

Revelation and Understanding Scripture: Reflections on the Teaching of Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI*

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IN *BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN CRISIS*, Joseph Ratzinger offers the following reflection on the relationship between the biblical text and revelation:

In today's theological lingo, it is common to term the Bible "Revelation" without qualification. This usage would never have occurred to the ancients. Revelation is a dynamic event between God and man, which again and again becomes reality only in their encounter. The biblical Word attests to Revelation, but it does not contain it in the sense of absorbing it and turning it into a sort of thing that one could stick in one's pocket. The Bible attests to Revelation, but the concept of Revelation is much broader.¹

In making this statement, Joseph Ratzinger refers his readers to his habilitation thesis:

* I would like to thank Crystal Wirth, whose invaluable editing has improved this contribution.

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretations in Conflict: On the Foundations and the Itinerary of Exegesis Today," in *Opening Up the Scriptures*, ed. Jose Granados, Carlos Granados, and Luis Sánchez-Navarro (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 26.

where there is only the letter, there we find only the Old Testament and Judaism, regardless of whether we call this letter, “New” or “Old” Testament. The mere letter is not “New” Testament; the New Testament is truly present precisely where the letter has been surpassed by the Spirit . . . Here therefore, “revelation” is synonymous with the spiritual understanding of Scripture; it consists in the God-given act of understanding, and not in the objective letter alone.²

This statement echoes a similar one made by St. Jerome: “Let us not think that the Gospel lies in the words of the Scriptures: it is in their meaning; not in the surface but in the marrow; not in the leaves of words, but in the root of understanding.”³

Based on these and other statements to which I will refer later, I first will reflect on Joseph Ratzinger’s teaching concerning the spiritual “understanding” that makes of the Scriptures a life-giving word. For the purposes of corroboration, I will rely on the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on Sacred Scripture, prophecy, and *sacra doctrina*. In particular, his distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio* accents the fact that understanding Scripture is principally concerned with an insight into the realities revealed rather than the application of method to propositions.⁴ I then will turn to the phenomenological work of Robert Sokolowski, which offers a fruitful way of overcoming the impasse in biblical interpretation created by nominalism and the Kantian predicament. The key insight in this part of the study is that words are bearers of *reality*: They are the reality in another form of existence. This position opens the door to the ancient concept of the “spiritual sense” as an understanding not of the deeper meaning of the words as such but of the realities they mediate. I will conclude by considering the *power* of the Scriptural Word,

² Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971, 1989), 63.

³ On *Galatians* 1,11, PL 26, 347A.

⁴ In the Middle Ages, “The content of Scripture was not conceived of as some abstract theoretical system of truth, but as a spiritual reality reproduced in the minds and souls of the faithful under the actual influence of the Holy Spirit.” Denis Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation: A Theological Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 140.

particularly as it is proclaimed in the Liturgy. Here I will examine Pope Benedict's statement in *Verbum Domini* that Christ's presence in the proclaimed Word is analogous to his presence in the Eucharist (§56).

The *Intellectus Spiritualis* of Scripture

Joseph Ratzinger's statement regarding the synonymy of revelation and the spiritual understanding of Scripture is illumined by Thomas Aquinas's teaching on the *intellectus spiritualis*. First, *intellectus* is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Different than *ratio*, "its relation to the things made known to us supernaturally is like that of the natural light of understanding to the things we instinctively recognize (*primordialiter cognoscimus*)" (*Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 8, a. 1, ad 2).⁵ The light of faith illumines the principles of faith even as the light of reason illumines the principles of reason. In both cases, the light makes the principles *per se nota*. This idea is a commonplace in Aquinas. For instance, he defines an article of faith as "a perception of divine truth that leads us to that truth itself" (ST II-II, q. 1, a. 6sc).⁶ The following text is particularly apposite:

It is clear, then, that faith comes from God in two ways: by way of an interior light that leads to assent, and by way of the realities that are proposed from without and that had as their source divine revelation. These are related to the knowledge of faith as the things perceived by the senses are related to the knowledge of principles, for both make our knowledge certain. So just as the knowledge of principles is taken from the senses, and yet the light by which principles are known is inborn, so "faith

⁵ Translation is that of T. C. O'Brien in *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars edition, vol. 32, p. 7.

⁶ *Perceptio divinae veritatis tendens in ipsam*. Aquinas attributes the definition to St. Isidore, but T. C. O'Brien *Summa theologiae*, Blackfriars edition, vol. 31, p. 28) assures us that it is not found in Isidore's works. That Aquinas himself agrees with this definition is witnessed by the fact that he earlier used it without any attribution (*Sent. III* d. 25, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 1, ad 4). For another description of an article of faith, see ST II-II, q. 1, a. 6c: "the object of faith is something unseen about the divine. Consequently there is a particular article of faith wherever there is something being unseen for some distinct reason." We may note that Aquinas gives as examples various mysteries of the life of Christ. For other examples of descriptions of an article, see *Sent. III* d. 25, q. 1, a. 1, sol 1; in 1 Cor 15, lect.1 (Marietti §896).

comes from hearing” (Rom 10:17), and nevertheless the habit of faith is infused.⁷

The proximate criterion, therefore, of judging the authenticity of a doctrinal position or pastoral practice is whether it is virtually contained in the articles of faith, which are drawn from Scripture and articulated whenever there is a particular aspect of divine truth that is being revealed. In this sense, the birth, death, and Resurrection of Christ are separate articles (*ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 6c).

There are two ways in which this quality of being contained in an article of faith can be discerned. The first method of proceeding is to compare what is held as tradition with the articles by a process that follows the laws of human thinking (*studium*). This process does not merely or even principally involve applying logic to propositions, but rather involves perceiving how the two juxtaposed realities are connected to each other: “God wills that something be because of something else, but it is not for the sake of the second reality that he wills the first” (I, q. 19, a. 5c).⁸ It is quite permissible to employ the results of sound philosophy in this endeavor, not as a ruling principle, but as providing human insight that can be taken up into revelation: “Those who use the work of the philosophers in sacred doctrine by bringing that work of the human mind into the service of faith, do not mix water with wine, but rather change water into wine.”⁹

The second method of discerning the authenticity of a teaching is to rest in the reality mediated by the articles and see in them, by means of

⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, “In Boet. De Trin.,” q. 3, a. 1, ad 4, in *Faith, Reason and Theology: Questions I–IV of His Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, Medieval Sources in Translation 32, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1987), 69.

⁸ “Vult ergo [Deus] hoc esse propter hoc, sed non propter hoc vult hoc.” For a discussion of this text and its possible relation to the teaching of Vatican I on how reason, enlightened by faith, can arrive at an understanding of divine mysteries, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, “Le savoir théologique chez saint Thomas,” in *Recherches thomasiennes*, 37–38. “Yet it must always be remembered that the assent to these other truths, the various material objects of faith, presupposes the formal object as providing the authenticating force for the assent.” Brian J. Shanley, “*Sacra doctrina* and Disclosure,” *The Thomist* 61, no. 2 (1997): 163–88, at 174–75, with a citation from *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 1c.

⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, “In Boet. de Trin.,” q. 2, a. 3, ad 5 (Maurer 50).

contemplative understanding, all that they contain. The penetration of faith and the *intellectus spiritualis* provide insight into the realities that are revealed. They enable these realities themselves to be the cause of knowledge. Although the articles of faith are enunciated in words, it is not the propositions themselves but the realities mediated by the propositions that, as an imprint of the divine knowledge, have the energy to lead the mind to judge of those things that are presented to it (cf. ST I, q. 1, a. 3, ad 2).

This divine action gives understanding of not just the letter of the Scriptures but the realities behind them. The Greek Fathers spoke, in this regard, of *gnosis*. St. Paul prayed that his faithful hearers be filled with *gnosis* and professed to have received this gift himself. By *gnosis*, he meant a rich and living knowledge of God's plan, the "mystery" of Christ that has been hidden for eternity in God (Eph 3:9).¹⁰ This form of knowledge pertains more to what Aquinas calls *intellectus* than to what he calls *ratio*: "That which is supreme in our knowledge is not reason, but understanding, which is the source of reason" (*Summa contra Gentiles* 1, c. 57, 8).¹¹ Insofar as theology involves an act of reason vivified by faith understanding, we can extend Aquinas's statement as follows: *intellectus est theologiae et principium et terminus*.¹²

Such a faith vision is the basis for the position that Thomas expresses in various ways. For example, "The formal objective of faith is the First Truth as this is made known (*manifestatur*) in Sacred Scripture and in the teaching of the Church which proceeds from the First Truth." Later in the same question, he states: "Faith adheres to all the articles of faith because of one reason (*medium*), namely, because of the First Truth proposed to us in the Scriptures understood rightly according to the teaching of the Church (*secundum doctrinam Ecclesiae*)" (ST II-II, q. 5, a. 3c and ad 2). To cite one last text: "The formal notion (*ratio*) in the

¹⁰ *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical Essay and a Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 387–88.

¹¹ Translation in Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, 197, n. 60. As is well known, Pierre Rousset developed this distinction in St. Thomas; see John M. McDermott, *Love and Understanding: The Relation of Will and Intellect in Pierre Rousset's Christological Vision*, *Analecta Gregoriana* 229 (Rome: Università Gregoriana, 1983).

¹² Cf. *In III Sent.* d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 2c: "Intellectus est rationis et principium et terminus."

object of faith is the first truth manifested through the teaching of the Church" (*De caritate*, a. 13, ad 6).¹³

Sacra doctrina, as it exists in the Church, consists of two things: the hearing and reading of the symbolic transmission of revelation; and the infused habit of faith, which is "more capable of causing assent than any demonstration."¹⁴ In other words, *doctrina* involves not only the pure light which is a share in God's knowledge of himself, but also the human activity or *studium* of assimilating and articulating the divine truths according to our mode of knowing. In this joint work of God and man, the greatness and the fragility of *sacra doctrina* and its Scripture is revealed: It is the word of God clothed in the flesh of human thought processes and words. If we ask how the prophetic word from God, that word he spoke once and for all in his Son at this, the end of the ages (cf. Heb 1:1–4), is to be preserved in the Church, the answer is twofold: First, it is given a written and normative expression; second, the epikl  sis of the Spirit allows this articulation to be impressed upon the minds and souls of its hearers.

In light of these considerations, we now will return to other statements in which Joseph Ratzinger insists on the need for the gift of *intellectus*. In his habilitation thesis, he wrote: "*Revelatio* refers not to the letter of Scripture, but to the understanding of the letter; and this understanding can be increased."¹⁵ This "increase" takes place when, through the gift of understanding, more of the reality is perceived and appreciated in its relation to the rest of revealed reality. The need for purity of heart in order to allow this increase is well expressed by the Pontifical Biblical Commission:

Access to a proper understanding of biblical texts is granted only to the person who has an experienced affinity (*une affinit  *)

¹³ Translation in Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On Charity*, trans. Lottie Kendzierski (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1960), 109. An aspect of faith not treated in this study is that Christ himself is *auctor doctrinae* both as God, the First Truth, and as man, the privileged manifestation of that truth. See Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1964; reprint, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 173–74.

¹⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *In III Physicorum*, cap. 3, lect. 5 (Leonine ed. 11, 113).

¹⁵ Ratzinger, *Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 68.

vecue) with that of which the text is speaking . . . As the reader matures in the life of the Spirit, so there grows also his or her capacity to understand the realities of which the Bible speaks.¹⁶

The concluding lines of Ratzinger's document on Biblical Interpretation especially concern us in this article: "The dead ends of the critical method have once again made it clear that understanding requires the understander—the key without which the text has nothing to say to the present."¹⁷

Phenomenological Reflections on the Act of Understanding

The basic principle I wish to develop in this section was summarized by Martin Luther: "He who does not understand the realities, cannot draw the meaning out of the words."¹⁸ St. Augustine expresses the same thought: "It is in the event itself and not only in the text that we must seek the mystery."¹⁹ A strong philosophical foundation for articulating "an understanding of understanding" is provided by Robert Sokolowski, whose thought helps detach us from an excessive attention to words and restores us to a consideration of the *res* or "the event itself."²⁰

The key insight of Sokolowski's phenomenological approach as it is applied to the reading of Scripture can be summed up in a few quotes gathered from his writings. The first principle is: "when the words stand out, we no longer intend [i.e., are conscious of] just what is before us. A new kind of intending comes into play, one that makes these perceived marks into words and at the same time makes us intend not just the marks that are present, but the [thing], which is absent."²¹ Words are a

¹⁶ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (April 15, 1993) 76–77.

¹⁷ Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretations in Conflict," 29.

¹⁸ "Qui non intelligit res non potest sensum ex verbis elicere." *Tischreden*, Weimarer Ausgabe 5, 26, no. 5246.

¹⁹ "In ipso facto, non solum in dicto, mysterium requirere debemus." On Psalm 68 (PL 36, 858).

²⁰ In addition to several studies of my own in which I have applied Sokolowski's approach, I am indebted to an article, as yet unpublished, by William M. Wright IV, "The Light of the World and the Festival of Tabernacles (John 8:12): Insights from Sokolowski's Theology of Disclosure." I wish to express my gratitude here to Professor Wright for his generosity.

²¹ Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Cambridge Univer-

means by which things are presented to a subject as a dative of manifestation. Sokolowski applies this principle to biblical revelation as follows:

Once we recognize the fact that the written word is a prerequisite for biblical revelation . . . we must be careful to avoid the danger of making the text the primary focus, of making the text and not the things it discloses the center of our attention. Words, whether spoken or written, present things. We never have “just” words: words are vehicles to articulate and disclose things . . . Writing therefore intensifies the temptation to make the text stand on its own and become an object in its own right . . . Indeed, “textualism” can be considered a deviation analogous to the rationalism, historicism, and psychologism we discussed . . . In each case a form of manifestation—a text, a thought, a situated appearance, a perception—is taken to replace the thing manifested . . . the saving acts of God are disclosed in the Church through the reading of the biblical text.²²

These words are consistent with Joseph Ratzinger’s dictum: “revelation” is synonymous with the spiritual understanding of Scripture; it consists in the God-given act of understanding, and not in the objective letter alone.”²³ An increase of understanding, especially with respect to the spiritual sense of the Old Testament, comes through a deeper appreciation not of the words as such but rather that “the one *thing* intended by the human author had dimensions that had not yet come into view, dimensions that could not appear until more had happened.”²⁴

In earlier studies, I have spoken of the actions of God recorded in the Old Testament as being an anticipatory or “economic” participation in the mystery of Christ. The events, as well as the persons of Israel,

sity Press, 1999), 78. In keeping with this orientation, I add here a remark of Aquinas concerning faith: “Such an act [of faith] does not have a proposition as its term, but a reality, since just as with scientific knowledge, so also with faith, the only reason for formulating a proposition is that we may have knowledge about the real” (*ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2).

²² Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 143–44.

²³ Ratzinger, *Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 63.

²⁴ Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence*, 149 (italics Sokolowski’s).

share proleptically but metaphysically in the reality of Christ.²⁵ The notion of “participation” eliminates a nominalistic understanding of the biblical text and opens the way to a deeper understanding of the whole mystery of the economy of salvation.²⁶

The Eternal Existence of the Word as Premise for the *Intellectus Spiritualis*²⁷

Just as every person after death is marked by his or her life, so Jesus Christ even now is marked by his earthly life. There are two differences in the life and death of Jesus and these form, implicitly or explicitly, the foundation for how the Gospels are written and read. The first difference arises from the fact that Jesus is risen from the dead. All that he said and did has risen with him and continues to be part of his glorious humanity: “And I saw in the midst of the throne and the four living beings, and in the midst of the elders, *a lamb standing as having been slain* having seven horns and seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth” (Rv 5:6). Jesus, the lamb who still bears the marks of his slaughter, now is endowed with divine power and knowledge. What tradition calls the “mysteries of the life of Christ” are, each in their own way, a source of particular blessing and grace for those who touch them.²⁸ This theological view is present already in the Letter to the Hebrews: “We do not have a high priest unable to share by experience our weaknesses, (but one) having been tested in all ways, because he is like us, (however) without sin.” The verb “having been tested” is, in Greek, a

²⁵ Francis Martin, *Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2006), 274.

²⁶ An excellent study, awaiting publication, is one by Jeremy Holmes, who, surveying several studies on the notion of participation, commends this line of thought as it has been followed up by several others. See also Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

²⁷ This section is made up of original material as well as some unpublished and published material. Much of the latter is found in Martin, *Sacred Scripture*, and is used here with permission. For an excellent study of the traditional understanding of the typological sense of the Old Testament, see Paolo Prosperi, “*Novum in vetere latet. Vetus in novo patet*: Toward a Renewal of Typological Exegesis,” *Communio* 37 (2010): 389–424.

²⁸ The reader interested in following up on this theme might turn to A. Solignac, “Mystère,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité X* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980), 1861–74.

perfect passive participle whose meaning in context is expressed by Zerwick-Grosvenor as “having triumphantly passed the test Jesus is forever tried and tested.”²⁹ It is precisely because he is fixed in that act of love in which he died and “is forever tried and tested” that we are exhorted: “Let us, then, with confidence approach the throne of grace, that we might receive mercy and grace at the proper time” (Heb 4:16).

The second difference lies in the fact that the Logos was present to Israel even before the Incarnation. For instance, in a series of warnings against imitating the infidelity of Israel, Paul writes, “All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:3–4).³⁰ In some mysterious manner, the rock that was the source of water in the desert was Christ. In fact, it is possible to read John 1:10–13 as referring to the presence of the Logos to Israel before the Incarnation:

He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man’s decision but of God. (NAB)³¹

Patristic texts commonly consider the theme of the Logos as mysteriously present before the Incarnation in the events by which God made himself known and which are transmitted in the Scriptures. Some salient examples occur in the writings of Irenaeus and Origen:

The Son of God has been sown everywhere throughout the Scriptures [of Moses]. Sometimes He speaks with Abraham, sometimes with Noah, giving him the measurements of the ark;

²⁹ Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979), 662.

³⁰ This summary of the manner in which God cared for Israel in the desert is close to that of the themes in the liturgy of Sukkot as well as those in Nehemiah 9:20: “You gave them your good spirit to instruct them, you did not withhold your manna from their mouths, you gave them water for their thirst.”

³¹ See references in Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 1, 401n360–62.

He looks for Adam, brings judgment on the Sodomites. There are times when He is actually seen, guiding Jacob on his way, speaking with Moses from the bush. (Irenaeus, “*Against the Heresies*,” IV, 10, 1)³²

Thus the Word of God always showed to men, so to speak, the outlines of the things he was to accomplish in the future, the contours of the Father’s saving plan, thereby teaching us the things of God. (Ibid., IV, 20, 11)

At the end of the ages the Word has indeed become human, Jesus Christ; but before this visible coming in the flesh he was already, although not yet human, the mediator of human beings (Origen, *Fragment on the Letter to the Colossians* [PG 14, 1297–98]). Now that I have shown how the preexistence of the Word and the Resurrection of Christ are the foundation for the spiritual reading of Scripture, I will consider the spiritual sense more in depth. Henri Crouzel suggests the complementary relation between spiritual exegesis and prophecy:

Spiritual exegesis is in a kind of way the reverse process of prophecy: the latter looks to the future, but the former looks back from the future to the past. Prophecy follows the course of time forwards and in a historical or contemporary event sees darkly the messianic or eschatological fact that is prefigured. Spiritual exegesis follows the course of time backwards and, starting from the Messiah already given to the People of God, recognizes in the old Scriptures the preparations and seeds of what is now accomplished. But this accomplishment is in part prophetic in relation to what will take place in the end time.³³

In *Verbum Domini* (§37), Pope Benedict quotes a definition of the spiritual sense given by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. This definition

³² Hans Urs von Balthasar, ed., *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus against the Heresies* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 90.

³³ Henri Crouzel, *Origen: The Life and Thought of the First Great Theologian*, trans. A. S. Worall (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 71.

continues in the same vein as Crouzel but binds the spiritual sense more intimately with the life of Christ and especially the Resurrection:

As a general rule we can define the spiritual sense, as understood by Christian faith, as the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it. This context truly exists. In it the New Testament recognizes the fulfillment of the Scriptures. It is therefore quite acceptable to reread the Scriptures in the light of this new context, which is that of life in the Spirit.³⁴

The paschal mystery, in which the Scriptures find their fulfillment, legitimizes and even calls for a spiritual reading of the whole of Scripture. The light of the Resurrection illumines all that precedes and follows it.

The mention of the paschal mystery contains an allusion to the text in Luke 24:44–46, which narrates Jesus’s post-Resurrection meeting with the apostles:

He said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. And he said to them, “Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.” (NAB)

On this text, Aquinas comments thus:

An intelligible light is sometimes divinely impressed on the human mind to judge something seen by others as is said of Joseph, and is obvious in the case of the Apostles for whom the Lord “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Lk 24:45). (*ST* II-II, q. 173, a. 2c)

The “intelligible light” whereby we understand the spiritual sense of

³⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II, B, 2.

Scripture comes from the Risen Lord.

Tradition at times associates Christ even more intimately with the words of the Scripture, particularly those of the Gospels. Beginning with Origen, the Church Fathers refer to the Scriptures as the “body of Christ.” De Lubac sums up the views of Origen, writing:

In the literal meaning of Scripture, the Logos is thus not, properly speaking, incarnated as he is in the humanity of Jesus, and this is what allows us still to speak of comparison: he is, nevertheless, already truly incorporated there; he himself dwells there, not just some idea of him, and this is what authorizes us to speak already of his coming, of his hidden presence . . . near to the saints of the Old Testament: “How could they have announced the Word of God if the Word of God had not been present to them?” (Origen, *Homily on Jeremiah* 9,1)³⁵

This sacramental mode of speaking is not far from Pope Benedict’s analogy between the word of God and the Eucharist: “Christ, truly present under the species of bread and wine, is analogously present in the word proclaimed in the liturgy” (*Verbum Domini* §56).

The Power of the Word

Having established from phenomenology and Scripture that the “word” is the reality itself in a different mode of existence, I wish to reflect briefly on the principle, often enunciated in both Scripture and Tradition, that the word is power. Already in the Old Testament, this underlying presupposition is given explicit expression in a great number of texts, of which the following are samples:³⁶

³⁵ Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen*, trans. Ann Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), 389. The same notion is developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 32, 529, 541.

³⁶ For a good treatment of this theme, one could consult “Word,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour (Gaithersburg, MD: Word Among Us Press, 1988).

By the Lord's word the heavens were made; by the breath of his mouth all their host. (Ps 33:6; NAB)

Yet just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it. (Is 55:10–11; NAB)

Not a single word of the blessing that the Lord had promised to the house of Israel failed; it all came true. (Jos 21:45; NAB)

The following texts from the New Testament are a sampling of those that link the word of God, the Gospel, with power:

You are already clean by the word I have spoken to you. (Jn 15:3)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: for Jew first, and then Greek. (Rom 1:16–17; NAB)

The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor 1:18; NAB)

For you may have thousands of tutors (paidagogous) in Christ but not many fathers; in Christ Jesus I begot you by the Gospel. (1 Cor 4:15)

And for this reason we too give thanks to God unceasingly, that, in receiving the word of God from hearing us, you received not a human word but, as it truly is, the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe. (1 Thes 2:13 NAB).

The understanding of the sacramental dimension of Scripture—that is, its reality as more than a human word—is found in the ancient and medieval commentators. I will cite a few examples from St. Thomas Aquinas. Commenting on 2 Timothy 3:16, Aquinas asks why only the Scriptures should be considered divinely inspired since, according to Ambrose, “anything true, by no matter whom said, is from the Holy Spirit.” His response is that God works in two ways, one that is immediate and that pertains to him alone, as is the case with miracles; the other manner is mediate, that is, through the mediation of lesser causes, as is the case with natural operations. He then concludes, “And thus in man God instructs the intellect both immediately through the sacred letters and mediately through other writings.”³⁷ The *auctoritas* of *sacra scriptura* is wholly singular: Scripture can cause knowledge immediately and, possessed of a unique power, it can have a referential function that brings us into contact with the divine realities themselves in a way that exceeds other faith formulations.³⁸

In a similar vein, St. Gregory the Great affirms: “Sacred Scripture, in its very manner of speaking, is above all other sciences because in one and the same word, while it narrates an event, it sets forth a mystery.”³⁹ St. Thomas expounds upon this idea in his commentary on Hebrews 5:12–14, in which the Christians are told they need someone to teach them again the “oracles” (*logiòn/sermonum*) of God, and that they need milk, not solid food:

³⁷ “Et sic in homine instruit intellectum et immediate per sacras litteras, et mediate per alias scripturas.” *In 2 Tim 3:16*, lect. 3 (Marietti ed. §126).

³⁸ In using the word “referential” in this context, I am alluding to a statement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its *Bible et Christologie* (Paris: Cerf, 1984), 1.2.2.1: “The “auxiliary” languages used in the course of the Church’s history do not have for faith the same authority (*auctoritas/valeur*) as the “referential language used by the sacred authors.”

³⁹ “Sacra Scriptura omnes scientias ipso locutionis suae more transcendit, quia uno eodemque sermone dum narrat gestum, prodit mysterium.” *Moralia* 20,1 (PL 76,135).

For *sacra doctrina* is food and drink because it nourishes (*potat*) and satisfies the soul. The other sciences only enlighten the mind; this one, however enlightens the soul . . . This is a characteristic of the teaching of Sacred Scripture (*doctrina sacrae Scripturae*), that in it not only speculative things are handed on, but also those that are to be practiced through activity (*approbanda per affectum*).⁴⁰

The Scriptures are unique in their completeness. They are food and drink; they enlighten the mind and soul; and they govern both speculative and practical activity.

In his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius's treatise *On the Divine Names*, Aquinas articulates how the authority and power of Scripture arises ultimately from the Holy Spirit, who spoke through the Apostles and Prophets:

Dionysius, in his teaching (*doctrina*) depends upon (*innititur*) the authority of Sacred Scripture which has strength and power (*roborem habet et virtutem*) because the Apostles and Prophets were moved to speak by the Holy Spirit who was revealing to them and speaking in them.⁴¹

In a commentary on Ephesians 6:13–17, Aquinas further elucidates how the power of the preached word comes from the Holy Spirit:

Just as in bodily warfare this [attack on the enemy] is accomplished by a sword so also is this accomplished by the word of God which is, spiritually, the sword of the Spirit which you must take up. As it says in Hebrews 4:12, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing through to the division between soul and spirit, joints and marrow; discerning the purposes and thoughts of the heart.” Thus preaching is called the sword of the Spirit because it cannot reach the human spirit unless it be wielded by the Holy Spirit: “It will not be you speaking but the Spirit of your Father who

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *On Hebrews*, c. 5, lect. 2.

⁴¹ Aquinas, In *De divinis nominibus* c. 1, lect. 1.

is speaking in you” (Matt 10:20) . . . Thus, we have weapons for fighting the demons themselves, namely, the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. Frequently in sermons, the word of God, penetrating the hearts of sinners, drives out the tangled mass of sins and demons.⁴²

Continuing this same line of reasoning about the Holy Spirit and Scripture, Henri de Lubac writes:

Thus Scripture is not merely divinely guaranteed. It is divinely true. The Spirit did not merely dictate it. The Spirit immured himself in it, as it were. He lives in it. His breath has always animated it. The Scripture is “fertilized by a miracle of the Holy Spirit.” It is “full of the Spirit.”⁴³

I now will consider a key action by which one becomes an “understander” of revelation, namely, the Eucharistic Liturgy, the original home of *lectio divina*.

“The Liturgy: Privileged Setting for the Word of God”

Most will recognize this title as designating the first major section of Part Two of *Verbum Domini*, namely, *Verbum in Ecclesia*. I now wish to place in prominence the active role that the biblical word plays in its own understanding. This notion is well articulated by Joseph Ratzinger in his book, *Revelation and Tradition*: “it becomes clear that we must go behind the positive sources, scripture and tradition, to their inner source, revelation, the living word of God from which scripture and tradition spring and without which their significance for faith cannot be understood.”⁴⁴ In *Verbum Domini*, in the aforementioned section, Benedict builds upon this theme:

⁴² Aquinas, *On Ephesians*, c. 6, lect. 4.

⁴³ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 1, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 82. The citations in the text are from Anselm, *De concord.* 3,6 (PL 157,528B) and Origen, *De Princ.* 4,1,7, respectively.

⁴⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, “Revelation and Tradition,” in *Revelation and Tradition* (Montreal: Palm, 1966), 34.

it must be said that Christ himself “is present in his word, since it is he who speaks when Scripture is read in Church.”⁴⁵ Indeed, “the liturgical celebration becomes the continuing, complete and effective presentation of God’s word. The word of God, constantly proclaimed in the liturgy, is always a living and effective word through the power of the Holy Spirit. It expresses the Father’s love that never fails in its effectiveness towards us.”⁴⁶ The Church has always realized that in the liturgical action the word of God is accompanied by the interior working of the Holy Spirit who makes it effective in the hearts of the faithful. Thanks to the Paraclete, “the word of God becomes the foundation of the liturgical celebration, and the rule and support of all our life. The working of the same Holy Spirit . . . brings home to each person individually everything that in the proclamation of the word of God is spoken for the good of the whole gathering” . . . *A faith-filled understanding of Sacred Scripture must always refer back to the liturgy in which the word of God is celebrated as a timely and living word.* (§52)⁴⁷

In the liturgy, Christ is actually present in the proclaimed scriptures, and the Holy Spirit makes this Word efficacious in the hearts of believers. The section of *Verbum Domini* dedicated to “The word of God and the Eucharist” brings us to a central insight of Joseph Ratzinger, which is intimately related to our previous discussion of the power of the Word. He writes:

Unless we acknowledge the Lord’s real presence in the Eucharist, our understanding of Scripture remains imperfect. For this reason “the Church has honoured the word of God and the Eucharistic mystery with the same reverence, although not with the same worship, and has always and everywhere insisted upon and sanctioned such honour.” (§55)

⁴⁵ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §7.

⁴⁶ *Ordo Lectionum Missae* 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

The power of the Word of God, then, is grounded in an analogy with the Eucharist.

In the next section, Pope Benedict proceeds to analyze the sacramentality of the word. He refers to the following remark of Pope John Paul II from *Fides et Ratio*:

To assist reason in its effort to understand the mystery there are the signs which Revelation itself presents . . . In a sense, then, we return to the *sacramental* character of Revelation and especially to the sign of the Eucharist, in which the indissoluble unity between the signifier and signified makes it possible to grasp the depths of the mystery. (§13)

The Pontiff returns to this earlier theme in order to understand the proclamation of the word in the light of sacramentality. Such an approach integrates the aspects of the mystery of the Word/word and points the way toward understanding:

The sacramentality of the word can thus be understood by analogy with the real presence of Christ under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine. By approaching the altar and partaking in the Eucharistic banquet we truly share in the body and blood of Christ. The proclamation of God's word at the celebration entails an acknowledgment that Christ himself is present, that he speaks to us, and that he wishes to be heard. (§56)⁴⁸

By making this analogy, Joseph Ratzinger points to the active part the Word of God plays in its being understood. The realities borne to us by the inspired Word cause their understanding. More than any other word, the inspired Word plays a sacramental role in regard to the recipient, thus the analogy with the Eucharist and the precisising of what is meant by *understanding* this Word. I will now sum up what I have attempted to elaborate and point to the work that still lies ahead in understanding the inspired Word.

⁴⁸ This passage refers to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1373–74, on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §7, on the reality of the Church as the Body of Christ.

Conclusion

In this article, I first attempted to clarify, through the teaching of Ratzinger and Thomas, that the transmission of revelation requires Sacred Scripture to be understood in its spiritual sense. The words reach beyond themselves to the divine reality. Robert Sokolowski contributes to this line of reasoning by teaching that words are bearers of reality, that is, they are the reality in another form of existence. In this light, I considered the presence of the Logos to Israel as an anticipated participation in the mystery of the Incarnation. Because the word is the reality in another form of existence, the question finally shifted to a consideration of the power of the reality. There is still much work to be done here. The direction is partially set, I think, by the understanding of what I considered last, namely, the analogous sacramental presence of Christ in the word, especially at the Eucharistic liturgy. Herein lies the urgency of restoring preaching as an essential part of the liturgy. By means of Sacred Tradition, the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles is handed on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Again, though the direction has been set, there is much work to be done here as well. This is an invitation to much serious effort, while bearing in mind the Arab saying that we should save a little work for our children. 