



Church Tradition and Its Biblical Foundations in the Teaching of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. An Outline of Problems

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Abstract: The Tradition of the Church has been a vital part of the Christian faith since the apostolic age. It has its tangible, historical basis in Scripture, but at the same time, it is a supernatural, living and ever-present reality of the Church. Because of its relevance to Christian life, tradition is also a frequently debated theological topic in Catholic and Protestant theological circles. As a theologian, Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI created and offered the Church his concept of the Tradition of the Church, and that theological proposal is the subject of the present analyses. They aim to describe the sources, the essence and the constituent elements of the sacred Tradition of the Church in Ratzinger's lectures with particular reference to its biblical basis. A methodologically correct way of dealing with the issue at hand is a historical and, at the same time, theological analysis, since the subject of the study is the Church as a supernatural reality of the community of believers past and present. This article first discusses Joseph Ratzinger's publications on the Tradition of the Church, proceeding afterwards to present the essential elements of his understanding of Tradition and, finally, describing its biblical foundations. For Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, Tradition is the constant actualisation of Jesus' presence in the Church, the memory of him, but also the living experience of salvation.

Keywords: Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, tradition, tradition of the Church, Tradition and Scripture, Revelation, theological exegesis

The Tradition of the Church has been a vital part of the Christian faith since the apostolic age. It has its tangible, historical basis in Scripture, but at the same time, it is a supernatural, living and ever-present reality of the Church. Because of its momentousness and significance for Christian life, tradition is also an oft-discussed theological topic not only in Catholic but also in Protestant theological circles. Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI created and offered to the Church his own understanding of Tradition, which has been the subject of many factual discussions.¹ The theological phenomenon that is the concept of Tradition proposed by the German theologian is the subject of the analyses presented here. They aim to describe the sources, the essence and the constituent elements of the sacred Tradition

¹ See studies on the topic of Tradition in the teaching of Joseph Ratzinger: Rowland 2008, 48–65; Hahn 2009, particularly 50–53; Brotherton 2015, 98–103, 111; also Hofmann 2009, 31–58 and 58–63 (“Exkurs: Ratzinger gegen Rahner – Tradition gegen Spekulation?”); for more, see Blanco 2011; Gagliardi 2022.

in Joseph Ratzinger's teachings with particular reference to its biblical foundations. By necessity, the analysis must be set in the broader context of the theological edifice built by Joseph Ratzinger, as noted by the eminent American Catholic theologian Scott Hahn: "He understands all the essential constituent elements of the Church – the hierarchy of apostolic succession, the apostolic tradition, the canon of Scripture, the Creed, and the rule of faith – in relation to the revelation and mission of the Word of God." (2009, 49) A methodologically correct way of dealing with the issue at hand is a historical and, simultaneously, theological approach. This is because the object of analysis is not only the Church in its historical origins but the Church as a supernatural reality of the community of believers past and present. First, Joseph Ratzinger's publications and statements on Tradition are discussed chronologically in order to indicate the essential components of his understanding of Tradition, as well as to make it possible to describe its biblical dimensions, which is done in the final section. Given the vastness and comprehensiveness of Joseph Ratzinger's/Benedict XVI's theological thought, it should be noted from the outset that the discussion presented here is merely introductory to Ratzinger's concept of Tradition.

1. Called to Be a Theologian of Revelation

The study of the theological thought of Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) should be preceded by at least a general discussion and evaluation of the sources one intends to consider during the analyses. Indeed, the period of creative scholarly work of the pope from Bavaria, from his priestly ordination (1951) to the end of his life, covers more than seventy years and is embedded in the recent history of the Church. Leaving aside his childhood and family home, the period mentioned above (1951–2022) can be distinguished by at least three distinct phases in his life: first as a student, lecturer and professor (1951–1977),² then as a bishop, cardinal and Roman curial (1977–2005), and finally as pope (2005–2022).³

Considering the chronological development of Joseph Ratzinger's theological thought is certainly necessary when presenting his concept of the living Tradition of the Church. This is because this issue appears as early as the first stage of the future pope's scholarly work and is present virtually until the end of his public activity. The first inspirations were born out of Joseph Ratzinger's encounter and fascination with the writings of St Augustine (Ratzinger 1954) and St Bonaventure, to whom he dedicated his habilitation thesis on Revelation and Salvation History: Typoskript

² Joseph Ratzinger presented the initial period of his life in his memoirs while he was already Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Ratzinger 1998; cf. Verweyen 2007, 18–42).

³ Further detailed information can, of course, be found online and in special studies (Verweyen 2007; Hintermeier 2010; Seewald 2021).

1955 (Ratzinger 2014b), published version — 1959 (Ratzinger 2014c). Selected paragraphs of the unpublished manuscript were printed separately in a more recent study.⁴

An important phase of the first period of Joseph Ratzinger's life was his participation in the work of the Second Vatican Council. The future pope was present at all four conciliar sessions as *peritus*, a theological advisor to the Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Josef Frings (Ratzinger 1998, 120–31; Hofmann 2009, 36–48). This is significant because, among his many different activities, Ratzinger's participation in the work on the conciliar Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, the second chapter of which is devoted to handing on Revelation, i.e., Tradition, Scripture and the *Magisterium Ecclesiae*, deserves special mention here. Joseph Ratzinger not only contributed to this⁵ and other conciliar constitutions but, shortly after the Council, wrote a commentary on *Dei Verbum* in German — critical according to some, approving according to others.⁶ Thus, Ratzinger commented

⁴ For example, Joseph Ratzinger's 1958 article "Offenbarung – Schrift – Überlieferung. Ein Text des hl. Bonaventura und seine Bedeutung für die gegenwärtige Theologie" corresponded thematically to §6 of an unpublished dissertation. Undoubtedly, this article contains a foreshadowing of a future holistic concept of Revelation, Scripture and Tradition (Ratzinger 1958, 2014a). For more, see Verweyen 2010; Hofmann 2009, 20–30; Gagliardi 2022, 11–28.

⁵ "It is not possible to determine the extent of Ratzinger's influence on the final form of the document, but it can certainly be said that many of the concepts contained in the final form of the Constitution coincide with Ratzinger's convictions, an example of which is precisely the understanding of Revelation." (Zatwardnicki 2014b, 101; for a broader description, see 100–103) This contribution is deemed more modest by Hofmann 2009, 36–42, particularly 39–41. For more, see Verweyen 2007, 35–39; Schirmacher 2021, 17–20. Ratzinger's contribution to *Dei Verbum* is further discussed in: Wicks 2008; Wicks 2010; Lam 2013. The last of these authors notes: "Finally, if one is to access about Ratzinger's contribution, then one might say that the value of a product lies in its good preparation. Ratzinger's participation in the early debate on the Schema *de fontibus revelationis* was surely a significant element of this good preparation. The foundation of this preparation, however, was Ratzinger's early studies of the theological classics, in particular the theology of the Seraphic doctor." (Lam 2013, 54)

The information provided by Ratzinger himself in his memoirs also does not settle the question conclusively. Ratzinger recalls: "Thus, it was agreed that Karl Rahner and I together would produce a second, more developed version. This second text, much more Rahner's work than my own, was then distributed among the Fathers and evoked some rather bitter reactions" (Ratzinger 1998, 128); and then adds: "It now became clear that Rahner's schema could not be accepted, but the official text, too, was rejected by a narrow margin of votes. The theme, therefore, had to be postponed. The Constitution on Divine Revelation could be completed only in the final period of the Council after some very complex debates, but the final product was one of the outstanding texts of the Council and one that has yet to be truly received." (Ratzinger 1998, 129) Given the rejection of Rahner's schema, one would be right to assume a greater influence of Ratzinger on the redrafted and subsequently approved text of the Constitution (see below).

⁶ One can take the view that J. Ratzinger's assessment of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* seems to have evolved, to have been varied and balanced, as noted by Cardinal Avery Dulles in his lectures; for example, Ratzinger's criticism concerns the not always correct reception of *Dei Verbum*'s statements, including the misinterpretation of Chapter 2 on the mutual relationship of Revelation, Tradition and Scripture: "Ratzinger now makes the point that revelation, as a living reality, is incapable of being enclosed in a text" (cf. Dulles 2008, 468 and 474); also Gagliardi 2022, 42–46. Cf. Ratzinger 1967, 715–31, in which the following general summary of the final outcome of the conciliar commission's work on the *Dei Verbum* Constitution was given: "the effort of a four-year dispute has not been in vain" (Ratzinger 1967, 729: "Aufs Ganze des Erreichten hin gesehen, wird man daher unbedenklich sagen dürfen, daß die Mühe

on Tradition and Scripture on many occasions in the 1960s, as is well illustrated in the following overview:

- 1962 “Die Heilige Schrift und die Tradition. Rec. do Josef R. Geiselmann. Die Heilige Schrift und Tradition. Zu den neueren Kontroversen über das Verhältnis der Heiligen Schrift zu den nicht geschriebenen Traditionen, Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder” (Ratzinger 2018b);
- 1964 “Zur Konzilsdiskussion über das Verhältnis von Schrift und Überlieferung” (Ratzinger 1964, cf. 2016a);
- 1965 “Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriffs” (Ratzinger 1965a, cf. 2008c, 2008b, 2018c);
- 1965 “Tradition: III. Systematisch” (Ratzinger 1965b; cf. 2018d);
- 1967 “Einleitung und Kommentar zum Prooemium, zu Kapitel I, II und VI der Offenbarungskonstitution »Dei Verbum«” (Ratzinger 1967, cf. 2016b).

Joseph Ratzinger perceived the important and valuable experience as an expert of the Second Vatican Council as a confirmation of his vocation, which he described as a “theological vocation” (“Biography of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI” 2024). At the same time, the period before and around the Second Vatican Council was a time when his theological concept of Revelation, Scripture and Tradition and the inter-relationship of these realities took shape.

During and after the Second Vatican Council, Joseph Ratzinger was successively a lecturer at several universities (see Verweyen 2007, 43–61; also Hofmann 2009, 31–58). The period of his work at Regensburg (1969–1977) includes another study in which the future pope addressed the topic of tradition, its anthropological necessity, foundations and conditions, but also stressed the important biblical and Christological components of his understanding of Christian tradition (Ratzinger 1982). The new context of this contribution should also be noted. Indeed, in place of the theological dispute over the sources of Tradition and the ecumenical perspective, the future pope discusses the civilisational and cultural crisis which, in his view, we are facing, including the crisis of faith of modern man combined with a profound crisis of theology and biblical exegesis.⁷

Appointed by John Paul II as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (25 November 1981), Ratzinger relinquished the pastoral leadership of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising (15 February 1982). The papal appointment meant that, as prefect, Ratzinger served in such capacities as chairman of

eines vier Jahre umspannenden Streites nicht vergeblich gewesen ist”). In this context, let us note a recent publication devoted to “the intellectual struggles of Joseph Ratzinger in 1965–1966.” (Bachanek 2024)

⁷ The text included in *Principles of a Catholic Theology* is the final version of a lecture given in the summer of 1973 at the University of Salzburg and subsequently included in a joint publication *Freiheit des Menschen* (Ratzinger 1974); this article cites the English translation of this publication (Ratzinger 1987a; cf. Polish translations: Ratzinger 2009, 111–34; 2018a).

the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the International Theological Commission.⁸ This is significant because the aforementioned commissions published many important documents during his tenure as prefect, although it is difficult to clearly define his contribution to their creation.⁹ A special mention should be made of *the Catechism of the Catholic Church* from that period, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was chairman of the commission working on it (1986–1992). The question of Tradition and Scripture and their relationship to each other was given its rightful place in the Catechism (CCC 74–83).¹⁰

The final stage of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's life was his election as the 265th Pope of the Roman Catholic Church (19 April 2005) and his subsequent papal ministry. During his early pontificate, Benedict XVI delivered a series of catechesis, one of which was explicitly dedicated to the living Tradition of the Church (Benedict XVI 2006).¹¹ A little later came the publication of the apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010), in which the Pope also referred to the theme of Tradition (VD 17–18). As he did earlier in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, so too in the *Verbum Domini* and his other speeches, Benedict XVI seems to follow the conciliar Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.¹² A year later (2011), the International Theological Commission subcommittee presented the document *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, in which the topic of Tradition was extensively and factually elaborated (ITC 2012, 32–42). Piotr Rossa concludes his analysis of the concept of Tradition as seen in this document with the apt statement that “the topic of Tradition is no longer a divisive one among Christians.” (Rossa 2013, 324) Undoubtedly, this was in no small

⁸ Much detailed information from this period was provided by the Pope's secretary Georg Gänswein (Gänswein and Gaeta 2023, 27–52).

⁹ Out of the numerous International Theological Commission documents, at least three are worth mentioning in the context of the issue of Tradition. During the creation of the first one, *Catholic Teaching on Apostolic Succession* (1973), Ratzinger was a member of the International Theological Commission (see Olejnik 1976). While the second document — *The Interpretation of Dogma* (1989) — was being drafted, he served as commission chairman, acting in his capacity as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The last document, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria* (2012), which was written over many years (2004–2011), was already created under the pontificate of Benedict XVI, and the topic of Tradition was prominently featured in it. See ITC 2012, 32–42 (No. 25–32); cf. Benedict XVI 2012; also: Rossa 2013 and footnote 13 below.

¹⁰ “Im Juli 1986 rief Johannes Paul II. eine Kommission aus Kardinälen und Bischöfen unter dem Vorsitz des Präferkten ins Leben. Sechs Jahre arbeitete er intensiv an einem Grundlagentext für das tägliche Leben der Christen.” (Gänswein and Gaeta 2023, 51) The new catechism essentially repeats the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the living Tradition of the Church; however, it also features some original elements (see CCC 78a, 80b, 83a; cf. DV 7–10).

¹¹ The above series of catechesis given by Benedict XVI during the general audiences between Wednesday, 15 March 2006, and Wednesday, 14 February 2007, has been published at least three times in Polish (Benedykt XVI 2007a, 2007b, 2008).

¹² Cf. Brotherton 2015, 102–3. In the referenced exhortation *Verbum Domini*, the expressions “Tradition,” “the living Tradition” and “the Church's living Tradition” (along with a singular case of “sacred Tradition” in VD 47) occur some thirty times, excluding the colloquial use of the term in such phrases as ecclesial tradition, biblical tradition, Latin tradition, etc.

part thanks to the theologian Joseph Ratzinger, although the Pope had no direct involvement in its creation.¹³ Finally, one must not forget that Joseph Ratzinger also worked and published privately, first as a prefect and then during his pontificate.¹⁴

2. Tradition as the Actualisation of Christ's Presence in the Church

Even a cursory reading of Joseph Ratzinger's theological works and publications indicates that he formulated the basic elements of his understanding of the Tradition of the Church early on in his scholarly journey. Three factors can be cited that influenced his concept of Tradition: his studies on the theological thought of St Bonaventure, the legacy of the Council of Trent on the two sources of Revelation and the prospect of ecumenical dialogue with Protestants (the question of *sola Scriptura*). The latter two factors led Ratzinger to deal with this issue mainly as a conciliar expert (*peritus*), while the first factor provided him with the philosophical and theological basis for his concept of Revelation, Scripture and Tradition.¹⁵ It suffices to quote the still-young theologian who wrote in 1958 (he was 31 years old at the time):

For today's discussion about the concept of tradition, the lesson should thus arise that an all too purposeful narrowing of the conversation to the immediate question of the proof of tradition and the proof of Scripture is inadequate from its starting point and so not very promising. Rather, it will be important to consider the entire complex of the relationship between revelation, Scripture, and tradition, and, in doing so, to develop a correct understanding of the basic concept of revelation itself [...] (own translation)¹⁶.

¹³ Fr. Prof. Jerzy Szymik, a member of the International Theological Commission for two terms (2004–2014), remarked in an interview that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, while still Chairman of the Commission, attended its annual plenary session (4–8 October 2004) and spoke at the end of the meeting, giving indications to those present on such things as the planned document *Theology Today*. While he no longer attended later International Theological Commission meetings as pope, his theological ideas did appear in speeches by committee members.

¹⁴ "Pope Benedict made it clear from the beginning that he was going to continue to privately write books and meet with his students. He took on an esteemed office, but he had not become another person. The Jesus Trilogy is a visible monument of this new attitude, as the Pope wrote not as the Pope but rather as Ratzinger the private individual and theologian." (Schirrmacher 2021, 3; see also Gänswein and Gaeta 2023, 25–27)

¹⁵ Aaron Pidel's monograph also refers to St Bonaventure as a source of inspiration for Joseph Ratzinger's theological thought, but this time in relation to his model of biblical inspiration (Pidel 2023, 53–99, particularly 54, 97).

¹⁶ "Für die heutige Diskussion um den Traditionsbegriff durfte sich so die Lehre ergeben, daß eine allzu zweckgebundene Verengung des Gesprächs auf die unmittelbare Frage des Traditionsbeweises und des Schriftbeweises von ihrem Ausgangspunkt her unzulänglich und so wenig aussichtsreich ist. Es wird vielmehr darauf ankommen, den Gesamtkomplex des Verhältnisses von Offenbarung, Schrift und Überlieferung ins Auge zu fassen und dabei gerade ein rechtes Verständnis des Grundbegriffs der Offenbarung selbst zu erarbeiten [...]" (Ratzinger 1958, 27; cf. 2014a, 635)

Joseph Ratzinger then wrote the following seven years later (1965), during the Second Vatican Council:

To make further progress, it will therefore be necessary to deepen our approach, not being preoccupied with such superficial implications as the sufficiency or insufficiency of Scripture, but presenting as a whole the overall problem of the mode of presence of the revealed word among the faithful. Then we can see that we have to reach beyond the positive sources of Scripture and tradition, to their inner source: the revelation, the living word of God, from which Scripture and tradition both spring and without which neither can be grasped in the importance they have for faith. The question of “Scripture and tradition” remains insoluble so long as it is not expanded to a question of “revelation and tradition” and thereby inserted into the larger context in which it belongs. (Ratzinger 2008c, 50; cf. 2018c, 355)

The starting point for understanding the place and role of Tradition and Scripture in the Christian life is a correct understanding of Revelation, which precedes and exceeds both of the aforementioned realities. Revelation is their source, but it is neither identical nor synonymous with them.¹⁷ This is where another element comes in, without which Revelation and salvation history, and thus also Tradition, would be impossible. The revealing God expects a response of faith on the part of the subject receiving the Revelation. Ratzinger writes about this in *Principles of a Catholic Theology*:

If we are correctly to assess the meaning of the Church, we must recall an insight at which we had arrived earlier in our general analysis of the concept of tradition. Tradition, we said, always presumes a bearer of tradition, that is, a community that preserves and communicates it, that is the vessel of a comprehensive common tradition and that becomes, by the oneness of the historical context in which it exists, the bearer of concrete memory. This bearer of tradition in the case of Jesus is the Church. (Ratzinger 1987a, 100; cf. 2018a, 440)

The reflection on the receiving subject of Revelation accompanied the future pope from the beginning. Joseph Ratzinger would once again refer to his youthful conclusions many years later, while already serving as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which indicates the extraordinary importance of this thesis:

[...] the receiving subject is always also a part of the concept of “revelation”. Where there is no one to perceive “revelation”, no *re-vel*-ation has occurred, because no veil has been removed. By definition, revelation requires a someone who apprehends it. These insights, gained through my reading of Bonaventure, were later on very important for me at the time of the conciliar discussion on revelation, Scripture, and tradition. Because, if Bonaventure

¹⁷ The relationship between Revelation and Scripture as seen by Joseph Ratzinger was discussed at length by Sławomir Zatwardnicki (2014b; see also 2022, 141–256).

is right, then revelation precedes Scripture and becomes deposited in Scripture but is not simply identical with it. This in turn means that revelation is always something greater than what is merely written down. And this again means that there can be no such thing as pure *sola scriptura* (“by Scripture alone”), because an essential element of Scripture is the Church as understanding subject, and with this the fundamental sense of tradition is already given. (Ratzinger 1998, 108–9)

Joseph Ratzinger places Scripture and Tradition in the broader context of a theology of Revelation in which Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God to man. Jesus Christ, with all his history revealing and fulfilling God’s plan of salvation for man and the world, is the fullness of Revelation. The locus of the Revelation is the receiving subject, the Church as a community of believers, and the indispensable salvific consequence of this process is the emergence of Scripture¹⁸ and Tradition (Christian tradition). Only here is it possible to present Tradition as Ratzinger defines it in his publications, supplementing the description with his later statements as prefect and pope.¹⁹

The basic determinant defining Tradition appeared in Ratzinger’s statements quoted above, and this is the essential difference between the reality of Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: “The fact that there is ‘tradition’ rests first of all on the incongruence between the two entities ‘revelation’ and ‘Scripture’. For revelation signifies all God’s acts and utterances directed to man; it signifies a reality of which Scripture gives us information but that is not simply Scripture itself. Revelation goes beyond Scripture, then, to the same extent as reality goes beyond information about it.” (Ratzinger 2008c, 51)

Ratzinger illuminates further the reality of Scripture as the written word of God, emphasising the different meanings of Scripture in the Old and New Covenants and its different interpretations, as well as the crucial importance of this for the Christian tradition. The final revelation of God in his Son was decisive: “The reality that comes to be in Christian revelation is nothing and no one other than Christ himself. He is revelation in the proper sense: ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’, Christ says in John (14:9).” (Ratzinger 2008c, 56) The Church, on the other hand, is merely the “bearer of Jesus’ tradition” and is its interpreter.

The explication of the reality of Christ took place in the apostolic Church in two ways, as a *Christological* interpretation of the Old Testament and later as an uninterrupted explanation in the Spirit of the event of Christ in the community of the Church (*ecclesial* interpretation).²⁰ “This latter is possible because Christ is not dead, but

¹⁸ Notably, this was also the time when Karl Rahner published *Über die Schriftinspiration*, in which he emphasises the ecclesial foundation of biblical inspiration: the constitutive element of the birth of the Church was God’s intended creation of Scripture (Rahner 1958, 1969).

¹⁹ See Ratzinger 2008c, cf. 1965a, 1965b; see Polish translations: Ratzinger 2008b, 2018c, 2018d.

²⁰ On the interpretation of the Old and New Covenant Scriptures in the context of the emerging Tradition, see Ratzinger 1965a, 59–62; 1965b, 293–96; cf. 2008c, 54.

living; not merely the Christ of yesterday, but just as much the Christ of today and of tomorrow. It is precisely in his Church, however, that he is living and present: she is his body, in which his Spirit is at work.” (Ratzinger 2008c, 58; cf. CCC 80)

In a 1965 article, the future pope pointed to three roots of the reality called “Tradition”: it grows out of the greater richness of the reality of Revelation, in juxtaposition with Scripture (1); another causal factor is the special character of New Testament Revelation, construed as the *pneuma*, in contrast to the *gramma* of the Old Testament: the living faith and its confession is above the specific record (2); the third root of Tradition is “the character of the Christ-event as present and the authoritative presence of Christ’s Spirit in his body, the Church, and associated with this the authority to interpret the Christ of yesterday with the Christ of today [...]” (3) (Ratzinger 2008c, 63; cf. 1965a, 45; also see Brotherton 2015, 101).

Tradition has its origin in the historical event of Revelation and, at the same time, is a living and ever-present reality of the Church as “accomplished and continuing revelation” (cf. Zatwardnicki 2022, 210–27). The Tradition of the Church is the modality (way) of communicating the word of God, which is different from Scripture: “The Church is tradition, the concrete situs of the *traditio* of Jesus, into which – let us admit it – much human pseudotradition has found its way; so much so, in fact, that even, and even precisely, the Church has contributed to the general crisis of tradition that afflicts mankind.” (Ratzinger 1987a, 100)

Several elements can be mentioned, which together constitute the mystery of Tradition; Joseph Ratzinger speaks of its four successive “strata” (German: *Schichten*) (Ratzinger 2008c, 63–64; cf. 1965a, 45–46):

- (a) In the beginning is the gift of the Father to the world, the gift of the Son (*Urparadosis*), who gave himself to the world and who is permanently present in his body, the Church (cf. CCC 79); the mystery of Christ’s presence is a comprehensively construed reality handed down in Tradition, which precedes detailed explanations, including the interpretation of Scripture (cf. CCC 78);²¹
- (b) Tradition exists concretely as a present in the faith which, being the indwelling of Christ in the believer, is fruitful, alive and takes concrete form;
- (c) Tradition has its own organ in the Church hierarchy, in those who have authority in the Church;²²
- (d) Tradition also exists, as already expressed, in what by virtue of faith has become a rule of faith (*symbolum, fides quae*).

²¹ Aaron Pidel aptly articulates this fundamental truth by noting: “At the most global level, tradition encompasses nothing less than the ,entire mystery of Christ’s presence’ in history, the surplus of meaning in revelation that can never be exhaustively captured in writing.” (2023, 113)

²² The author refers here to a separate study on the Magisterium and Unity of the Church (Ratzinger 1963; cf. Ratzinger 2008a).

What is striking and puzzling at the same time is the absence in the above description of Tradition of an explicit, dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, the Guarantor of the living Tradition, although it can be assumed in item (b).

The Author distributes the emphasis differently in the article compiled for the *Lexikon für die Theologie und Kirche*, in which he lists six elements of Tradition. Nonetheless, the essence of his argument remains the same: Scripture is part of Tradition, interpreted first as the Old and then as the New Testament — Christologically and ecclesiastically (a and b); a fundamental element of the Christian concept of Tradition is the idea of *successio apostolica* (c); another component in the structure of the concept of Tradition is the idea of *regula fidei*, which was later replaced by *symbolum* (d); a strong awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the time of the Church (“Das Präsens des Pneuma gehört konstitutiv zur christlichen Tradition”) (e); in contrast, the idea of unrecorded apostolic traditions, which emerged later in Catholic theology, is not constitutive of the notion of Tradition (f) (Ratzinger 1965b, 293–96; cf. 2018d, 385–88).

Finally, it is worth recalling the statements made by Benedict XVI in his general audience in which he emphasises the unique role of the Holy Spirit (see Benedict XVI 2006):

This permanent actualization of the active presence of the Lord Jesus in his People, brought about by the Holy Spirit and expressed in the Church through the apostolic ministry and fraternal communion is what, in a theological sense, is meant by the term “Tradition”: it is not merely the material transmission of what was given at the beginning to the Apostles, but the effective presence of the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus who accompanies and guides in the Spirit the community he has gathered together.

The Pope then adds:

Tradition is the communion of the faithful around their legitimate Pastors down through history, a communion that the Holy Spirit nurtures, assuring the connection between the experience of the apostolic faith, lived in the original community of the disciples, and the actual experience of Christ in his Church.

In other words, Tradition is the practical²³ continuity of the Church, the holy Temple of God the Father, built on the foundation of the Apostles and held together by the cornerstone, Christ, through the life-giving action of the Spirit [...].

²³ This passage should read “the organic continuity”; the Italian version of this catechesis reads: “la continuità organica”; the German translation: “die organische Kontinuität,” much like the other language versions.

To put the Pope's thought succinctly, Tradition is the "permanent actualization of the active presence of the Lord Jesus in his People" or in other words, "Tradition is the organic continuity of the Church [...] through the life-giving action of the Spirit"; thus, the Pope virtually equates Tradition with the Church. A concise opinion on Tradition in Benedict XVI's lecture was given by Tracey Rowland, who states: "His is a position which favours an understanding of tradition as a medium for the transmission of Revelation..." (2008, 64) An equally brief but very apt synthesis of Benedict XVI's thought on Tradition is given by Scott Hahn, who summarises the Pope's position as follows: "The Tradition: Church as *Memoria Ecclesiae, Viva Vox*," (see 2009, 50–53) and then specifies: "Tradition, then, is nothing less than Christ's living and saving and interpretive presence in the Church." (2009, 51)

To conclude this section, let us add that Ratzinger's concept of Revelation, Scripture and Tradition and the reciprocal relationship of these realities would hardly change or undergo any significant correction in his later publications and speeches, with only some specific issues concerning Tradition being clarified further; e.g. some authors emphasise Ratzinger's greater openness to the material dimension of Tradition (see Gagliardi 2022, 113–48, particularly 121–29).²⁴

3. The Biblical Foundations of the Church's Living Tradition

The publications cited in section one and the subsequent outlining of the theological, holistic concept of Revelation, Tradition and Scripture with particular reference to Tradition, now make it possible to recall the biblical components of the living Tradition of the Church in Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's lectures.²⁵ The starting point must be to recall the truth, also present in successive documents of the Church, that Tradition and Scripture flow from the same divine wellspring, are closely linked to each other and have the same mission to fulfil ("For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same

²⁴ It is worth recalling a more extensive excerpt from Mauro Gagliardi's opinion, as it is a good summary of the analyses so far: "Il primo è che lo studio giovanile condotto da Ratzinger su Bonaventura gli ha fatto sviluppare una visione di teologia della Rivelazione che egli ha mantenuto praticamente immutata nell'arco dell'intero percorso della sua produzione teologica. Come è ovvio, attraverso decenni di lavoro e centinaia di pubblicazioni, egli ha potuto limare e rivedere, o anche migliorare qualche aspetto di dettaglio; ha potuto supportare la sua visione con le nuove conoscenze che andava acquisendo, ma la sua visione fondamentale sulla Rivelazione, la Scrittura, la Tradizione e sul rapporto tra le ultime due è rimasto praticamente immutato." (Gagliardi 2022, 7)

²⁵ Recent Church documents regularly address the reciprocal relationship between Tradition and Scripture (see DV 7–10; CCC 80–82; VD 17–18); cf. Brotherton 2015, 102.

end”) (*DV* 9; cf. *CCC* 80). However, the sacred Tradition of the Church precedes the Scripture and is also the place of its constant interpretation.²⁶

The fundamental, organic constituent of the Tradition of the Church is Jesus Christ. It is in him that Tradition originates and continues, for in him the Word became Flesh (John 1:14) and he continues to live in the Church. As a consequence of this salvific truth, Scripture — originally the books of the Old Covenant — received a *Christological* interpretation in the teaching of Jesus and later his disciples, becoming a constituent part of Tradition.

At this point, it is important to note Jesus’ unique relationship to biblical (Old Testament) and Jewish tradition. As Son and Word incarnate, Jesus is unique and special, and therefore, also occupies a unique and special place in the structure of Tradition. Conscious of his mission and filial dignity, Jesus strongly criticises human traditions, but at the same time, defends the authentic tradition already present in the Old Testament:

Even apart from content, this seems to me to offer a most significant insight with regard to structure: Jesus did not present his message as something totally new, as the end of all that had preceded it. He was and remained a Jew; that is, he linked his message to the tradition of believing Israel. He did not abandon the Old Testament as something antiquated and now superseded. He lived it and, in doing so, revealed his meaning: his message was the creative referral of tradition to its original foundation. Traditions were criticized in order that genuine tradition might be revealed. (Ratzinger 1987a, 95; for a broader description, see 94–101)

The fullness of Revelation in the person of Jesus Christ, attested in the New Testament, in turn, became the content of *ecclesiastical* interpretation, this time of the Old and New Testaments. The apostolic Church was the bearer of the tradition of Jesus and its interpreter. In the context of the origins of Tradition, the future pope evoked the Christological texts of St Paul’s letter (2 Cor 3:14–18; cf. Jer 31:33–34); then, only generally, the Gospel of St John (“the age in which everyone is taught by God himself”; cf. Isa 54:13 and John 6:45) and St Peter’s first address in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14–36; cf. Joel 3:1–5) (see Ratzinger 2008c, 53–56). First passed down orally as an apostolic tradition, it gave rise to the writings of the New Covenant. The New Testament witnesses to the living Tradition of the Church (cf. *CCC* 83).²⁷ Consequently, Tradition makes it possible to accept Scripture as the word of God and also to understand it more and more fully in the history of the Church: “by means of

²⁶ For more on the function of exegesis within such an understanding of Tradition, see Ratzinger 2008c, 64–67; cf. 2018c, 365–67.

²⁷ *CCC* 83 reads as follows: “The first generation of Christians did not yet have a written New Testament, and the New Testament itself demonstrates the process of living Tradition.” Was this statement an authorial addition by the Chairman of the commission that worked on the new catechism?

the same tradition, the full canon of the sacred books is known to the Church and the holy Scriptures themselves are more thoroughly understood and constantly made effective in the Church.” (VD 17; cf. DV 8; CCC 66)²⁸

The canon of sacred books also took shape within the sacred Tradition. Initially, Jesus and his disciples only had Scripture, later called the Old Testament, as noted several times above. In contrast, the books that now make up the New Testament were only just being formed, and it was the Magisterium of the Church that later authoritatively designated the canon of the Old and New Testaments; the formation and emergence of the biblical canon is an important component of the living Tradition of the Church (DV 8).

The above basic theses on the relationship between the earlier, living Tradition of the Church and Scripture have their basis in the biblical testimonies of the emerging Christian tradition. The biblical texts outline its origins, underpin it and guarantee its truthfulness, which can be illustrated by discussing particular aspects of Christian Tradition (see Benedykt XVI 2007b, 42–43).

One of Joseph Ratzinger’s fundamental claims was the observation that Revelation needs a receiving subject — the community of believers (Ratzinger 1987a, 100; 1998, 108; 2008c, 52, 57). Thus, the origins of the Church’s Tradition are the disciples, those who believed and followed Jesus. It is not surprising, then, that in his statements on Tradition, the Pope refers to the biblical texts describing the origins of the Church: the calling of the disciples and the commissioning of the Twelve, and the entrusting to them of the mission of preaching the Gospel, with which Christ’s assurance of his permanent presence among the disciples was linked. In this context, the Pope cites key ecclesial texts illustrating his thesis: the commissioning of the Twelve (Luke 6:13), entrusting them with the mission of teaching the nations (Matt 28:19) and the uninterrupted celebration of the Paschal Commemoration until the glorious coming of Christ (1 Cor 11:26).²⁹ The indication of the selection of the Twelve from among the disciples of Jesus is intended by the Pope, since Jesus’ mission, though directed originally to the House of Israel, is intended for the whole world and all eras. Just as the Old Testament received a Christological interpretation in the Church, so likewise the commissioning of the Twelve emphasises the historical-salvific continuation of God’s people of Israel in the new God’s people of the Church, which will continue until the eschatological future and the judgment on the “twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19:28) (see Hahn 2009, 48; cf. ITC 1973, I. 3). Further, the Pope points out that Jesus explained his teaching to his disciples in private (Mark 4:34; 7:17; 8:29–30), which takes us back to the very beginnings of the living

²⁸ Ratzinger 1965b, 293–94; 2018d, 385–86; cf. ITC 1989, B. I, 1–3; also see Zatwardnicki 2014b, 107–10; Pidel 2023, 113.

²⁹ On the other hand, in *Principles of a Catholic Theology*, Joseph Ratzinger pointed to the following New Testament texts while discussing the offices and ministries in the apostolic Church: Mark 3:13–19; Matt 10:7–9, 40; Luke 10:16; John 20:21. See Ratzinger 1987b, 273.

Tradition and its personal foundations, and thus to the beginnings of the *traditio* and *successio apostolica*: “‘Tradition’ is indeed never a simple and anonymous handing on of teaching, but is linked to a person, is a living word, that has its concrete reality in faith.” (Ratzinger 2008a, 23) A little later, Joseph Ratzinger elaborates and concretises his view on the role of the apostles and their importance for Tradition: “‘Apostolic succession’ is by its nature the living presence of the word in the personal form of the witness. The unbroken continuity of witnesses is derived from the nature of the word as *auctoritas* and *viva vox*.” (Ratzinger 2008a, 30–31)

The task of the apostles was to “teach all nations,” a mission they carried out after the Ascension as representatives of Christ, acting in the power of the Spirit (cf. *VD* 15). Here we encounter another biblical dimension of the emerging, living Tradition, which is the words of Jesus assuring us of his presence “to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19–20). In the light of Benedict XVI’s theological exegesis, these words guarantee the constant, active and effective presence of Jesus Christ in the Spirit in the community of the Church and its official representatives (cf. Heb 13:8).³⁰ Such a theological exegesis of biblical texts is something characteristic of the Author in question, who wrote the following as early as 1965: “Because the Jesus’ tradition is not an enslaving human historical tradition, but a presence of the Spirit (‘The Lord is the Spirit’: 2 Cor 3:17!), therefore, the word of the Lord can and must be understood as present and related to the present” (own translation).³¹

The same role of constant actualisation of the presence of Jesus in the community of believers is also fulfilled by the Paschal Commemoration, which is celebrated continuously. The Eucharist not only makes the saving death of Jesus present each time but is also a sacramental gift of salvation for all peoples and all times (1 Cor 11:26).³²

In turn, the following biblical texts cited by Benedict XVI bring closer the intrinsic nature of the Church’s living Tradition, of which the Holy Spirit is the Author and Guarantor. Benedict XVI was particularly preoccupied with the theme of the Holy Spirit. This is reflected in his speeches, which contain numerous references

³⁰ Hahn 2009, 49: “For Benedict, the Office of the apostle is a sharing in the divine power of Christ. He finds support for this in Christ commissioning the apostles: ‘Anyone who listens to you listens to me; anyone who rejects you rejects me’ and again, ‘As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.’ The apostle is more than a spokesman for Christ, however. He proclaims the same words as Christ, announcing the coming of the kingdom of God. But he also, by the divine gift, ‘has the power to make the coming visible by signs of power’ (in conjunction with footnote 16); cf. Pidel 2023, 83–84.

³¹ “Weil die Jesusüberlieferung nicht verknechtende menschliche Geschichts-Tradition ist, in der es auf archivarische Bewahrung ankommt, sondern Gegenwart vom Geist her (‘Der Herr ist der Geist’: 2 Kor 3, 17!), darum kann, ja muß das Wort des Herrn als ein gegenwärtiges und auf die Gegenwart bezogenes verstanden werden” (Ratzinger 1965b, 294; Polish translation: Ratzinger 2018d, 386).

³² Cf. ITC 1973, II: “This foundation is not only historical; it is also spiritual. Christ’s pass-over, anticipated at the Last Supper, establishes the New Covenant and thus embraces the whole of human history. The mission and task of preaching the Gospel, governing, reconciling, and sanctifying that are entrusted to the first witnesses cannot be restricted to their lifetime.” Cf. Olejnik 1976, 13–14.

to biblical texts that speak of the Spirit's activity, as well as a full quotation of these texts (Benedict XVI 2006):

Thanks to the action of the Paraclete, the Apostles and their successors can realize in time the mission received from the Risen One. "You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you" (Lk 24:48 ff.).

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And this promise, which at first seems incredible, already came true in the Apostles' time: "And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him" (Acts 5:32).

According to the Pope, the action of the Holy Spirit, fundamental to the living Tradition of the Church, does not consist only in empowering the disciples of Jesus to bear witness to Jesus and his Gospel. The Holy Spirit, through the laying on of hands of the apostles and their prayer, consecrates and sends out missionaries and preachers of the Gospel (Acts 13:3–4; 1 Tim 4:14). The Pope stresses that the biblical texts speak interchangeably of Paul's appointment of "elders in every Church" (cf. Acts 14:23) and the Spirit's establishment of "guardians of the flock" (cf. Acts 20:28); therefore, he concludes: "The action of the Spirit and the action of Paul thus are deeply interwoven." Likewise, the Spirit guides the community of believers and individuals and is present when making decisions of momentous importance for the life of the Church, enabling a new interpretation of Christ's message (Acts 15:28) (Ratzinger 2008c, 60; cf. ITC 1989, B. I, 2).

Guided by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict XVI also reminds us that the Tradition initiated by Christ and the Apostles "makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit," so that "there is a growth in insight into the realities and the words"; over time, the Church gains a deeper understanding of the truth revealed in the Scriptures (see VD 17). In this context, it is puzzling that the Council Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* — much like Pope Benedict XVI in his exhortation *Verbum Domini* — do not refer to the texts of John that speak of the Paraclete who will lead the disciples into all truth (see John 14:26; 16:13–15); the Council Fathers pointed to Marian texts (Luke 2:19, 51) (DV 8).³³

As a final note, it is worth recalling an issue that is well-known and repeatedly discussed in the subject literature — theological exegesis, Benedict XVI's hermeneutics of faith. The fact that Scripture is a human word, the Pope argues, justifies its

³³ Nevertheless, Ratzinger wrote the following in an article for the *Lexikon für die Theologie und Kirche* (1965): "Endlich ist aus den Paraklet-Sprüchen des Jo-Ev. ein starkes Bewußtsein von der Anwesenheit des Heiligen Geistes in der Zeit der Kirche hervorgewachsen, das sich in altchristlicher Zeit in der Vorstellung von der Inspiriertheit der ökumenischen Konzilien äußert [...]" (Ratzinger 1965b, 295; cf. 2018d, 387) See also ITC 1973, II (last paragraph); Olejnik 1976, 14.

interpretation according to the principles of historical exegesis (the historical-critical method). However, Scripture is first and foremost the word of God and hence requires the consideration of theological principles of interpretation — theological exegesis, which is only possible in faith and in the Spirit (Rowland 2008, 58; Hahn 2009, 41–46). The theological exegesis of Joseph Ratzinger’s biblical texts and also the entire earlier biblical formation of the German pope form the biblical-theological basis of the concept of the living Tradition of the Church he developed.³⁴

Conclusion

The vision of Tradition presented by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI is part of his holistic view of God’s Revelation and the community of believers as a historical and spiritual reality at the same time. Tradition is an indispensable component of his ecclesiology. A discussion of the available subject publications has shown that there is no single, systematic and complete presentation of the topic of the living Tradition of the Church in the works of the German theologian and pope. Nonetheless, his numerous publications, released over several decades in a changing ecclesial context, are available. A fruitful beginning to Ratzinger’s work on Revelation, Tradition and Scripture and their reciprocal relationship was his encounter with the theological thought of St Bonaventure, and the conciliar discussions on the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* accelerated the development of his ideas. Also significant, as is evident from his writings, was the perceived crisis of faith in the post-conciliar period, including the crisis that affected biblical theology and exegesis. Joseph Ratzinger presented an innovative view of the reality of Tradition in its relation to Scripture, but he did not immediately gain approval for his proposal. In retrospect, however, it is important to recognise that his understanding of Tradition has found expression in official Church documents and has similarly established itself in contemporary theology (cf. Rowland 2008, 65). For Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, the living Tradition of the Church is the constant actualisation of Jesus’ presence in the Church, the memory of him (*memoria*) and at the same time the living experience of salvation (*viva vox*): “Thanks to Tradition, guaranteed by the ministry of the Apostles and by their successors, the water of life that flowed from Christ’s side and his saving blood reach the women and men of all times. Thus, Tradition is the permanent presence of the Saviour who comes to meet us, to redeem

³⁴ See Verweyen 2007, 84–98; The subject literature on Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI’s theological exegesis is extensive; not all biblical scholars share the Pope’s hermeneutical and exegetical views. For further literature sources, see Szymik 2012; Zatwardnicki 2014a. The current volume of *Verbum Vitae* also offers discussions of Benedict XVI’s hermeneutical proposals: Crimella 2024; Hahn 2024; Prato 2024; cf. ITC 1973 (Introduction!); Olejnik 1976, 10–11.

us and to sanctify us in the Spirit, through the ministry of his Church, to the glory of the Father.” (Benedict XVI 2006)

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