology* (Washington,

the later chapters of Isaiah “cannot have for its author Isaiah himself” and that the work “must” be attributed to someone else? The same applies in the case of the fourth and fifth questions of this PBC decree. Ratzinger seems to hold that there are multiple authors, but he would not likely say that “the philological argument . . . is to be considered weighty enough *to compel* a serious and critical scholar . . . to acknowledge for this book a plurality of authors.”³⁰ Neither does he argue that “there are solid arguments, even when taken cumulatively, *to prove* that the Book of Isaiah must be attributed not to Isaiah alone but to two or even more authors”³¹ Ratzinger is a more careful thinker than that. Nevertheless, despite the fact that he does not technically contradict this PBC decree, it is clear that the two at least stand in deep tension.

The decree *On the Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch* provides more opportunity for reflection on this tension. Its first question reads:

Whether the arguments amassed by critics to impugn the Mosaic authenticity of the sacred books designated by the name Pentateuch are of sufficient weight . . . to justify the statement that these books do not have Moses as their author but were compiled from sources for the most part posterior to the time of Moses.³²

The answer to this question is, unsurprisingly, “Negative.” Notice that the document does not expressly require one to maintain that Moses wrote the entire Pentateuch. In fact, the second question in this document allows for the possibility that Moses entrusted his inspired work to another who, omitting nothing from what he received, composed it in a way faithful to Moses’s own thought. The third question affirms that the authenticity of the Pentateuch would not be impugned if Moses had recourse to prior sources for its composition, while the fourth question allows for the possibility that certain alterations to the text were introduced over the centuries. At the same time, the fourth question permits this under the assumption that one grants “substantial Mosaic authenticity of the Pentateuch.”

Rather than directly tackling the question of Mosaic authorship, Benedict’s exegesis reflects the belief that more is going on in the

DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 86.

³⁰ PBC, *On the Character and Authorship of the Book of Isaiah*.

³¹ Ibid. (emphasis added).

³² PBC, *On the Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch* (1906).

redaction of the Pentateuch than mere additions to a text substantially produced at the time of Moses. This is especially evident in his treatment of the creation accounts in the set of homilies published under the title *In the Beginning*.³³ It also comes across in the various questions he addresses concerning creation in the interview book *God and the World*. In an interesting response contrasting the Bible and Koran, he writes:

[The Bible] is mediated to us by a history, and even as a book it extends over a period of more than a thousand years. The question of whether or not Moses may have been a writer is one we can happily leave to one side. It is still true that the biblical literature grew up over a thousand year history and thus moves through quite different stages of history and of civilization, which are all reflected in it. . . . It becomes clear that God did not just dictate these words but rather that they bear the impression of a history that he has been guiding; they have come into being as a witness to that history.³⁴

As is typical in his more informal works, such as interviews or pastorally-oriented documents aimed for a more popular audience, Ratzinger is careful not to take sides on the issue of who wrote the Pentateuch. What is noteworthy is that he says, “[t]he question of whether or not Moses may have been a writer is one we can happily leave to one side.” For the PBC, this was certainly not a question that could remain unanswered. Ratzinger thus entertains a position that is contrary to that of the PBC, yet this still does not amount to a direct contradiction. After all, the PBC decree simply required one to hold that the arguments of modern scholarship are not of sufficient weight “to impugn the Mosaic authenticity of the sacred books.” It is not forbidden for Catholics today to hold substantial Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, so the language of the PBC decree checks out even though one can discern that Ratzinger’s exegesis conflicts with what can be inferred from it.

A clearer example of contradiction concerns a text not typically mentioned in a discussion of problematic PBC statements, a 1933 decree *On the False Interpretation of Two Texts*. The first question of the

³³ Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

³⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 151–52.

text asks: “Whether it is permissible for a Catholic . . . [to] interpret the words of Psalm 15 [16]:10–11 . . . as if the sacred author was not speaking of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ” and gives the answer “Negative.”³⁵ As part of its argument, the document references the authoritative interpretation of “the two chief apostles” in Acts 2:24–33 and 13:35–37. The text reads:

For David says concerning [Christ] . . . “For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let thy Holy One see corruption. Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou wilt make me full of gladness with thy presence” [Ps 16:27–28]. Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.³⁶

Modern exegetes would question the New Testament’s interpretation here on at least two points. The first concerns whether it is correct to assume that David composed this psalm, but that is not the issue here. More importantly, did the psalmist himself actually foresee the resurrection of Christ, as Acts maintains and the PBC mandated that Catholics hold? Benedict treats briefly of this question:

In the Hebrew version [“You do not give me up to Sheol, or let your godly one see the Pit . . .”] the psalmist speaks in the certainty that God will protect him, even in the threatening situation in which he evidently finds himself, that God will shield him from death and that he may dwell securely: he will not see the grave. The version Peter quotes [“For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let your Holy One see corruption . . .”] is different: here the psalmist is confident that he will not remain in the underworld, that he will not see corruption.³⁷

³⁵ PBC, *On the False Interpretation of Two Texts* (1933).

³⁶ Acts 2:25, 27, and 30–32.

³⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 255.

As Benedict observes, the version of the Old Testament typically used by the early Church was the LXX. In that version, the verbs “You will not abandon” and “Nor will you allow” of Psalm 16:10 occur in the future tense, describing a restoration from physical death after David’s natural death occurs: “Here the psalmist is confident that he will not remain in the underworld, that he will not see corruption.”³⁸ In the original Hebrew of Psalm 16, on the other hand, the sacred author has rescue from physical death in his sights. His use of the present tense—“You do not give me up”—reflects the hope that God would shield him from dying in the first place. Herein lies the ostensible contradiction between Benedict’s exegesis of the psalm and that required by the PBC. The PBC requires one to affirm that the sacred (human) author was speaking of the resurrection of Christ, whereas in the earliest version of the text the sacred author does not seem to have resurrection on his radar at all, let alone the resurrection of Jesus.³⁹

Another instance of tension between the requirements of the PBC and the New Testament exegesis of Benedict concerns the authorship of the Gospel of John. In a 1907 decree *On the Authorship and Historicity of the Fourth Gospel*, the commission’s first question considers “[w]hether . . . it is proved by such solid historical argument that the Apostle John and no other must be acknowledged as the author of the Fourth Gospel, and that the reasons brought forward by the critics against it in no wise weaken this tradition.”⁴⁰ Although the PBC answers with an “Affirmative,” Benedict’s exegesis challenges this conclusion in an important way. According to Benedict:

The evidence suggests that in Ephesus there was something like a Johannine school, which traced its origin to Jesus’ favorite disciple himself, but in which a certain “Presbyter John” presided as the ultimate authority. The “presbyter” John appears as the sender of the Second and Third Letters of John . . . He is evidently not the same as the Apostle, which means that here in the canonical text we encounter expressly the mysterious figure of the presbyter. . . . At any rate, there seems

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ For a discussion of how the spiritual sense plays a role in the interpretation of Ps 16, see the treatment I draw from in *Dark Passages of the Bible*, 269–73. Benedict adds a further potential wrinkle to the PBC argument in demonstrating an openness to the possibility that the speech of Acts 2 might not be that of Peter himself in the first place; see *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, 256.

⁴⁰ PBC, *On the Authorship and Historicity of the Fourth Gospel* (1907).

to be grounds for ascribing to “Presbyter John” an essential role in the definitive shaping of the Gospel.⁴¹

Benedict’s conclusion stands in stark contrast to that of the PBC. However, it should be noted that he adds something that, while not completely eliminating the discrepancy, shows that he intends to say something similar to what the PBC said but in a more nuanced way. For Benedict, the contents of the Gospel “go back to an eyewitness, and even the actual redaction of the text was substantially the work of one of his closest followers.”⁴² As we will gather from the principles elucidated below, Benedict would likely say that his essential point was the same as that of the PBC—namely, to uphold the authoritative portrait of Jesus painted in the Gospel of John—even if certain assertions of the PBC would later stand in need of correction.

Perhaps the most obvious contradiction between Benedict’s exegesis and the mandates of the PBC concerns the authorship, date, and mutual dependence of the Synoptic Gospels or, as it is sometimes called, the Synoptic problem. Here I will offer illustrations from three different PBC documents that speak to the same broader point and then discuss them in light of Benedict’s thought. The first is the 1911 decree *On the Authorship, Date of Composition, and Historicity of the Gospel of Matthew*.⁴³ Its first question affirms that “it may and must be affirmed with certainty that Matthew, an apostle of Christ, is truly the author of the Gospel published under his name.” Its fourth question is similar to the first:

Whether we may accept as probable the opinion of certain modern writers who assert that Matthew, strictly speaking, did not compose the Gospel as it has come down to us, but only composed a collection of the sayings and discourses of Christ, which a later anonymous author, whom they call the redactor of the Gospel, used as sources.

Answering “Negative,” the PBC asserts as not “probable” the proposition that the Gospel of Matthew had its origin as a collection of Christ’s sayings and discourses that were crafted into a literary whole

⁴¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, 226.

⁴² Ibid., 227.

⁴³ PBC, *On the Authorship, Date of Composition, and Historicity of the Gospel of Matthew* (1911).

by an author who lived later than the Apostle Matthew. The sixth question goes further in responding “Negative to both parts” to the following suggestion:

Whether . . . it may also be affirmed that the narratives of the deeds and words of Christ found in the Gospel have undergone certain alterations and adaptations under the influence both of Old Testament prophecies and of the more developed perspective of the Church, and that, in consequence, this Gospel narrative is not in conformity with historical truth.

This statement (“Negative” response to the question) affirms that the Gospels must be acknowledged as representing the “historical truth” of Christ’s life. It further insinuates that it would not be in conformity with said truth if the words and deeds of Christ’s life had undergone certain alterations by the authors who wove them into their respective narratives.

The next source relevant to the Synoptic problem is the 1912 decree *On the Authorship, Time of Composition, and Historicity of the Gospels of Mark and Luke*.⁴⁴ As in the case of Matthew above, this document’s first question affirms that “the clear witness of the tradition . . . compels us to affirm with certainty that Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, and Luke the physician, the assistant and companion of Paul, were truly the authors of the Gospels respectively attributed to them.” The fourth question requires Catholics to hold that the final verses of Mark are inspired and canonical. It additionally states that “the reasons by which some critics attempt to prove that the last twelve verses of the Gospel of Mark (Mark 16:9–20) were not written by Mark himself” fail to demonstrate that Mark was not the author of said verses. The fifth question, concerning the chronological ordering of the Gospels, states that it is not permitted “to abandon the claim . . . that, after Matthew, who first of all wrote his Gospel in his own native dialect, Mark wrote second and Luke third.”

Finally, the 1912 decree *On the Synoptic Question or the Mutual Relations Among the First Three Gospels* speaks to the same overarching problem and appears in stark contrast to the thought of Benedict XVI.⁴⁵ Its second question generates a pair of “Negative” responses:

⁴⁴ PBC, *On the Authorship, Time of Composition, and Historicity of the Gospels of Mark and Luke* (1912).

⁴⁵ PBC, *On the Synoptic Question or the Mutual Relations Among the First Three Gospels* (1912).

Whether we can consider what has been set forth above as observed by those who, without the support of any testimony of tradition or of any historical argument, easily embrace the hypothesis commonly known as the Two-Source Theory, which seeks to explain the composition of the Greek Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke mainly by their common dependence on the Gospel of Mark and a so-called collection of the sayings of the Lord; and, whether, in consequence, we can freely advocate this theory.

Thus it is not possible for a Catholic to either “easily embrace” or “freely advocate” the Two-Source Theory, which considers the Gospels of Matthew and Luke to be the fruit of a synthesis between preexistent material from Mark and a separate collection of Jesus’s sayings.⁴⁶

Several works of Ratzinger exhibit fundamental disagreements with the aforementioned PBC conclusions. For example, in two works Ratzinger speaks of the Two-Source Theory as being “almost universally accepted” as an account of the Synoptic problem.⁴⁷ In other works, he illustrates this conviction, as when he assumes that Mark’s eschatology is oldest and that “the gospel of Matthew, composed contemporaneously with Luke’s (or perhaps even later) contains an undiminished imminent eschatology which may even be described as heightened in comparison with Mark.”⁴⁸ A speech by Cardinal Ratzinger presents us with a case in which he traces the titles of Jesus from the earlier title “Christ” (seen in the confession of Mark 8:29) to “Christ, Son of the living God” (the parallel confession in Matthew 16:16) to “Logos” (John 1).⁴⁹ However, in *God and the World*, he elaborates upon the Synoptic problem more broadly and in a way that speaks to all of the above PBC decrees:

With regard to the individual Gospels, today we assume that not Matthew but Mark is the oldest of the Gospels. Matthew

⁴⁶ This collection of “sayings” are commonly referred to as “Q” as an abbreviated form of the German word *quelle* (“source”).

⁴⁷ Ratzinger, “Exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church,” 127; cf. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 50–51.

⁴⁸ Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 37.

⁴⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Christ, Faith, and the Challenge of Cultures,” speech given in Hong Kong to the presidents of the Asian bishops’ conferences and the chairmen of their doctrinal commissions during a March 2–5, 1993 meeting (available at <https://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/RATZHONG.HTM>).

and Luke have, so to speak, taken Mark as their basic framework and have enriched it with other traditional materials that were available to them. The Gospel of John, now, had a separate origin and development and is homogeneous. It is important that the first three Gospels were not just written by *one* writer in each case but were based on the transmission of material by the whole believing Church—a process, that is to say, in which material slowly crystallized in particular traditions that were finally brought together to form the text of the Gospels. In a certain sense, then, the question about particular people is secondary. . . . What is fundamental is that oral transmission came at the beginning, as is so characteristic in the Orient. That guarantees the close connection with the historical origin.⁵⁰

While well aware of the venerable tradition that considers Matthew the first of the Gospels, Ratzinger clearly accepts—with appropriate nuances and modifications—the standard suggestions of modern scholarship regarding the origin and relationship of the Synoptic Gospels.⁵¹ His findings thus directly contradict those of the earlier PBC to the effect that Matthew was the first of the Gospels and that he did not borrow from preexistent source material. Turning on its head the somewhat simplistic question of who wrote which gospel and when, he focuses on the ecclesial nature of the Bible and wants to show that

⁵⁰ Ratzinger, *God and the World*, 229. Elsewhere, Ratzinger makes a similar point with a thought-provoking contrast with Protestantism and an allusion to Orthodoxy: “[A]n exclusive insistence on the *sola scriptura* of classical Protestantism could not possibly survive, and today it is in crisis more than ever precisely as a result of that ‘scientific’ exegesis which arose in, and was pioneered by, the Reformed theology. This demonstrates how much the Gospels are a product of the early Church, indeed, how the whole of Scripture is nothing other than tradition. So much so that a number of Lutheran scholars seem to converge with the view of the Eastern Orthodox: not *sola scriptura* but *sola traditio*”; see Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 160.

⁵¹ Ratzinger summarizes: “Earlier the Gospel of Matthew was held to be the oldest of the Gospels. A note by a second-century writer, Papias, says that Matthew first of all wrote this Gospel in Hebrew, and then it was translated into Greek. . . . Luke and Mark were also acceptable, but Matthew was held to be the oldest and the one that offered most, the one most immediately directed to the Church as far as her liturgy and her faith were concerned” (*God and the World*, 228).

“the first three Gospels were not just written by *one* writer in each case but were based on the transmission of material by the whole believing Church.” Earlier source material “slowly crystallized in particular traditions that were finally brought together to form the text of the Gospels.” In this way, “the question about particular people is secondary,” since the Gospels did not simply originate with individual authors but rather in the heart of “the whole believing Church.”⁵²

In the same discussion Ratzinger adds further points that conflict with the PBC’s declarations requiring Catholics to hold that the Apostles themselves wrote the Gospels that were named after them:

According to the results of research, the texts of the three Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke—are intertwined with one another in some kind of close relationship and are interdependent. The question of how Matthew came to be written has been completely reopened. Nowadays the greater number of scholars are of the opinion that one cannot ascribe this Gospel to the apostle Matthew, that, on the contrary, it originated rather later and was written down toward the end of the first century in a Syrian Christian congregation. The origin and growth of the Gospels as a group now appears to us to be a very complex process. At the beginning there were probably collections of the sayings of Jesus, which were at first memorized and handed on orally but quite soon were also written down in a set form . . . In the beginning, then, there was oral tradition.⁵³

Notice that Ratzinger does not go so far as to forbid a Catholic to uphold the venerable tradition that the Apostle Matthew himself wrote the text attached to his name or that his was the first of the four Gospels. Rather, he is content to summarize the available scholarly evidence, the ancient tradition, and his own scholarly opinion. All the same, it is clear that, contrary to the PBC, Ratzinger is fine with attributing the Gospels to authors other than the evangelists themselves and that he is comfortable accepting an ordering among the four that differs from the reckoning of the Church’s more ancient tradition. He is even open to the presence of significant redactions to the biblical

⁵² For more of Ratzinger’s thoughts on the origin of the canon in the heart of the Church, see Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible*, 62–68.

⁵³ Ratzinger, *God and the World*, 229–30.

text from the second century, as when he overtly contradicts the PBC in stating, “In the second century, a concluding summary was added, bringing together the most important Resurrection traditions and the mission of the disciples to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world (Mark 16:9–20).”⁵⁴

At the same time, Ratzinger is careful to maintain that the various evangelists and redactors, while re-forming the same basic material in view of their respective theological insights and purposes, “transmit the very same thing with slight variations.”⁵⁵ To anticipate language that will become critically important further below, “Even if the *details* of many traditions have been expanded in later periods, we can trust the Gospels *for the essentials* and can find in them the real figure of Jesus. It is much more real than the apparently reliable historical reconstructions.”⁵⁶ The Gospels thus present us with a faithful portrait of the real historical Jesus. The evangelists, Ratzinger writes, “were practicing painstaking fidelity, but it was a fidelity that played a role in the formation process in the context of lived participation, though *without influencing the essentials*.”⁵⁷

Continuity and Discontinuity: Benedict’s Hermeneutic of Reform

Up to this point I have been tracing the discrepancies between Benedict-Ratzinger’s views and the views of the magisterium of yesteryear vis-à-vis modern biblical criticism. However, the purpose of emphasizing this discontinuity becomes clear only when we examine how Benedict puts his critical observations’ conclusions to work, developing a hermeneutic capable of addressing many of the greatest challenges to the magisterium’s authority today. As we will see below, whether true reform will come about in the Church is bound up with our ability to understand and deal with two seemingly incompatible realities in the history of Catholic doctrine and practice.

In an important speech to the Roman curia in the first year of his pontificate, Benedict put the matter plainly concerning the proper implementation of Vatican II: “It is precisely in this combination of

⁵⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, 262.

⁵⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Light of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 174. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church’s Marian Belief* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 44.

⁵⁶ Ratzinger, *God and the World*, 204 (emphasis added).

⁵⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 174 (emphasis added).

continuity and discontinuity at different levels that the very nature of true reform consists.”⁵⁸ To understand what Benedict has in mind here, it is important to note that he is not merely proposing a “hermeneutic of continuity” as some have thought, but rather what he calls a “hermeneutic of reform.” This term is fitting because Benedict’s approach does not pretend that Catholicism has emerged utterly unchanged through the centuries, and so it is willing to come to terms with the elements of discontinuity we have witnessed in this paper. At the same time, this hermeneutic maintains that, over the course of history, “the one subject-Church . . . is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same.”⁵⁹ In one brief statement, Benedict thus distances himself both from radical traditionalism, which refuses to accept the newness of the post-conciliar Church, and from radical progressivism, which fails to realize that the Church today is the same Church that existed before Vatican II. He put this pointedly in an interview:

It is impossible [for a Catholic] to take a position for or against Trent or Vatican I. Whoever accepts Vatican II, as it has clearly expressed and understood itself, at the same time accepts the whole binding tradition of the Catholic Church, particularly also the two previous councils. And that also applies to the so-called “progressivism,” at least in its extreme forms. . . . It is likewise impossible to decide in favor of Trent and Vatican I, but against Vatican II. Whoever denies Vatican II denies the authority that upholds the other two councils and thereby detaches them from their foundation. And this applies to the so-called “traditionalism,” also in its extreme forms. . . . Every partisan choice destroys the whole (the very history of the Church) which can exist only as an indivisible unity.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, Dec. 22, 2005 (available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html). For this principle and its application to the thorny issue of religious freedom, see Martin Rhonheimer, “Benedict XVI’s ‘Hermeneutic of Reform’ and Religious Freedom,” *Nova et Vetera* 9 (2011): 1029–54.

⁵⁹ Benedict XVI, Christmas Address, 2005.

⁶⁰ Ratzinger and Messori, *The Ratzinger Report*, 28–29. For further comments in this regard, see Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., “Benedict XVI: Interpreter of Vatican II,” in *Church and Society: The Laurence J. McGinley Lectures, 1988–2007* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 468–84.

At the end of the day, both radical camps described above operate by what he has labeled a “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture,” an approach that keeps them from accepting the magisterium as the authoritative guardian of Christian orthodoxy still today. Regrettably, many Catholics today know only this popularized misinterpretation of Catholic history. According to Benedict, this is due in part to the fact that the hermeneutic of rupture “has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media.”⁶¹

As an indication of how firmly he believed this, Benedict dedicated some of his final thoughts as pontiff to the variant interpretations of Vatican II, observing that “there was the Council of the Fathers—the real Council—but there was also the Council of the media,” which also turned out to be the “accessible . . . dominant . . . more effective one.”⁶² In various works, he goes so far as to apply some of the same critical labels to this mentality as he did to the anti-modernist statements of the early twentieth century. Noting that even many Council fathers entertained a problematic hermeneutic of the Council, he described the ambience of the time as pervaded by an

⁶¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Christmas Address, 2005. On the two interpretations of Vatican II, see also Ratzinger’s *Salt of the Earth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 75.

⁶² Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Parish Priests and Clergy of Rome, Feb. 14, 2013 (available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130214_clero-roma.html). The Pope further lamented, “We know that this Council of the media was accessible to everyone. Therefore, this was the dominant one, the more effective one, and it created so many disasters, so many problems, so much suffering: seminaries closed, convents closed, banal liturgy.” At the same time, Benedict exuded in this speech a firm hope that the media’s portrayal of Vatican II as a rupture will not be the final word and that the Church has great reason to rejoice in finally seeing the council bear the fruit it was designed to yield. As for the damage that occurred to the Church after Vatican II, Benedict had earlier stated, “I am convinced that the damage that we have incurred in these twenty years is due, not to the ‘true’ Council, but to the unleashing within the Church of latent polemical and centrifugal forces; and outside the Church it is due to the confrontation with a cultural revolution in the West” (*The Ratzinger Report*, 30). Ratzinger observed that, historically, any ecumenical council is typically followed by this sort of tumult, for which reason John Henry Newman spoke of the danger involved with convoking councils (*ibid.*, 39–40). This is a theme Ratzinger takes up elsewhere, as when he states, “And it cannot be denied that, from close by, nearly all councils have seemed to destroy equilibrium, to create crisis”; see Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 369.

“almost naïve progressivist utopianism” and a “euphoria of reform” that “can only be called neurotic.”⁶³ In a Wednesday catechesis on St. Bonaventure, he added:

Indeed, we know that after the Second Vatican Council some were convinced that everything was new, that there was a different Church, that the pre-Conciliar Church was finished and that we had another, totally “other” Church—an *anarchic utopianism*! And thanks be to God the wise helmsmen of the Barque of St Peter, Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, on the one hand *defended the newness of the Council, and on the other, defended the oneness and continuity of the Church*, which is always a Church of sinners and always a place of grace.⁶⁴

Benedict notes that St. Bonaventure, serving as Minister General of the Franciscan order in his day, faced a problem similar to that faced by the Church in the modern period. For the sake of unity in his order, Bonaventure made it a pastoral priority to combat the widespread “anarchic utopianism” that caused many to dissociate the search for authentic spirituality from the hierarchical structure of the Church. As indicated above, this is precisely the type of attitude we often witness today: a disregard for the hierarchical Church that takes its cue from the supposition that Vatican II was completely new and that it fundamentally changed the nature of the rigid, pre-conciliar, hierarchical, institutional church. That said, in these passages, Benedict does indeed acknowledge a real “newness” and “discontinuity” in Vatican II. Indeed, in one place, he even speaks of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, in conjunction with *Dignitatis Humanae* on religious liberty and *Nostra Aetate* on non-Christians, as a “countersyllabus” to that of Pius IX.⁶⁵ But if this speaks to the discontinuity side of Benedict’s hermeneutic, it remains to be seen just how the aspect of continuity has its due place.

⁶³ Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 227 and 373.

⁶⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience of March 10, 2010 (emphasis added) (available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100310.html).

⁶⁵ Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 381–82.

Discernment of the Essential: Key to Benedict's Hermeneutic of Reform

One of the central keys to Benedict's theology as a whole, and to his hermeneutic of reform in particular, lies in the endeavor to discern what he variously calls "the kernel," "the essential," or "the permanent" aspect of Catholic doctrine that has remained unchanged through the centuries even amidst the vicissitudes of discontinuity and development described above.⁶⁶ The existence of this element is the linchpin that allows Benedict to grant the presence of both continuity and discontinuity in the Church throughout the ages. In what follows, I will be teasing out what he means by this concept and how he applies it to the problem of the Church's teaching concerning modern biblical scholarship.

Benedict's 2005 address to the Roman curia contains some evocative language that reveals the basis and aims of his thought concerning our subject. It is significant that Benedict incorporates the language of John Henry Newman when he affirms that a sound hermeneutic must admit the presence of discontinuity but also firmly insist on the existence of a "permanent aspect" in the Church's teaching in such a way that, at Vatican II, "the continuity of principles proved not to have been abandoned."⁶⁷ Benedict's choice of the expression "continuity of principles" reflects verbatim Newman's second "note" for distinguishing a genuine doctrinal development from a "corruption" in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.⁶⁸ The Pontiff's

⁶⁶ It is noteworthy that Benedict frequently employs these terms and other variations upon them when seeking to discern the principal affirmation of a problematic biblical text. Although an examination of his application of this particular principle to the many individual biblical texts he treats is beyond the scope of this article, it is instructive to observe the affinity between his method of dealing with problematic texts in the Bible and in the magisterium, respectively. For just a few among dozens of examples, see *God and the World*, 45, 75ff, 104, and 165–68, and *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 215–16. For an application of this method to some of the "darkest" passages in the Bible, see Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible*, chs. 5 and 6.

⁶⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, Christmas Address, 2005.

⁶⁸ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 178–85. Regarding the language of permanence used by Benedict, see *ibid.*, 178, where Newman states, "Doctrines grow and are enlarged; principles are permanent." Among the other works of Newman that explore this theme, I would highlight his sermon "The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine" (1843) and his Letter to the Reverend Pusey (1865) (available at <http://www.newmanreader>).

references to the essential or core dimension of Catholic teaching likewise reflects Newman's conviction that Catholic doctrine "has been in substance one and the same from the beginning."⁶⁹ These similarities, which are just a couple among many, are probably no coincidence, given that Benedict not only beatified Newman but also praised his theology elsewhere on various occasions. Reflecting on the "fruitful possibilities" for development of Newman's teaching on doctrinal development, he shares, "With this he had placed the key in our hand to build historical thought into theology, or much more, he taught us to think historically in theology and so to recognize the identity of faith in all developments."⁷⁰

Throughout Benedict's corpus, one can witness his endeavor to apply Newman's thought in a way that builds up the Church and lets the central truths of the faith shine forth. This comes across most explicitly when he is being interviewed about his personal vocation as a theologian. When asked whether there have in fact been "two Ratzingers" in his lifetime—one a progressive teenager and the other a resigned conservative ecclesial official—he responds:

org/works/anglicans/volume2/pusey/section3.html). See also the discussion of the parallels between Benedict and Newman in Gerard O'Collins, S.J., "Does Vatican II Represent Continuity or Discontinuity?" *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 793.

⁶⁹ Newman, "Letter to the Reverend Pusey" (1865).

⁷⁰ The text of this quote is valuable to share at greater length: "Even deeper for me was the contribution which Heinrich Fries published in connection with the Jubilee of Chalcedon. Here I found access to Newman's teaching on the development of doctrine, which I regard along with his doctrine on conscience as his decisive contribution to the renewal of theology. With this he had placed the key in our hand to build historical thought into theology, or much more, he taught us to think historically in theology and so to recognize the identity of faith in all developments. Here I have to refrain from deepening these ideas further. It seems to me that Newman's starting point, also in modern theology, has not yet been fully evaluated. Fruitful possibilities awaiting development are still hidden in it. At this point I would only like to refer again to the biographical background of this concept. It is known how Newman's insight into the ideas of development influenced his way to Catholicism. But it is not just a matter of an unfolding of ideas. In the concept of development, Newman's own life plays a role. That seems to become visible to me in his well-known words: 'to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often'; Joseph Ratzinger, Presentation on the Occasion of the First Centenary of the Death of Cardinal John Henry Newman, April 28, 1990 (available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900428_rattinger-newman_en.html).

I think I have already made the essential point, namely that the basic decision of my life is continuous. . . . I want to be true to what I have recognized as essential and also to remain open to seeing what should change. . . . I don't deny that there has been development and change in my life, but I hold firmly that it is a *development and change within a fundamental identity*. . . . Here I agree with Cardinal Newman, who says that to live is to change and that the one who was capable of changing has lived much.⁷¹

These comments are notable for a number of reasons. First, here again Ratzinger identifies with Newman in suggesting that the fullness of life in the Church—and in one's personal life as well—always entails a certain amount of change. Second, the terminology “essential point,” “continuous,” and “development and change within a fundamental identity” is typical of Newman and works throughout the rest of Ratzinger's corpus. Third, when traditionally-minded Catholics are faced with Ratzinger's thought concerning the appropriateness of modern biblical scholarship, they sometimes point to the fact that many of his more controversial statements came from the time when he was a young progressive and writing as an individual rather than with the authority of the magisterium. While it should certainly be granted that many of the relevant texts in this paper are not stamped with the seal of magisterial authority, in this revealing application of hermeneutical principles to his own life, Ratzinger has made it clear that his thought remained fundamentally one and the same throughout his career as a theologian and churchman.

Elsewhere in this same interview, Ratzinger sheds further light on the aim of his theology and the development of his thought:

Although the constellations in which I have found myself—and naturally also the periods of life and their different influences—have led to changes and development in the accents of my thought, my basic impulse, precisely during the Council, was always *to free up the authentic kernel of the faith from encrustations*

⁷¹ Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 115–16 (emphasis added). In a different interview, Ratzinger was asked concerning his involvement in founding the international periodical *Concilium*: “What significance does this have for the man who was to become prefect of the former Holy Office? Was it a false step? A youthful transgression?” His reply was to the point: “It is not I who have changed, but others” (*The Ratzinger Report*, 18).

and to give this kernel strength and dynamism. This impulse is the constant of my life. . . . Naturally the office gives an accentuation that isn't present as such when you are a professor. But nonetheless what's important to me is that I have never deviated from this constant, which from my childhood has molded my life, and that I have remained true to it as the basic direction of my life.⁷²

The "encrustations" Ratzinger has in mind here are of various types, but as we can gather from his comments in earlier portions of this article, they certainly would include some of the writings of Leo XIII, Pius X, and the PBC on the subject of modern biblical scholarship. It is critical that Catholics not fall prey to "forced interpretations" for the apparent contradiction in Church teaching on this or any other point. Ratzinger states consolingly:

Doubt need not be immediately associated with a fall from faith. I can sincerely take up the questions that press upon me while holding fast to God, *holding to the essential core of faith*. On the one hand, I can try to find solutions for the seeming contradictions. On the other hand, I can also be confident that, though I can't find them all, there are solutions even when I can't find them. There are things that remain unsolved for the moment that should not be explained by forced interpretations.⁷³

⁷² Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 79 (emphasis added). In this same text, Ratzinger opens up about "the cost" of having to take on his ecclesiastical role and abandon full-time scholarly inquiry: "For me the cost [of becoming Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith] was that I couldn't do full time what I hand envisaged for myself, namely really contributing my thinking and speaking to the great intellectual conversation of our time, by developing an opus of my own. I had to descend to the little and various things pertaining to factual conflicts and events. I had to leave aside a great part of what would interest me and simply serve and to accept that as my task. And I had to free myself from the idea that I absolutely have to write or read this or that, I had to acknowledge that my task is here" (ibid., 116–17). Though not stated explicitly here, it goes without saying that part of the "accentuation" involved in taking on an ecclesiastical office is that one has to be more careful in issuing theological opinions, since they all will be construed—rightly or wrongly—as bearing authoritative weight. In this light, it is remarkable to see just how much Ratzinger/Benedict pushed the envelope of theological development during his tenure in office.

⁷³ Ibid., 31 (emphasis added).

Fortunately for the Church, Ratzinger was not content with a forced interpretation that would offer a facile solution to the problem of how to deal with modern exegesis in the Church. “Holding to the essential core of faith,” he puts his hermeneutical principles to work in the effort to offer a balanced account of continuity and discontinuity in the matter at hand.

Application of Benedict’s Method to the PBC Decrees

Having elucidated the two elements of Benedict’s hermeneutic of reform and the key operation that consists in seeking out the enduring essence of Catholic teachings, at last we are in a position to apply these principles to the problem of the magisterium in relation to modern biblical scholarship. To this end, two texts are of particular relevance. The first is the text Ratzinger presented to the press upon the publication of the instruction *Donum veritatis*. His comments on the document tie together the principles introduced above and add a note of solemnity, issued as they were by the cardinal-prefect of the CDF:

The text also presents the various forms of binding authority which correspond to the grades of the magisterium. It states—perhaps for the first time with such candor—that there are *magisterial decisions which cannot be the final word* on a given matter as such but, *despite the permanent value of their principles*, are chiefly also a signal for pastoral prudence, a sort of *provisional policy*. Their *kernel* remains valid, but *the particulars determined by circumstances can stand in need of correction*.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Ratzinger, “On the ‘Instruction Concerning the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,’” 106 (emphasis added). Among the texts Ratzinger has in mind here is the following portion of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s *Donum veritatis* (1990) that discusses interventions of the magisterium in the prudential order: “It could happen that some Magisterial documents might not be free from all deficiencies. Bishops and their advisors have not always taken into immediate consideration every aspect or the entire complexity of a question.” The importance of this statement lies in the fact that it indicates certain aspects of magisterial utterances contain “deficiencies” that are not intended to be the comprehensive final word in response to their respective questions. In order to pursue his discipline well, the theologian must be competent in history in order to ascertain correctly the context in which dogmatic formulas arise and to be mindful of “the filtering which occurs with the passage of time.” While the document is careful to ensure that this statement not be construed as “a relativization of the tenets of the faith,” it proceeds to add these poignant words: “The theologian knows that some

This citation adds a pair of nuances germane to our endeavor. First, Ratzinger confirms that some magisterial decisions are not intended to be definitive, but rather “provisional” determinations of pastoral prudence. Second, in keeping with the terminology we have already examined, he indicates that such statements have a kernel that remains valid throughout history, while certain “particulars” or accidental features “can stand in need of correction” by later formulations.⁷⁵

Ratzinger offers two examples to illustrate the aforementioned point. “In this connection,” he writes, “one will probably call to mind the pontifical statements of the last century regarding freedom of religion and the anti-Modernist decisions of the then Biblical Commission.”⁷⁶ The second of these examples is the very issue at the heart of this article. Having already established immediately prior to this the principle that magisterial statements have both a permanent core and particulars that may stand in need of correction over time, he now adds that, “*as warning calls* against rash and superficial accommodations, they remain perfectly legitimate,” for “the anti-Modernist decisions of the Church performed the great service of saving her from foundering in the bourgeois-liberal world.”⁷⁷ Thus, from our

judgments of the magisterium could be justified at the time in which they were made, because while the pronouncements contained true assertions and others which were not sure, both types were inextricably connected. Only time has permitted discernment and, after deeper study, the attainment of true doctrinal progress” (*Donum veritatis*, §24).

⁷⁵ Already in his pontificate, Francis has reiterated this distinction in so many words: “Exegetes and theologians help the church to mature in her own judgment. Even the other sciences and their development help the church in its growth in understanding. There are ecclesiastical rules and precepts that were once effective, but now they have lost value or meaning. The view of the church’s teaching as a monolith to defend without nuance or different understandings is wrong”; see Pope Francis and Antonio Spadaro, S.J., “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America*, September 30, 2013 (available at <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>).

⁷⁶ Ratzinger, “On the ‘Instruction Concerning the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,’” 106.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Among the things the PBC intended to save us from was what Ratzinger calls a “ready-made philosophy” that uses historical criticism to draw false and destructive conclusions from the premise that God cannot intervene in history and reveal himself to man. Ratzinger tells us that such a being “is not the God of the Bible”; see Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict: On the Foundations and the Itinerary for Exegesis Today,” in *Opening Up the Scriptures*, 1–29, at 23. In another work, he adds that modern scholarship sometimes reveals more about the presuppositions of the scholar than about the person

privileged vantage point a century later, we can see that the principal goal or core of the PBC decrees did not consist in their assertions concerning such things as when and by whom particular biblical books were composed. Rather, the substance of what the magisterium intended to convey at the time, and which remains true today, is the need to safeguard the authority of the Scriptures, the historicity of Jesus, and the Church's divine foundation in the wake of deconstructive intellectual currents that would undermine the faith. Be that as it may, immediately following these words concerning the important pastoral role played by the PBC's early decrees, Ratzinger soberly acknowledges, "Nevertheless, with respect to particular aspects of their content, they were *superseded* after having fulfilled their pastoral function in the situation of the time."⁷⁸

Benedict employs similar language in his 2005 Christmas address to the Roman curia, underscoring the need to distinguish "permanent" from "contingent" dimensions of magisterial teaching:

In this process of innovation in continuity we must learn to understand more practically than before that *the Church's decisions on contingent matters—for example, certain practical forms of liberalism or a free interpretation of the Bible—should necessarily be contingent themselves, precisely because they refer to a specific reality that is changeable in itself. It was necessary to learn to recognize that in these decisions it is only the principles that express the permanent aspect, since they remain as an undercurrent, motivating decisions from within. On the other hand, not so permanent are the practical forms that depend on the historical situation and are therefore subject to change.* Basic decisions, therefore, continue to be well-

of Jesus: "I must admit the more I hear about these efforts of source research, the less confidence I feel in the plethora of hypotheses it has thrown up. . . . I think all these attempts are reconstructions in which we can always see the face of the architect. . . . All these constructions have been undertaken with one guiding idea: There can be no such thing as God made man" (Ratzinger, *God and the World*, 203). See also *The Ratzinger Report*, 143–44, in which we are exhorted to beware of an uncritical acceptance of a *weltanschauung* that tries "to find a message that represents what we already know, or at any rate what the listener wants to hear." For this reason, a "criticism of the criticism" or a "self-critique of historical exegesis" is needed in order to evaluate the claims and limits of modern scholarship in a way "that both carries on and modifies Kant's critiques of reason" (Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Conflict," 8).

⁷⁸ Ratzinger, "On the 'Instruction Concerning the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,'" 106.

grounded, whereas the way they are applied to new contexts can change.⁷⁹

Here the pontiff situates decisions regarding “a free interpretation of the Bible” within the realm of “decisions on contingent matters” that are “subject to change.” As seen in the document above, so here he maintains that decrees like those of the PBC have a “permanent aspect”

⁷⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, Christmas Address, 2005 (emphasis added). For an informative discussion of the historical condition that affects magisterial decisions, see the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1973 declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*. At the beginning of a pivotal section entitled “The Notion of the Church's Infallibility Not To Be Falsified,” it indicates that we should seek to “define exactly the intention of teaching proper to the various formulas.” However, difficulties arise in this domain for two reasons: first from the fact that God's mysteries so transcend the human intellect that they remain “wrapped in darkness” in this life, and second from “the historical condition that affects the expression of revelation.” Spelling out what is meant by this “historical condition,” the CDF argues that “the meaning of the pronouncements of faith depends partly upon the expressive power of the language used at a certain point in time and in particular circumstances. Moreover, it sometimes happens that some dogmatic truth is first expressed incompletely (but not falsely), and at a later date, when considered in a broader context of faith or human knowledge, it receives a fuller and more perfect expression.” When one attends to these contexts, we see that the Church “usually has the intention of solving certain questions or removing certain errors” and that “all these things have to be taken into account in order that these pronouncements may be properly interpreted.” Ever affirming that the truths of the faith are not dependent upon “the changeable conceptions of a given epoch,” the document acknowledges that “it can sometimes happen that these truths may be enunciated by the Sacred Magisterium in terms that bear traces of such conceptions.” In light of the foregoing points, the document concludes that, while the Church's ancient dogmatic formulas “maintain . . . completely the same meaning” and “remain forever suitable” when interpreted correctly, “it does not however follow that every one of these formulas has always been or will always be so to the same extent” (*Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 5). On the continuity of meaning in dogmatic formulas over the centuries, see the First Vatican Council constitution *Dei Filius*, ch. 4: “Hence, too, that meaning of the sacred dogmas is ever to be maintained which has once been declared by Holy mother Church, and there must never be any abandonment of this sense under the pretext or in the name of a more profound understanding” (available at <https://www.ewtn.com/library/COUNCILS/V1.HTM#4>). See also the discussion of this formula in Charles Journet, *What Is Dogma?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 20 and 98. For the rejection of any form of “evolutionism” in the Church, see also Pope Pius X's *Lamentabili sane* (1907), as well as his *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907), §§26–28, and “Oath Against Modernism” (1910)

that remains valid even if the “practical forms” of decisions are “not so permanent” due to the changing landscape of the Church’s situation in history. To many Catholics, the use of such language in relation to magisterial statements may understandably come across as jarring. However, if we understand the expression properly within the context of principles addressed in this article, it is right at the heart of Ratzinger’s brilliant solution to the thorny problem of the magisterium in relationship to modern biblical scholarship—a solution that he arrives at only by facing difficulties head-on.

How are we to explain Benedict’s pointed language and the about-face in the Church’s attitude toward the modern historical-critical method today? Why did the PBC issue these decrees that, to many people today, seem so plainly incorrect? Ratzinger offers a vivid comparison to illustrate:

The process of intellectual struggle over these issues had become a necessary task and can in a certain sense be compared with the similar process triggered by the Galileo affair. Until Galileo, it had seemed that the geocentric world picture was inextricably bound up with the revealed message of the Bible, and that champions of the heliocentric world picture were destroying the core of Revelation. It became necessary fully to reconceive the relationship between the outward form of presentation and the real message of the whole, and it required a gradual process before the criteria could be elaborated. . . . Something analogous can be said with respect to history. *At first it seemed as if the ascription of the Pentateuch to Moses or of the Gospels to the four individuals whom tradition names as their authors were indispensable conditions of the trustworthiness of Scripture and, therefore, of the faith founded upon it.* Here, too, it was necessary for the territories to be re-surveyed, as it were; the basic relationship between faith and history needed to be re-thought. This sort of clarification could not be achieved overnight.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Ratzinger, “Exegesis and Magisterium of the Church,” 134. Pope Benedict XVI reflected on this dimension of the Galileo affair in a poignant speech about Vatican II near the end of his pontificate: “And we knew that the relationship between the Church and the modern period, right from the outset, had been slightly fraught, beginning with the Church’s error in the case of Galileo Galilei; we were looking to correct this mistaken start and to rediscover the union between the Church and the best forces of the world, so as to open up humanity’s future, to open up true progress” (Address to the Parish

In this passage Ratzinger provides insight into the reason certain features of the PBC decrees in question stood “in need of correction.” Those who crafted the statements had assumed that the trustworthiness of Scripture—and thereby the faith itself—would be undermined if the Church entertained findings of modern scholarship that contradicted ancient traditions concerning such matters as the authorship and dating of biblical books.⁸¹

Conclusion

While it is understandable to fear a certain “slippery slope” once one becomes acquainted with the undeniable presence of discontinuity in certain areas of Catholic teaching, thankfully the Church offers guidance for how to navigate through these difficulties. Indeed it is critical—and relieving—to realize that the Church recognizes various levels of magisterial teaching that command correspondingly different types of assent. Among the various doctrines of the Church, the CDF indicates that many require “irrevocable assent” because, of their own nature, they are “irreformable.”⁸² These teachings form the *substance* of the Catholic faith that cannot change. Writing as head of the PBC,

Priests and Clergy of Rome, Feb. 14, 2013).

⁸¹ To offer just one illustration, many would understandably fear dating the Gospel of Matthew later than Mark because this opens the door to the claim that the papal institution narrative in Matt 16 was tradition invented by the early Church rather than spoken by Jesus.

⁸² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the *Professio Fidei*” (1998), §§5 and 8. The CDF teaches that a Catholic may never withhold assent to a divine revealed truth, such as the articles of the Creed, Marian dogmas, the inerrancy of Scripture, and papal infallibility. Likewise, a Catholic may never refuse to accept “those teachings belonging to the dogmatic or moral area, which are necessary for faithfully keeping and expounding the deposit of faith, even if they have not been proposed by the magisterium of the Church as formally revealed.” Among many doctrines that fall within the scope of this statement, the CDF reminds us of the illicitness of euthanasia, the legitimacy of saint canonizations, and the reservation of priestly ordination only to men, to name only a few examples. For a delineation of these levels along with examples of doctrines that have an “irrevocable character,” see *ibid.*, §11. That said, the CDF has not intended by this to provide a complete list of truths that Catholics are bound to hold as irreformable. Indeed, it even elucidates a third category of teachings “which either the Roman Pontiff or the College of Bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic magisterium.” Even if these are not proclaimed “by a definitive act,” the document indicates that they nevertheless require “religious submission of will and intellect” on the part of the faithful (*ibid.*, §10).

Ratzinger offered some examples of teachings that, in contrast with the PBC decrees examined in this article, could never be altered as the result of modern biblical scholarship: the birth of Jesus by the Virgin Mary, the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus, and Jesus's bodily resurrection from the dead. Concerning this last point, he tells us that Jesus's bodily resurrection "is the *meaning* of the empty tomb," as if to preempt any objectors who would claim that the essence of the empty tomb lay in a spiritual experience of the Apostles and not a direct encounter with the Son of God in his glorified flesh. In short, Ratzinger emphasizes that the Christian faith is bound up with certain accidental features, but it requires us to profess "that Jesus—in all that is essential—was effectively who the Gospels reveal him to be."⁸³

In this way, despite his frank criticisms of certain aspects of past magisterial pronouncements, Ratzinger's hermeneutical approach is worlds apart from an attitude that would conclude from such observations that the magisterium has erred in an essential matter and thereby abdicated its authority to teach Christians today. For, while he does not shy away from facing the most alarming challenges to the magisterium's teaching authority, he writes, "But we also refuse simply to condemn what went before, but see it as a necessary part of the process of knowing."⁸⁴ We must therefore regard as illegitimate the moves of those who, believing themselves to be ahead of the curve in matters of doctrinal development, dissent from today's magisterium on the hypothetical grounds that its teaching *might* change some day and that, at any rate, their views do not deny anything "irreformable."⁸⁵ Indeed, given what was said above, features some consider essential to the faith in theory could be shown to be accidental, but the CDF rightly reminds us that individual Catholics are in no position to play the role of magisterium in these matters. What are we to do in the meantime? Benedict offers this wise counsel in the context of an interview:

Of course we always need to ask what are the things that may once have been considered essential to Christianity but in real-

⁸³ Ratzinger, "Exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church," 134 (emphasis added).

⁸⁴ Ibid., 136.

⁸⁵ In this regard, it is important to recall that the CDF commentary is not exhaustive. Even if it does not explicitly identify certain erroneous teachings or practices, the magisterium's mind on these matters has often been made manifest in myriad other ways that call for the "religious submission" of the Catholic's will and intellect.

ity were only expressions of a certain period. What, then, is really essential? This means that we must constantly return to the gospel and the teachings of the faith in order to see: *First, what is an essential component? Second, what legitimately changes with the changing times? And third, what is not an essential component?* In the end, then, the decisive point is always to achieve the proper discernment.⁸⁶

Once again, for Benedict, the key to properly assessing the presence of discontinuity in Catholic teaching over the centuries lies in a hermeneutic of reform and the crucial endeavor to distinguish what is essential in the faith from what “were only expressions of a certain period” or what “legitimately changes with the changing times.”

One final text from an interview sheds unique light on the person of Ratzinger-Benedict as he turns the thorny problems addressed by the PBC on their head. Rather than letting the myriad challenges of modern biblical scholarship trouble one's faith, he invites the believer to see the complicated process of the Bible's composition as the work of divine providence:

He must learn that *the complicated history of the genesis of biblical texts does not affect the faith as such*. What shines through this history is something different and greater. Through this complicated historical genesis, which, by the way, is always hypothetical, one can see, on the contrary, how statements and realities, which are not simply invented by man, impress themselves upon his consciousness. *I believe that precisely when one comes to know the human factors of biblical history, one also sees all the more clearly that it is not just a case of human factors, but that another is speaking here.*⁸⁷

For Ratzinger, the fruit of modern biblical scholarship presents a picture of the Bible's origin that gives even more glory to the divine providence at work in the early Church than it would if we could

⁸⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 141. In another interview, Ratzinger addressed the problem of ecumenism in like terms: “We can only humbly seek to *essentialize our faith*, that is, to recognize what are really the essential elements in it—the things we have not made but have received from the Lord—and in this attitude of turning to the Lord and to the center, to open ourselves in this *essentializing* so that he may lead us onward, he alone” (Ratzinger, *God and the World*, 453; emphasis added).

⁸⁷ Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 32 (emphasis added).

rest consoled in knowing that Matthew was the first of the Gospels, that the Beloved Disciple wrote John, or that the Pentateuch could be substantially attributed to Moses.

At the same time, throughout his career Ratzinger has shown that he no more believes in the validity of all modern biblical scholarship than he believes that the past decrees of the PBC provide an accurate analysis of the Bible's origins.⁸⁸ Rather, Ratzinger's biblical project aims to offer a balanced synthesis of the best of ancient and modern thought, taking into account the strengths and shortcomings of each. He therefore takes seriously the greatest fruits and challenges of modern scholarship in a way that enables us to see more clearly the person of Jesus Christ. This is put best by Benedict himself on the subject of his *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy:

What you might call the high point of my book was the demonstration that the Jesus in whom we believe is really also the historical Jesus and that his figure, as portrayed in the Gospels, is much more realistic and credible than the numerous alternative portraits of Jesus that are paraded before us in constant succession. . . . The important point is this: The only real, historical personage is the Christ in whom the Gospels believe, and not the figure who has been reconstituted from numerous exegetical studies.⁸⁹

This text from Benedict also reflects the ultimate goal of the present article: to build up the Church with a response to a modern problem that would challenge her faith in Christ. Benedict's biblical exegesis

⁸⁸ See especially his famous call for a "criticism of the criticism" in "Biblical Interpretation in Conflict." For more recent expositions of Benedict's thought concerning the possibilities and limits of modern biblical scholarship, see the foreword to *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* and *Light of the World*, 167–73. One example of Benedict's balanced approach can be seen in how he responds to an interviewer whose question seemed to exhibit a very negative view of modern biblical criticism as such. Benedict grants his point regarding the limits of said scholarship, but he adds, "I would put things more cautiously and say that research on points of detail remains important and useful, even though the excess of hypotheses eventually leads to absurdity. It is clear that the Gospels also reflect the concrete situation of the transmitters of the tradition and that they are clothed directly in the flesh in faith" (ibid., 173). For an in-depth treatment of Ratzinger's project of exegetical synthesis, see Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible*, chapter 2.

⁸⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 173.

aims to ensure that we have access to the essence of Jesus's life and message. His principles for tackling the problem of the magisterium in relation to that very exegesis ensure that today's faithful have access to the same magisterial tradition that has guided the Church throughout the ages. N&V