

THE CHALLENGE OF *JESUS OF NAZARETH* FOR THEOLOGIANS

• Roch Kereszty •

“Our union with the mind and will
of Christ provides the foundation
for a Christian theology of secularity.”



Pope Benedict's *Jesus of Nazareth* poses a manifold challenge for theologians. Instead of articulating doctrinal theses as the supreme teacher of the Catholic Church, Benedict takes off the protective armor of his office and, addressing believers and unbelievers alike as a simple theologian, presents to the world his “personal search ‘for the face of the Lord.’”¹ He makes it very clear from the beginning that his book is in no way an exercise of the Magisterium, but rather relies solely on the persuasive weight of its argument. He anticipates criticism and contradiction with the peaceful serenity of a veteran theologian who trusts fully in the power of truth. His evident sincerity and assurance proved appealing: *Jesus of Nazareth* sold 1.5 million copies within the first month of its publication on the European market.

¹Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xxiii.

1. *Why such interest for the book?*

In addition to the natural curiosity of people “to look at the emperor without his clothes,” which in this case means to look at the personal faith of the official guardian of the Faith, the book owes its attraction to the widespread confusion about, and lively interest in, the figure of Jesus. As Pope Benedict himself acknowledges, the purported effort to reach the “real” Jesus behind the crust of ecclesiastical dogma by separating “the historical Jesus” from “the Christ of faith,” a quest which began at the end of the eighteenth century in liberal German Protestant circles, has produced a confusing number of contradictory portrayals of Jesus. “At one end of the spectrum was the anti-Roman revolutionary working—though finally failing—to overthrow the ruling powers; at the other end, he was the meek moral teacher who approves everything and unaccountably comes to grief.” What Albert Schweitzer noticed in 1906, Pope Benedict extended also to the later stages of the quest: “If you read a number of these reconstructions one after the other, you see at once that far from uncovering an icon that has become obscured over time, they are much more like photographs of their authors and the ideals they hold.” The only point on which all reconstructions agreed was that the historical Jesus was *not* the Jesus of the Gospels, while the conflict of the contradictory portrayals of Jesus left the impression “that we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus and that only at a later stage did faith in his divinity shape the image we have of him.” This kind of literature has created “a dramatic situation” for the faith of the Christian people because “intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air.”² We should not be surprised, then, that so many people want to find out why this Pope, who is so aware of the contemporary intellectual landscape, is able to speak about Jesus with such consummate assurance and insight.

²Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xii. On the stages and details of the history of the Quest for the Historical Jesus, see John P. Meier, “The Real Jesus and the Historical Jesus” in volume one of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 21–40; Roch Kereszty, *Jesus Christ. Fundamentals of Christology*, revised 2nd ed. (Staten Island: Alba House, 2002), 3–31.

2. *The book's literary genre and its setting in Benedict's life*

His book resists rigid classification into exegetical study, systematic Christology, homily, or mystical theology; in some sense, it is all of these. Though not a work of scholarly exegesis, it discloses the profound unity between the Old and New Testaments, as well as among the Synoptic, Johannine, and Pauline Christologies. It presents no systematic christological treatise, yet it lays foundations for a future christological synthesis. It is not a collection of homilies, but by drawing on its insights, homilists can revitalize their preaching. It is not a treatise of mystical theology either, yet it springs from an intimate friendship with Christ and intends to lead its readers to such a friendship. *Mutatis mutandis*, we could, in fact, apply to this work what Gregory the Great said about Scripture: it is a river in which the lamb walks but the elephant is able to swim.³ *Jesus of Nazareth* can indeed be profitably read by a college graduate, but it also provides new insights to learned exegetes and theologians. What is, then, its literary genre? Pope Benedict himself describes it simply as “an expression of my personal search ‘for the face of the Lord.’”⁴

We can better understand Benedict's unique blend of theology, exegesis, and contemplation if we compare it with the theological style of the Church Fathers and with that of St. Augustine in particular. When visiting St. Augustine's tomb in Pavia, Pope Benedict explained that the second stage in Augustine's conversion took place at the time when Augustine accepted ordination to the priesthood and gave up his contemplative scholarly existence for the sake of the ministry. He devoted himself to learning how to teach the most sublime mysteries of faith to the simplest folks in the city of Hippo. Through all this, he did not cease being a theologian; he merely abandoned the esoteric language and lifestyle of the scholar. Eventually, he succeeded in expressing the deepest theology in the simplest language, comprehensible for his provincial audience and yet an enduring challenge for the learned.⁵

We find a similar development in Joseph Ratzinger's life journey. From an early age he felt the vocation to be a theologian; even after ordination, he found teaching and writing, rather than

³*Epistola ad Leandrum*, line 177 (Cetedoc, Cl. 1708 SL143).

⁴*Jesus of Nazareth*, xxiii, based on Psalm 27:8.

⁵See Zenit, 22 April 2007: <http://zenit.org/article-19430?l=english>.

pastoral ministry, to be most congenial to his talents and personality. Then came the unexpected appointment to the archbishopric of Munich-Freising in 1977 by Pope Paul VI. Archbishop Ratzinger explained the irony of his life by telling the legend of the first bishop of Munich-Freising, St. Corbinian. As the saint was riding to Rome, a bear ran out of the forest and devoured his horse. The saint ordered the bear to carry his pack to Rome for him. Ratzinger made the bear part of his coat of arms, likening himself to that bear: instead of indulging in theological thinking, writing, and teaching, he had no choice but to carry the heavy pack of St. Corbinian, the burden of the pastoral office.⁶ Nevertheless, like St. Augustine, Archbishop Ratzinger did not cease to be a theologian; instead, he learned to teach the deepest mysteries of faith in a language that speaks to ordinary people.

In the patristic age and in the early Middle Ages, great theologians were, as a rule, also great proclaimers of the faith (as bishops, priests, and monks) and great mystagogues, competent and willing to lead the faithful toward an intimate personal union with God. They had a strong impact on the life of the Church. From the late Middle Ages onward, however, an increasing trend of specialization and differentiation set in, with the result that dogmatic theology, moral theology, exegesis, and ascetico-mystical theology became separate domains for the competence of different groups of scholars. The influence of theologians on the thinking, life, and spirituality of the Church was thus severely marginalized. Theologians began to write for other theologians and for their students, but the Church at large felt excluded from the esoteric language games of the experts. While there were always great exceptions of saintly pastor-theologians in the Church (such as Cardinals Bellarmine, Bérulle, and Newman), only the twentieth century saw a significant change in this trend. Guardini, de Lubac, Daniélou, Congar, and Balthasar, just to mention some of the most prominent names, combined all three vocations in their lives. They were, at one and the same time, theologians, shepherds, and masters of spiritual life. Yet the one who best epitomizes this contemporary synthesis of preaching, theology, and mystagogy is the German bear who obediently carried the heavy burden of the pastoral office, first to the

⁶See Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones. Memoirs 1927–1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 154–155.

Piazza del Sant'Uffizio (as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith), and finally, on 19 April 2005, to the very Chair of Peter. The success of his *Jesus of Nazareth* challenges today's theologians to embrace a more integral ecclesial vocation. This new type of theology should not be a slavish imitation, but a contemporary re-creation of the patristic model. Scholarly research and painstaking technical analysis of details is evidently indispensable; Benedict himself utilizes the fruits that have accrued throughout the centuries from the specialized development of the different theological specialties, including the positive results of historical-critical exegesis. Nevertheless, if ultimate Truth is ultimate Love, and if God invites us to share in His own life of love, then theologians should articulate all the mysteries of faith in such a way as to present the concrete shape and form of this invitation and participation. Theological knowledge, in other words, should lead us to Christian life and union with God.

3. *The "historical Jesus" and the Gospels*

As is well known, David F. Strauss coined the terms "Jesus of history" and "Christ of faith" in the nineteenth century. By "Jesus of history" he meant the real Jesus as he lived and acted in history; by "Christ of faith" he meant the mythological figure of Church dogma. According to Strauss, the goal of historical research was to rediscover as much as possible the real "Jesus of history" by peeling off the crust of distorting ecclesiastical dogma. Since he considered anything supernatural (such as the Incarnation and Resurrection) to be *a priori* impossible, the real Jesus had to be, again *a priori*, merely human, devoid of "mythological distortions." This was—with minor differences—the position of the representatives of what is called today the first "Quest for the historical Jesus" in Germany. After its collapse at the beginning of the twentieth century, a period of skepticism with regard to the possibility of any reliable reconstruction of the real Jesus followed. Then the "Second Quest for the historical Jesus" came in the middle of the twentieth century, with more modest goals and a more sophisticated array of exegetical tools. Unlike the historians of the First Quest, these scholars did not set out to write a biography of Jesus, since they were convinced of its impossibility, yet they still attempted to draw a portrayal of Jesus that would include some events of his life, some of his teachings, and

some features of his personality. Soon, with the green light given by the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* in 1943, Catholic exegetes eagerly joined this enterprise. Most of them, however, acknowledged that their portrait of Jesus could not be identical with the real Jesus as he lived and acted in history, but could only be a mental construct based on a fragment of Jesus' reality. Moreover, the historians in the Second Quest, especially the Catholic exegetes, were more positive with regard to the Church's "Christ of faith." Many of them recognized continuity between the latter and the Jesus of history. Yet, even many Catholic scholars showed reservation in affirming the reality of the full Gospel portrait of Jesus. Benedict, for example, quotes Rudolph Schnackenburg, according to whom the Gospels "want, as it were, to clothe with flesh the mysterious Son of God who appeared on earth."⁷ There is, however, no need for the Gospels to clothe him with flesh, counters the Pope, and no need to dress him up with imaginary stories, since he himself has truly taken flesh, lived, and acted in history. Nevertheless, the Pope sympathizes with the difficulty of reaching his flesh "through the dense jungle of traditions."⁸

In addition to the distrust in the reality of the Gospel portrayals of Jesus, we find among the "Jesus of history" scholars an effort to explain the *Gestalt* of Jesus by squeezing him into a well-known historical category. Benedict admits that this is how historiography operates most of the time: it presupposes a certain kind of "uniformity" among the historical events,⁹ and explains new events and characters by fitting them into previously established historical patterns. Depending on the author, Jesus is thus interpreted by the "New Quest" as a unique prophet or a charismatic healer, a moral teacher or apocalyptic dreamer.

Benedict acknowledges the complexity of the problems we are facing, especially the relationship between the "historical ground" and the "faith view" of the Gospels.¹⁰ Yet he boldly declares his full trust in the Gospels: "I wanted to try to portray the

⁷On page xiv, Benedict quotes Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels. A Biblical Christology*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 322.

⁸*Jesus of Nazareth*, xiv.

⁹Cf. *ibid.*, xvi–xvii.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, xiii.

Jesus of the Gospels as the real, 'historical' Jesus in the strict sense of the word."¹¹ His approach has nothing to do with a simplistic fundamentalism. He takes for granted "everything that the [Second Vatican] Council and modern exegesis tell us about literary genres, about authorial intention, and about the fact that the Gospels were written in the context, and speak within the living milieu, of communities."

In attempting to show that the Jesus of the Gospels *is* the historical Jesus, Benedict follows a way that differs substantially from the way recent Catholic and Protestant historians have tried to ground faith in the Jesus of the Gospels. By using the method and resources of historical criticism, the latter established a minimum of historical data about Jesus. Then they showed that their construct, this Jesus of history, was so impressive as to warrant faith and allegiance in him even today. Yet, as Schnackenburg himself admits, the handicap of this approach is to "draw us into a continual discussion of tradition and redaction history that never comes to rest."¹² Moreover, such a discussion does not provide us with adequate means to recover belief in the Jesus of the Gospels. There remains forever an unbridgeable gap between any reconstruction of the "Jesus of history" and the Jesus as he is portrayed in the Gospels.

Benedict, in contrast, finds a way to avoid the ever-changing quicksand of the varying "Jesus of history" reconstructions and manages to make credible—and even plausible—the Jesus of the Gospels. His starting point is the Gospel portrait of Jesus in the full depth and power of its mystery; this portrait, of course, can only be accepted by faith, but faith in the Jesus of the Gospels appears eminently reasonable in Benedict's book. Thus, his exegesis of the New Testament is clearly theological, since it presupposes faith in Jesus and seeks an understanding based on this faith, the *fides quaerens intellectum* of St. Anselm. The paradox of Benedict's approach, however, consists in this: while presupposing faith, it suggests a much more reasonable explanation for the historicity of the Jesus portrait of the New Testament than any rationalistic explanation could provide. Let Benedict speak for himself:

¹¹Ibid., xxi.

¹²Ibid., xiii.

I believe that this Jesus—the Jesus of the Gospels—is a historically plausible and convincing figure. Unless there had been something extraordinary in what happened, unless the person and the words of Jesus radically surpassed the hopes and expectations of the time, there is no way to explain why he was crucified or why he made such an impact. As early as twenty or so years after Jesus' death, the great Christ-hymn of the Letter to the Philippians (cf. 2:6–11) offers us a fully developed Christology stating that Jesus was equal to God, but emptied himself, became man, and humbled himself to die on the cross, and that to him now belongs the worship of all creation, the adoration that God, through the Prophet Isaiah, said was due to him alone (cf. Is 45:23).¹³

Critical scholarship rightly asks the question: What happened during those twenty years after Jesus' Crucifixion? Where did this Christology come from?

Could anonymous groups (the apostles and their followers) be so creative? Does it not seem more logical to assume that “the greatness came at the beginning, and that the figure of Jesus really did explode all existing categories and could only be understood in the light of the mystery of God?”¹⁴

Here we have touched upon the central methodological issue regarding access to the historical reality of Jesus: the exciting use of a theological method that Benedict practices but does not fully explicate here. In *Jesus of Nazareth*, he presents the New Testament figure of Jesus as fully and as forcefully as only believing theologians and masters of the German language can: by employing a unique blend of theological and poetic language. His approach certainly resembles that of Hans Urs von Balthasar, yet Benedict's language is more lucid and direct than that of his revered friend. He finds no better way to intimate the reality of Jesus' mystery than an evocative language that both veils and reveals the Divine. He does not reduce the figure and teaching of Jesus to an instance of a general historical pattern, but intimates Jesus' inexpressible mystery. Let just one short fragment illustrate the point:

Jesus does not appear in the role of a human genius subject to emotional upheavals, who sometimes fails and sometimes

¹³*Jesus of Nazareth*, xxii.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, xxii–xxiii.

succeeds. If that were the case he would remain just an individual who lived long ago and so would ultimately be separated from us by an unbridgeable gulf. Instead, he stands before us as the “beloved Son.” He is, on one hand, the Wholly Other, but by the same token he can also become a contemporary of us all, “more interior” to each one of us “than we are to ourselves.”¹⁵

In Benedict’s work, then, the rational, historical-critical argument is fully integrated into the faith-inspired perception of Jesus’ divine mystery. Only those who open up to God’s grace as they meditate on the “figure of Jesus” perceive clearly the logical force of his argument: the portrait of Jesus in the New Testament is better explained by the reality of Jesus himself than by an appeal to an inventive group of secondary figures and/or anonymous communities. Moreover, if the Jesus portrait was created by the different faith communities, how do we explain the “deep harmony” of the different New Testament documents “despite all their differences”?¹⁶

Why did the Pope choose this approach of *fides quaerens intellectum*? Why not stay on the level of pure “historical reasoning” so that, with the famous image of J. P. Meier, the Jew, the agnostic, and the Christian could all agree upon the truth of Jesus without giving up their respective worldviews?¹⁷ The main reason is both theological and pastoral. Benedict knows that in the concrete order of salvation, no human being exists in the mere (pure) state of nature. In other words, every human being on earth either accepts (or is in the process of accepting) God’s inviting grace and thus is open to the supernatural mystery of Christ, or he rejects (or is in the process of rejecting) grace and therefore is closed up to Christ’s mystery. Even the person in the state of willful unbelief, however, has not yet definitively hardened himself while here on earth, and therefore he may still embrace faith as he allows himself to be impressed by the reality of the Jesus of the Gospels. Once he opens up to God’s grace, however, this grace will not destroy the operation of his intellect, but will rather purify and enhance it. Thus, for both kinds of readers (those open to grace by grace and those closed to grace), exposure to the full *Jesugestalt* of the New Testament is

¹⁵Ibid., xxiv. Cf. the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine, III, 6, 11.

¹⁶*Jesus of Nazareth*, xxiii.

¹⁷Cf. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1–2.

substantially more profitable than the allegedly neutral approach of historians and exegetes, including Catholic scholars.

In contrast, the usual practice of Catholic scholars has been as follows. They accepted from the consensus of biblical scholars a set of criteria which prove, with varying degrees of certainty, the historical authenticity of a fact, saying, or event regarding Jesus. While bracketing any positive influence of their faith, these scholars construct, by using these criteria, a historically “provable” yet fragmentary portrait of Jesus, their own “Jesus of history.” Only then does the exegete take a theologian’s approach and attempt to show that this historically guaranteed portrayal of a fragment of Jesus resists any conventional rational explanation, and can best be explained by accepting Jesus’ divine claim. The problem with this approach is twofold. (1) Although we can demonstrate that even a fragment of the New Testament *Jesugestalt* explodes our conventional categories of history and thus suggests the presence of a mystery, with this method we can hardly show that the Jesus of the New Testament is identical with the real Jesus as he lived in history. (2) Although even a fragmentary portrait of Jesus participates in his mystery, and thus may orient one toward faith, none of these “Jesus of history” reconstructions is as powerful in breaking through the skepticism of an unbeliever as is the concrete *Jesugestalt* of the New Testament. To the extent that the theologian-historian is able adequately to depict the figure of Jesus in the Gospels, the power of his person and his teaching may impress itself even on an entrenched skeptic.

4. *The unity of Scriptures*

The prevailing approach to Scripture in our times is to emphasize the irreducible differences and even contradictions between the Old and the New Testament, the various books of both Testaments, and even the diverse layers of tradition or redaction within each document. Benedict is well aware of this tendency among biblical scholars, and acknowledges its usefulness to a certain degree. In this book, though, he demonstrates the immense heuristic value of his faith conviction, that no matter how different the literary form and the historical context of each biblical document may be, all of them together constitute one book (*eine Schrift*), insofar as they reflect the one saving plan of God whose center is Jesus of Nazareth.

Since Benedict starts the interpretation of the mystery of Jesus through the Old Testament, we would have expected him to treat the Messianic prophecies and show how Jesus fulfilled them. However, such an approach would have resulted in a repeat performance of the two-thousand-year-old Jewish (and liberal Christian) rebuttal: Jesus does not fit the job description of the Messiah as it is prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Messiah is not supposed to be God himself, but a great leader, the harbinger and ruler of universal peace. Jesus, however, claimed to be God and did not establish world peace. Instead of setting himself up for this customary Jewish response, Benedict begins with a meditation on Deuteronomy 18:15–18 in the context of the book’s conclusion: God will raise up a prophet like Moses for the people, God will put all his words into his mouth, and they should listen to him. This promise cannot be reduced to the institution of prophecy in the history of Israel, for Deuteronomy 34:10 concludes that “there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses whom the Lord knew face to face.” Thus, an eschatological prophet, someone like Moses and greater than Moses, who yearned to see the face of God but was allowed to see only his back (Deut 33:18–23), is promised and awaited here at the end of times. Then the full meaning of the New Testament theme “Jesus *the* prophet” or “Jesus the new Moses,” which runs through Luke-Acts, Matthew, and John, dawns on us: “No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son who is nearest to the Father’s heart, who has made him known (John 1:18):”

What was true of Moses only in fragmentary form has now been fully realized in the person of Jesus: He lives before the face of God, not just as a friend, but as a Son; he lives in the most intimate unity with the Father.¹⁸

In this perspective, the Johannine Prologue’s conclusion is not a foreign element opposed to the Synoptic view and to the Old Testament, but precisely the articulation of the Synoptic view on the relationship between Jesus and his *Abba*. Jesus speaks not from fragmentary knowledge but from an unceasing face-to-face dialogue with his Father. The Pope’s approach, then, brings to light Israel’s deepest religious longing: her desire to see the face of God as it finds

¹⁸*Jesus of Nazareth*, 6.

expression in Deuteronomy and the Psalms.¹⁹ In fact, all of Israel's religious history could be characterized by her search for the face of God and her repeated turning away from that search, which results in God's hiding his face from his people. From this perspective (whether one accepts the Christian faith or not), Benedict can show that the New Testament claims Jesus to be the fulfillment of this desire. Jesus is the new Moses who continuously sees God face to face. In this way, Benedict's "simple gaze at the whole"²⁰ reveals the deep inner coherence and unity among the Old Testament, the Synoptics, and John. As a result, the theme of Jesus as *the* Prophet and as the New Moses in the Synoptics and in John appears as the obvious fulfillment not only of the promise of Deuteronomy 18:15 but of the central dynamism of Israel's faith. This one theme should suffice to illustrate the rich fruits of Benedict's faith supposition on the unity of the Bible.²¹

5. *Christology and the message of Jesus*

Harnack's famous statement that "Jesus' message is about the Father, not about the Son, and that Christology therefore has no place in it"²² expressed in a radical way a prevailing view of his peers and, over the long run, influenced even the position of many Catholic New Testament scholars. A real cleavage opened up between what was presented as the authentic message and self-

¹⁹See, for example, Deut 34:10; Ps 13:1, 24:6, 27:8–9, 30:7, 31:16, 41:12, 44:24, 67:1, 88:14, 102:2, 119:135, 143:7; Is 54:8, 64:7.

²⁰*Jesus of Nazareth*, 342. The German (on page 393 of the German edition) is "der einfache Blick auf das Ganze."

²¹As Denis Farkasfalvy's article ("*Jesus of Nazareth* and the Renewal of New Testament Theology," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 34, no. 3 [Fall 2007]) explains in more detail, the rational foundations of this faith supposition are summarized succinctly in Benedict's introduction to his book: any human utterance may contain more meaning than its authors actually were aware of. Moreover, the biblical authors did not simply write for themselves, but spoke from the perspective of a common history that sustains them and "that already contains the possibilities of its future, of the further stages of its journey. The process of continually rereading and drawing out new meanings from words would not have been possible unless the words themselves were already open to it from within."

²²*Jesus of Nazareth*, 7.

understanding of Jesus on the one hand, and the Christology of Paul and John on the other, while the doctrine of the Ecumenical Councils appeared as an illegitimate hellenization of biblical Christology. This state of affairs has paralyzed for a long time the efforts of those theologians who intended to build a biblically based dogmatic (systematic) Christology. They had a hard time perceiving and explaining that, in spite of some differences, there is an underlying unity among Jesus' self-understanding, Pauline and Johannine Christology, and the Christology of the first six Ecumenical Councils.

Relying to a large extent on what has been accepted as authentic Jesus traditions by most scholars, Benedict shows that "Jesus is only able to speak about the Father in the way he does because he is the Son, because of his filial communion with the Father. The christological dimension . . . is present in everything Jesus says and does."²³ The center of Jesus' message is indeed not himself but the Kingdom of God. The underlying Hebrew word *malkut* does not mean a domain or realm, but rather a king's activity: the Kingdom of God is God's active lordship in the world. Thus, when Jesus declares that the "Kingdom of God is at hand," and that the "Kingdom of God has come upon you," he refers to himself as he casts out demons, forgives sins, heals the sick, and calls repentant sinners to the wedding feast. The distinguishing feature of Jesus' proclamation "is to be found in Jesus himself":

Through Jesus' presence and action, God has here and now entered actively into history in a wholly new way. The reason why *now* is the fullness of time (Mk 1:15), why *now* is in a unique sense the time of conversion and penance, as well as the time of joy, is that in Jesus it is God who draws near to us. In Jesus, God is now the one who acts and who rules as Lord—rules in a divine way, without worldly power, rules through the love that reaches to the end (Jn 13:1), to the cross.²⁴

In a profound way, then, the message and activity of Jesus is theocentric and, for that reason, christocentric. God is present and active *because* Jesus is present and active.

²³Ibid., 7.

²⁴Ibid., 60–61.

The same dialectic characterizes the rest of his preaching. He cannot reveal the ultimate depth of the mystery of God without revealing simultaneously the corresponding depth of his own communion with Him. When reflecting on Jesus' relationship to the Torah, Benedict quotes with approval the insights of the famous Jewish rabbi Jacob Neusner in his book, *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus*.²⁵ In the book, Neusner places himself in the audience for the Sermon on the Mount and listens to him with the sensitivity of a believing Jew who jealously guards Israel's faith in the one God. While he finds much to admire and ponder in Jesus' teaching, Neusner eventually decides not to join the disciples of Jesus. He sees clearly that Jesus is not a liberal rabbi who relaxes the rigor of the Law, but rather "takes the place of the Torah" himself: according to Jesus one becomes holy not simply by following the precepts of the Law, but by following Jesus himself. Relationship to Jesus is above any blood relationship within the family on which the sacred social order of Israel depends. Moreover, by claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath, in fact replacing the Sabbath rest with rest in him, Jesus attacks the core of the social order of "eternal Israel." Neusner concludes, and rightly so according to Benedict, that Jesus should be charged with disobedience against the Law unless, of course, he is on the level of God. Neusner, in fact, asks a disciple of Jesus the decisive question: "Is it really so that your master, the son of man, is lord of the Sabbath? . . . I ask again—is your master God?"²⁶

Since the Kingdom of God is God present and acting in Jesus, the parables reveal to us the mystery of Jesus and his Cross. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus is "God's arm" (from St. Augustine) by which the Father embraces the Son who was lost and is found, was dead and now came back to life.²⁷ The Johannine parable of the seed that dies and so bears fruit (Jn 12:24) summarizes and discloses the christological meaning of the many Synoptic seed parables: "Jesus is not only the sower who scatters the seed of God's word, but also the seed that falls into the earth."²⁸

²⁵Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

²⁶*Jesus of Nazareth*, 110, quoted from Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus*, 88.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 207.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 191.

Jesus' conviction by the Sanhedrin for blasphemy makes sense only if we realize that Jesus was not a simple wisdom teacher or a liberal moralist but, as the Gospels claim, his teaching and actions threatened the Jews' understanding of monotheism. His judges sensed that Jesus put himself "on equal footing with the living God himself," the same scandal Rabbi Neusner experienced in our times when reading the Sermon on the Mount.²⁹

Benedict takes issue with the widely accepted view that the disciples recognized Jesus' divinity only after his death and Resurrection. Of course, he admits that the apostles could articulate a clear confession of faith in Jesus' divine standing only after the Resurrection; the cumulative testimony of many dialogues between Jesus and the disciples, however, shows that "in various ways the disciples were repeatedly able to sense in Jesus the presence of the living God himself."³⁰ This awareness of God's proximity in Jesus is the foundation for the post-Easter faith of the disciples: "Where is post-Easter faith supposed to have come from if Jesus laid no foundation for it before Easter?"³¹

These are only a few samples to illustrate the christological center of the Gospels. Where others had seen no intimations of Jesus' divinity or at most only a few ambiguous hints, Benedict perceives its splendor everywhere. The glory of Jesus' divinity, however, shines not in lofty, other-worldly scenes, but on the Cross, where he will reveal his love to the end and draw all to himself. For this reason, every intimation of Jesus' divine status and communion with the Father is linked to a prediction of his Passion and Resurrection, as well as to his invitation to discipleship, to follow him on the road to the Cross.

6. Christology and the theology of secularity

In the Pope's synthetic vision, the mystery of Christ is the illuminating center for every major theological theme or treatise. Thus the prayer of Jesus sheds light on the eternal intra-trinitarian communion between Father and Son in the Holy Spirit. The drawing of the disciples into Jesus' filial relationship with the Father

²⁹Ibid., 303.

³⁰Ibid., 302.

³¹Ibid., 303.

shows the right starting point for a christologically centered anthropology and ecclesiology. Jesus' baptism, his feeding of the multitudes, and the Last Supper provide the right perspective on the meaning of the Church's sacraments. Surprisingly—and this is the theme I choose to explain here in some detail—our union with the mind and will of Christ provides the foundation for a Christian theology of secularity. Benedict begins by admitting with Neusner and others that, unlike the Old Testament, the New has no moral code for the order of society: “The Sermon on the Mount cannot serve as a foundation for a state and the social order.”³² In fact, according to Benedict, Neusner rightly points out that Jesus relativizes the fourth commandment by placing allegiance to, and love for, his person above the family ties on which Israel's society was built. He shakes the very foundations of Jewish society by replacing the Torah (and in particular the Sabbath rest) with himself. Instead of teaching social ethics, Jesus opens up the way for us to share his sonship and his unity of will with his Father. This is the freedom from the letter of the Torah that St. Paul proclaims, a freedom that is not bound by the individual prescriptions of the Law of Moses. But this is not freedom according to the flesh and not a licentious freedom, but “a ‘seeing’ freedom, anchored in communion of will with Jesus and so with God himself.”³³ If our wills become united with the will of God, we are set free to build up, by using our reasoning abilities, a concrete social order that might differ from country to country, from culture to culture and from age to age. Christ's grace, as in other areas as well, enables the human mind and freedom to operate at its best in the realm of moral responsibility.

At this point Benedict develops one of his favorite insights: the Christian justification for the right autonomy of the secular order. While critics like to dismiss Ratzinger's views as totally opposed to modernity, here and in many of his previous works Ratzinger explains one of the most important milestones of modernity, the secular state. Even though the modern age was instrumental in its development, it was Christianity that brought about

³²Ibid., 114.

³³Ibid., 119. Benedict does not elaborate on the role of the Holy Spirit regarding Christian freedom, even though for Paul the law of Christ is also the law of the Spirit. Compare Gal 5:18 with Rom 8:2.

an epoch-making event in world history that has not occurred as such in any other culture: the concrete political and social order is released from the directly sacred realm, from theocratic legislation, and is transferred to the freedom of man, whom Jesus has established in God's will and taught thereby to see the right and the good.³⁴

Here then is the paradox that derives from the very heart of Christianity: the Incarnation and redemption by the Son of God sets us free from an absolute theocratic order so that, united with the will of God and purified by his Spirit, we are able to use all our rational resources to work out a concrete social and political order which has its own legitimate autonomy. In Christianity there is no one sacred blueprint for society, but the peoples, united with God's will, are encouraged to work out the model that best fits the needs of a given culture and civilization.

Here we also grasp the christological basis for Benedict's opposition to a certain kind of capitalist society and a certain form of liberation theology. Benedict uses every opportunity to call Christians (and all human beings) to fight the social ills of society, and to build a more just and humane social and political order. But just as he criticizes the Constantinian symbiosis of church and empire, he condemns the absolutization of any technological or social program. Third-world countries will be harmed if the West provides only technological aid while shoving aside religion and traditional culture as unimportant. In the same way, a utopian liberation program that downgrades the Gospel, God, and religion, into a means to promote the well-being of society does more harm than good. The results will be greater oppression and worse injustice than before, as terribly evidenced in the history of the twentieth century.

7. *Contemplative theology*

The reviews which characterized *Jesus of Nazareth* as a mixture of theology and the expression of personal devotion missed one of its significant features. Instead of being a mixture or juxtaposition of theological reflections and effusions of religious sentiment,

³⁴Ibid., 118. Benedict admits that moderns at first understood this secularity in a one-sided and false way.

it is Benedict's theology itself that, like its patristic precedent, leads to contemplation by its own dynamics. We need to clarify this feature in some detail.

As we have already seen, the work avoids the temptation of the Jesus of history literature that has sought to reduce Jesus to a simple general category, such as the label of an apocalyptic prophet, wisdom teacher, or social revolutionary. With equal consistency, the Pope also avoids the approach of earlier neo-scholastic Christologies that built a complex framework of abstract concepts in order to articulate the mystery of Christ, but with the unintentional result of obscuring rather than illuminating the living reality of Jesus of Nazareth. Benedict is fully aware of the importance of metaphysical speculation, but he prefers a personalist, concrete, and at times poetic language that leads not to speculating about, but to encountering the living person of Christ himself. One word, *unterwegs*, "being on the way," is more expressive in German than in English, and it characterizes the entire work. This is how Benedict himself begins his introduction: "*Zu dem Jesus-Buch . . . bin ich lange innerlich unterwegs gewesen.*" The translation can provide only a distant approximation: "This book about Jesus . . . has had a long gestation."³⁵ But the German speaks literally about the long inner journey Benedict traveled towards this book. At other places in the book, the Pope implies that he and the Church are still on the way to Jesus. In Thomas's confession, "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28), the disciples found the perfect form of their confession of faith:

Yet, at the end, we remain always on the road with this word [of confession]. It is so great that we can never come to terms with it; it always remains ahead of us. Throughout her entire history the Church always makes her pilgrimage anew into this word. Only by touching Jesus' wounds and encountering his Resurrection can it be grasped, and then it becomes our mission.³⁶

Notice the threefold repetition of the word "always," emphasizing the never-ending pilgrimage of the Church toward grasping the full meaning of her confession of faith.

³⁵*Jesus von Nazareth* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 10; *Jesus of Nazareth*, xi.

³⁶*Jesus von Nazareth*, 352. I use here my own awkward, more literal translation to point out the concrete poetic language of the original.

When Benedict describes the mystery of Jesus' divine-human identity and his relationship to the Father, he uses, instead of the terminology of the hypostatic union, a concrete personalist language that brings us much closer to participating in the mystery:

Jesus' own "I" is always opened into "being with" the Father: he is never alone, but is forever receiving himself from and giving himself back to the Father. "My teaching is not mine"; his "I" is opened up into the Trinity. Those who come to know him "see" the Father; they enter into this communion of his with the Father. It is precisely this transcendent dialogue, which encounter with Jesus involves, that once more reveals to us the true Shepherd, who does not take possession of us, but leads us to the freedom of our being by leading us into communion with God and by giving his own life.³⁷

Here we see the goal of Benedict's book, which in fact should become the goal of a renewed theology. It goes beyond the articulation of concepts for expressing the metaphysical dimension of the Christian mystery, however important this task may be. It aims at helping the "I" of the reader die to its limits and enter into the "I" of Jesus so that the reader may also "see" the Father.³⁸ This "seeing," this sharing in the communion between Jesus and the Father, this continuously being "*unterwegs*," this never-ending pilgrimage into the unfathomable depth of the Church's confession of faith, constitutes both the actual practice and the goal of the christological enterprise. It remains *always* on the way and yet, if genuine, it *always* already participates in the reality of the mystery.

Conclusions

The great challenge of *Jesus of Nazareth* for theologians, then, is to have confidence in the convincing power of the person of the Incarnate Logos as it is presented in the New Testament. The contemplation of his *Gestalt* purifies, uplifts, and enables the full exercise of the human logos, or human rationality. Theologians

³⁷*Jesus of Nazareth*, 283.

³⁸Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Spiritual Basis and Ecclesial Identity of Theology," in *The Nature and Mission of Theology. Approaches to Understanding Its Role in the Light of Present Controversy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 50–55.

should discover and present the full dimensions of the figure of Christ, and when they do, they will see for themselves how his *Gestalt* commands intellectual and existential acceptance by the believer and shakes up the complacency of the agnostic and unbeliever.

The book provides the theological rationale for the necessary use of the historical-critical method but calls theologians to transcend it, insofar as these theologians should be able to present credibly the unity of the Scriptures of both Testaments, and the unity of the manifold portrayals of Jesus in the New Testament.³⁹ It may not be easy for theologians to resist the book's challenge if such highly critical intellectuals as Peter Steinfels of the *New York Times* acknowledge that the book's "central case ultimately rests on the coherence and power of its portrait of Jesus as a person for whom 'communion with the Father' was 'the true center of his personality.' It is a case built not on psychological speculation or devotional fervor but on an imposing web of Old and New Testament texts. It is a case I find persuasive and deeply helpful."⁴⁰

If theologians followed the book's lead, it would inaugurate a new kind of theology for a new era in the Church, a theology practiced not for a select few in academia but for the enrichment of the faith of the entire Church. It would lead not only to concepts but to reality. It would not be satisfied with enlightening only the intellect, but it would become again—just as its patristic and monastic precedents—mystagogy, leading the believer to "see" the Father in Christ and to share in the trinitarian communion.

³⁹Fr. Joseph S. O'Leary's comments on the book show the remarkable ambivalence of those contemporary scholars who sense the liberating effect of this book on the average educated Catholic, but are unable to see the truth of a theological interpretation of Scripture which does not discard but rather transcends the historical method: "If Benedict is right, a whole century of New Testament scholarship will have to be radically corrected and largely jettisoned. For most readers of Benedict's book this will be received as an immense liberation, a recovery of the fullness of Christ in every page of scripture, but for critical exegetes and theologians it is more likely to induce gnashing of teeth and the sense of doors being locked." "A provocative book that challenges current theology" (*National Catholic Reporter* 43, no. 38 [21 September 2007]: 29).

⁴⁰"The Face of God. What Benedict's 'Jesus' Offers," *Commonweal* 84, no. 14 (17 August 2007): 9.

Such a christological concentration would also result in setting human rationality free. If the intellect and will are united to Christ, then one is not bound by the individual social precepts of the Old Testament, but encouraged to use human reasoning to build up different social orders in different cultures and times, each in accord with Christian morality. Thus, instead of simply eliminating liberation theology, Ratzinger's book is encouraging the emancipation of "the concrete political and social order" from "the directly sacred realm," and "assigning reason its sphere of responsibility for acting within history." Benedict's challenge, then, calls for the full actualization of human resourcefulness in building a more just social order rather than advocating one rigid theologico-social program, as it had been done in ancient theocracies and in some contemporary liberation theologies.

Finally, Benedict's insight into Jesus as the new Moses, who sees God face to face and introduces us into his eternal communion with God, locates Jesus in the very heart of the "eternal Israel." The most noble longing, indeed the very obsession of Israel's believing remnant throughout the millennia, has been the relentless seeking after the face of her Lord. Conversely, just as the mystery of Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel, even if Israel at this point does not perceive it, the mystery of Israel belongs to the very heart of the Church without which the mystery of the Church would remain incomprehensible and distorted. □

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