



Normative and Performative: The Authority of Scripture for Catholic Theology and Worship in the Thought of Pope Benedict XVI

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Abstract: This essay addresses Pope Benedict XVI's apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, which explained authoritatively the three central principles of Catholic scriptural interpretation found in the Vatican II constitution *Dei Verbum*. In *Verbum Domini*, much of Benedict's prior work as a private theologian gained a magisterial voice. Hence, this essay will engage both with *Verbum Domini* and Benedict's previous writings. For Benedict, theology is more than information. When practiced as a "spiritual science," theology is a real contact with the living Word. The authors of scripture are, accordingly, "normative theologians." The real contact with the living Word contained in scripture is most profoundly mediated by the Church's liturgy. The biblical Word's liturgical setting is the source of its theological normativity. Thus, for Benedict, the *performativity* of the Word implies a unity between Scripture and liturgy, and the resultant *normativity* of the Word implies a unity between Scripture and theology. Without these unities, and the life of continuous conversion that flows from their recognition, there can be no theology in the true sense of the word. If these unities are recognized, however, the task of the theologian becomes letting God himself "speak"—to be the servant or handmaiden of revelation.

Keywords: Benedict XVI, Ratzinger, Scripture, exegesis, faith and reason, authority, theology, liturgy

1. Introduction: Benedict, *Dei Verbum*, and *Verbum Domini*

If the first half of the twentieth century was marked by the *emergence* of three renewal movements—the biblical, the patristic, and the liturgical—we see the *convergence* of these movements in Vatican II's dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*.¹ In his *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy, Benedict is attempting to put into practice the criteria of DV 12. In his own words, Benedict is "finally putting into practice the methodological principles formulated for exegesis by the Second Vatican Council (in DV 12), a task that unfortunately has scarcely been attempted thus far." (Ratzinger 2011, xiv–xv; emphasis added)

¹ With regard to biblical renewal, DV 12 cites as authority First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, and Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Benedict discussed *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in particular depth in *Verbum Domini*, immediately before his discussion of DV 12, positing that DV 12 was to be read "against this background," namely the documents of his predecessors and particularly Pius XII (VD 33).

While this article does not explore the trilogy,² it will explore the exhortation *Verbum Domini*, where Benedict explained what the *Dei Verbum* criteria fundamentally required. In a word, in Benedict's corpus, where *Verbum Domini* is an explanation of how to do theology according to *Dei Verbum*, *Jesus of Nazareth* is a demonstration.

While he himself was not a trained exegete, one of the dominant themes of Pope Benedict XVI's entire corpus as a theologian is the proper interpretation of Scripture (see Ratzinger 1997b, 66). As I concluded in an earlier essay,

In his biography of Benedict's predecessor, George Weigel suggested that Pope John Paul II's "theology of the body" would be his greatest legacy to the Church. That is a bold claim, and one that may prove accurate. In any case, I believe a similar claim can be made for the biblical theology of Pope Benedict, which may prove to be the legacy he bequeaths to future generations. It is a theology in which the essential unity and continuity can be seen between faith and reason, the Old and New Testaments, Scripture and liturgy, Church and kingdom, and dogma and devotion, theology and history. It is a theology of great power and beauty. (Hahn 2010, 458, citing Weigel 1999, 342)³

This essay will take up where the previous one left off by exploring how Benedict's post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* forms a privileged expression of Benedict's lasting contribution to biblical theology.

Indeed, Benedict put the three principles from *Dei Verbum* front and center in *Verbum Domini*:

Since Scripture must be interpreted in the same Spirit in which it was written, the Dogmatic Constitution indicates three fundamental criteria for an appreciation of the divine dimension of the Bible: 1) the text must be interpreted with attention to *the unity of the whole of Scripture*; nowadays this is called canonical exegesis; 2) account is to be taken of the *living Tradition of the whole Church*; and, finally, 3) respect must be shown for *the analogy of faith*. "Only where both methodological levels, the historical-critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book." (VD 34, citing Benedict XVI 2008b, 493)

In exploring *Verbum Domini* in light of Benedict's prior theological work, we will see his previous thought on the unity of scripture and theology emerging in *Verbum Domini* as no longer the private opinions of Joseph Ratzinger; rather, in *Verbum*

² For two such explorations, see Wright 2019, 83–162, and de Gaál 2018, 137–46. Benedict himself had a hand in drafting *Dei Verbum* as a young theologian. For a historical perspective, see Prior 1999 and Wicks 2008; see also Ratzinger 1998, 120–31; Benedict XVI and Seewald 2016, 101–66.

³ For a more in-depth treatment of Benedict's biblical theology, see Hahn 2009, which went to press before the promulgation of *Verbum Domini*, and from which elements of this essay are drawn. See also Twomey 2007 and Rowland 2008.

Domini they obtain a magisterial voice. Two themes in particular will occupy us in this article: The “performative” nature of the Word of God in the liturgy of the Church, and the resultant “normative” character of the same Word for theology. As we shall see, the two concepts are inseparably related: The Word of God is only “normative” for theology because it is “performative” in the liturgy.

2. Benedict’s *opus* as *ressourcement* of Normative Criteria for Exegesis

Benedict’s theological project involves the faithful search for understanding of the God who has revealed himself to the world in Jesus Christ. This search drives Benedict’s efforts to purify the historical-critical methods and his efforts to recover the ancient form of the Church. In “his critique of criticism,” he wants to define the legitimate limits of the historical method. In this he is reacting against the tendency in the last century to exalt historical-criticism as the “sole scientific way” of reading the Bible (see Ratzinger 2005a, 91–126; Ratzinger 2007).⁴

In identifying the historical method’s procedural prejudices and blind spots, Benedict’s aim is not to discredit the method, but to open it to new possibilities of fruitful inquiry and understanding. Benedict undertakes his critique with full respect for the goals of science, which seeks to produce theories that have the greatest explanatory power:

From a purely scientific point of view, the legitimacy of an interpretation depends on its power to explain things. In other words, the less it needs to interfere with the sources, the more it respects the corpus as given and is able to show it to be intelligible from within, by its own logic, the more apposite such an interpretation is. Conversely, the more it interferes with the sources, the more it feels obliged to excise and throw doubt on things found there, the more alien to the subject it is. To that extent, its explanatory power is also its ability to maintain the inner unity of the corpus in question. It involves the ability to unify, to achieve a synthesis, which is the reverse of superficial harmonization. Indeed, only faith’s hermeneutic is sufficient to measure up to these criteria. (Ratzinger 1986, 44–45)

As a scholar, Benedict also attempted to discover the normative criteria for theology and biblical interpretation in the Church from the history of early Christianity (see Hahn 2009, 63–90, 137–96). But we should not look upon this effort as a kind of “primitivist” turn or “back-to-the-basics” movement. Benedict’s return to the sources

⁴ See also Hahn 2009, 25–62, 187–96; Gadenz 2015, 41–62; and Pitre 2015, 26–40.

is, on the one hand, an act of solidarity with the founding figures of early Christianity and a search for the living Spirit and true form of the faith, but also has a clear scientific intention and character (see Hahn 2010, 427–33; Hahn 2009, 43–62; Ratzinger 2005d, 41–67).

Benedict believes that if we want to come up with theological, hermeneutical, and exegetical methods that truly have the power to explain things, we need to know where Scripture came from, how it was formed, and what were its original intention and function. Critical scholarship had itself shown that the origin of the Scriptures was the pilgrim community of God's people, and most especially their liturgy (Ratzinger 2005a, 114–26). Benedict's theological and exegetical work, then, is rooted in a kind of *ressourcement*, his historical retrieval of the original structure of God's revelation in the Church.⁵

3. Benedict's Conception of "Normative Theology"

For Benedict, theology is far from a private affair. Theology is "ecclesial" by nature because this was the original structure of God's revelation (Benedict XVI 2005b; Ratzinger 1995, 105). Theology is a reflection upon the Word heard in the Church and in the depths of one's own soul. And it is always *for* the Church—that is, the work of theology is always in the service of the Church's mission. As an expression of the Church's faith, theology carries a "missionary dynamism" that naturally orients it to preaching and catechesis—to leading others to the encounter with the Word, to communion in the family of God (Ratzinger 1995, 27).

But Benedict's vision for theology does not reduce it to apologetics or catechetics. Rather, he sees theology's missionary impulse issuing from the heart of the Christian faith experience. The innate character of faith, which is a summons to the love of God and neighbor, impels every believer to seek deeper understanding and love of God—not only for himself, but also for his neighbor. If we believe the testimony of the Word, that in Jesus is the truth about human history and happiness, then our love of our neighbor will lead us to testify to that Word. Theology is ordered to this testimony, which is part of the proclamation and teaching of the Church—"to tell man who he is and . . . to disclose to him the truth about himself, that is, what he can base his life on and what he can die for." (Ratzinger 1995, 63–64)

Theology, then, is a part of the Church's "living transmission" of the faith, bound up integrally with the Tradition founded on the apostles' teaching and prayer, "which interprets the Word which is handed down and gives it an unequivocal clarity of meaning." (Ratzinger 1995, 60) Benedict's thoughts on the nature and mission

⁵ For Benedict's appreciation of the *ressourcement* movement in theology, see Ratzinger 1987, 133–34.

of theology are not his own, but grow naturally out of his reflections on the historical nature and mission of the Church.

As a result, he rejects the modern presumption that there is a necessary tension between the work of theology and the teaching mission of the Church. Present-day controversies are rooted in the problems he identified in his critique of criticism—namely, an unwarranted hermeneutic of suspicion that presumes a dialectical opposition between the “institutional Church” and the Gospel, and an overreaching application of “scientific” and rational methods.

As critical scholarship had itself established, to presume a conflict between theology and the Church is to seriously misunderstand the historical relationship between theology and the Church. The Church is “the ground of theology’s existence and the condition which makes it possible.” (Ratzinger 1995, 61) Always and fundamentally, Benedict insists, “theology is interpretation” (Ratzinger 1995, 93). That is, the theologian does not properly begin with his own ideas. “Theology is pondering what God has said and thought before us.” (Ratzinger 1995, 103–4; see Ratzinger 1987, 325–27)

Nor is theology an isolated task of the individual. Theology is always corporate, ecclesial. It begins in the Church and flows from the act of faith in the Word that has been given. The task of a truly Christian theology cannot be conceived apart from the Church’s faith in the Word that is given by God and preserved and proclaimed in the Church in history. We do not come to the faith without the Church. We believe only because we have heard the Word that speaks to us from the heart of the Church and have accepted that Word as the norm for our lives in the sacramental waters of baptism. The Word that speaks with such authority as to compel us to believe is the same Word that theology seeks to understand, reflect upon, and interpret.

The Church that proclaims that Word with authority likewise is entrusted to care for this Word, to protect it from manipulation and misinterpretation. As he says:

The path of theology is indicated by the saying, “*Credo ut intelligam*” [“I believe so I may understand”]: I accept what is given in advance, in order to find, starting from this and in this, the path to the right way of living, to the right way of understanding myself. Yet that means that theology, of its nature, presupposes *auctoritas*. . . . This authority is a Word. . . . The Word comes from understanding and is intended to lead to understanding. (Ratzinger 2005c, 31, 37; see also Ratzinger 1995, 45)

From these reflections, it is clear that the Church’s teaching authority, its magisterium, cannot be regarded as an extraneous or “foreign” element that constricts the freedom of the theologian. The normative authority of the Church over the Word is part of the essential historical structure of God’s revelation in the Church. For Benedict, Scripture, Tradition, and the Church’s apostolic teaching authority are

inseparable facets of the same historical reality—the revelation of the Word to the Church (Ratzinger 2005c, 36; see Hahn 2009, 41–90). The authority of the Church as “the primary interpreter of the Word” is the *auctoritas apostolica*—the authority of the living Word communicated as *viva vox*, as the living voice of the apostolic preaching (Ratzinger 2005c, 35–36). The Church’s preaching, its proclamation of the faith is quite naturally “the normative criterion of theology” because this proclamation, the Gospel the Church proclaims, is the very “object of theological reflection” (Ratzinger 2005c, 35–36; see Ratzinger 1995, 61, 63).

4. “Normative Theology” as a “Spiritual Science”

In Benedict’s discussion of the nature and mission of theology we see the further implications of the historical “interwovenness” of Church and Word. Theology, as reconstructed by Benedict according to its original place in the primitive Church, is an ecclesial work that always seeks to help the Church to understand the divine Word and to articulate the truths of the faith in terms of the questions and challenges of its own time and culture (see Benedict XVI 2007a).

We are now in the position to consider what I take to be Benedict’s most daring and fertile assertion of methodological principle in theology: “theology is a spiritual science. The normative theologians are the authors of Holy Scripture. This statement is valid not only with reference to the objective written document they left behind but also with reference to their manner of speaking, in which it is God himself who speaks. I think this fact has great significance for our present situation.” (Ratzinger 1987, 321–22)

This important programmatic statement needs to be parsed closely in order for us to understand first what Benedict means by theology and later what he is up to in his own theology. He says: Theology is a *spiritual science*. Theology is the scientific study of things of the Spirit—it is ultimately about God who is Spirit (John 4:24). So the first point to be clarified is that theology is about God. God is the ultimate subject of theology. Theology seeks to understand the God who reveals himself in his Word to the Church. As such, theology is “rational reflection upon God’s revelation” (Ratzinger 1995, 16).

Of course, God has done more than deliver a collection of texts to the Church. The Word has been made flesh in Jesus Christ. Following the normative theologians of the New Testament, Benedict posits that the “content” of theology is always reflection on the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The New Testament, after all, is “about” Jesus Christ—who he is, the full meaning of the salvation-historical event of his resurrection, and how his presence remains in the world in his Church (Ratzinger 2005b, 76–77).

Theology for Benedict is essentially Christology. It begins from the Christ-event, most decisively from the event of the resurrection. Hence, Benedict writes: “All Christian theology, if it is to be true to its origin, must be first and foremost a theology of resurrection.” (Ratzinger 1987, 184–85) The primary data for theology remains the words and deeds of Jesus as remembered and interpreted in the New Testament.⁶

Benedict bases this principle on a prior assumption—namely, the reliability of Scripture as the authentically divine Word (see Hahn 2009, 72–75; Nichols 2005, 188–99). This assumption goes well beyond what can be “proven” by scientific means. But theology is not philosophy, which inquires into metaphysical or spiritual realities solely by rational methods. Theology is a *spiritual science*. Theology proceeds according to rational *and* spiritual means—according to a hermeneutic of faith that guides our inquiry, which we conduct by the rational principles and methods of the human sciences. Just as one cannot learn how to swim without being in water, one cannot do theology without “the spiritual praxis” of the life of faith (Ratzinger 1987, 322). To say that theology is a spiritual science is to say that both “faith and rational reflection are integral to theology. The absence of either principle would bring about theology’s demise.” (Ratzinger 1995, 57) In order to be authentically Christian, the work of theology must proceed according to the harmonious effort of faith and reason.⁷

Because faith is a necessary element for theology, it must also be an expression of conversion and discipleship. Theology is faith seeking understanding of the “contents” of the faith, that is, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ to the people of God, the Church. It follows that theology must begin with a faith commitment, a conversion to Jesus Christ. Taking the New Testament authors as “normative” means, in the first place, that the theologian must be a person who has heard and believed the Word, professed his faith in the Church, and dedicated himself to abide according to the moral and sacramental life of the Church. As Benedict says: “The New Testament authors were believers in Jesus. And their writings stem from the act of faith and the experience of following Jesus in faith. The theologians of the New Testament presume that knowledge of Christ and his Gospel comes only to those who follow him as disciples.” (Ratzinger 1995, 57)

And again:

Because there is no theology without faith, there can be no theology without conversion. Conversion can take many forms . . . [I]n one form or another, however, the convert must consciously pronounce in his own name a Yes to this new beginning and really turn from the “I” to the “no-longer-I.” It is thus immediately obvious that the opportunity for creative theology increases the more that faith becomes real, personal experience; the more

⁶ “[T]he remembrance and retention of the words of Jesus and of the course of his life, especially his passion, were from the beginning an essential factor in the formation of Christian tradition and in the norms applied to it.” (Ratzinger 1985, 4).

⁷ For a penetrating study on faith in Ratzinger’s theology, see Cardó 2020.

that conversion acquires interior certainty thanks to a painful process of transformation; the more that it is recognized as the indispensable means of penetrating into the truth of one's own being. This is why in every age the path to faith can take its bearings by converts; it explains why they in particular can help us to recognize the reason for the hope that is in us (compare 1 Pet 3:15) and to bear witness to it. The connection between faith and theology is not, therefore, some sort of sentimental or pietistic twaddle but is a direct consequence of the logic of the thing and is corroborated by the whole of history. (Ratzinger 1995, 57)

As he puts it here in no uncertain terms, Benedict does not envision the hermeneutic of faith as an excuse for lazy or unscientific theology. Faith for Benedict is far more than mere acceptance of specific assertions and events. Faith, like reason, is “*a way of knowing*” (Ratzinger 2003; emphasis added).

The act of faith gives the theologian the power to accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and the Church as the people of God in which the Scriptures remain a living Word (Benedict XVI 2007f, 145; see Ratzinger 2011, xx–xxi). This acceptance of the Church as the living subject of Scripture is vital for Benedict's approach to theology. Again, he has expressed this with almost axiom-like clarity:

For the Catholic Christian, two lines of essential hermeneutic orientation assert themselves . . . The first: we trust Scripture and we base ourselves on Scripture, not on hypothetical reconstructions that go behind it and, according to their own taste, reconstruct a history in which the presumptuous idea of our knowing what can or cannot be attributed to Jesus plays a key role; which, of course, means attributing to him only what a modern scholar is happy to attribute to a man belonging to a time that the scholar himself has reconstructed. The second is that we read Scripture in the living community of the Church, and therefore on the basis of the fundamental decisions thanks to which it has become historically efficacious, namely, those that laid the foundations of the Church. One must not separate the text from this living context. In this sense, Scripture and Tradition form an inseparable whole, and it is this that Luther, at the dawn of the awakening of historical awareness, could not see. (Benedict XVI 2007f, 145)

Theology, as a spiritual science, a science conducted by the Christian believer, is an *ecclesial* science. The normative theologians were believers joined in one body by baptism in the Church. The purpose of their theologizing was to understand the content of their faith and to fulfill the command of Christ—that they make disciples of all nations (see Hahn 2009, 73–82).

Theology begins in a kind of faithful listening to the Word that speaks to the Church. It is, ultimately, the attempt “to perceive the meaning in this Word, to understand this Word.” As such, “theology presupposes faith” in the Word that is given (Ratzinger 2005c, 32; see Ratzinger 1995, 55). Theology flows from the natural desire to better know the One we have come to believe in, the God who has shown his face to us in Jesus Christ.

Thus, Benedict can say, “the revelation of Christ is . . . the fundamental normative starting point for theology.” (Benedict XVI 2005a) Belief in that revelation, conversion to the Word that reveals, is likewise prerequisite to that theological task. The theologian must first pronounce his own word of faith in the sacrament of baptism, entering into the faith of the Church that always precedes his own faith, accepting the Word and pledging to order his life according to it.

As theology flows from the act of faith, by its nature, it also shares in the Church’s mission of proclamation and witness to the Word. Benedict makes his own what he describes as St. Bonaventure’s two-fold justification of theology. In the first place, theology is a response to the command of 1 Pet 3:15: “Always be prepared to make a defense (*apologian*) to anyone who calls you to account (*logon*) for the hope that is in you.” This passage opens up the nature of faith as something that is not a private decision but which rather “wishes to make itself understandable to others.” But before the faith can be communicated, it must be interiorized. It must become the inner Word (*logos*) that guides the innermost being of the believer. “The *logos* must be so intimately their own that it can become *apo-logia*; through the mediation of Christians, the Word [*Wort*] becomes response [*Antwort*] to man’s questions.” (Ratzinger 1995, 26)

Faith in Christ, by this view, possesses an inner dynamism that orients believers toward the desire to know the truth about this God in whom we believe, and to understand as fully as possible his Word to us. But, again following Bonaventure, Benedict sees faith also partaking of “the dynamism of love”—which impels the believer to seek to know the God he loves with ever greater intimacy (Ratzinger 1995, 104).

This reciprocity of divine Word and the human word of response constitutes the whole Tradition of the Church. The data that theology interprets is never simply the written texts. For Benedict, the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* is neither sufficient for theology nor is it consistent with the “inner structure” of the Word as it has been given to us historically in the foundations of the Church. Simply stated, the Word of God did not begin as a “book.”⁸

But the Word that theology seeks to understand is always more than the written Word of sacred Scripture. To refer back to Benedict’s programmatic statement about normative theology, we see that the “written document . . . left behind” by the normative theologians of the New Testament testifies to this. This normative document, for Benedict, testifies that “the Bible is the condensation of a process of Revelation which

⁸ “It is not at all difficult to acknowledge in theory that theology is ecclesial by its very nature; that the Church does not merely provide theology with an organizational framework but is its inner foundation and its immediate wellspring; that, in consequence, the Church cannot be incompetent in matters of content or theologically mute but must have a living voice, that is, the faculty to speak bindingly even for the theologian. . . . The essence of the magisterium consists precisely in the fact that the proclamation of the faith is also the normative criterion of theology: indeed, this very proclamation is the object of theological reflection. . . . [P]roclamation is the measure of theology, and not vice versa.” (Ratzinger 1995, 61, 63)

is much greater and inexhaustible. . . . It is then part of a living organism which, through the vicissitudes of history, nonetheless conserves its identity and which, as a result, can, so to speak, claim its ‘rights of authorship’ from the Bible as a resource which is its own.” (Ratzinger 1983, 28)

The “book” always points us back to the people entrusted to bear God’s words and thoughts in human history (Ratzinger 2011, xx; see Ratzinger 1995, 329). As Benedict says: “It is consequently important to read Sacred Scripture and experience sacred Scripture in the communion of the Church, that is, with all the great witnesses of this Word, beginning with the first Fathers and ending with today’s saints, with today’s magisterium. Above all, it is a Word that becomes vital and alive in the liturgy.” (Ratzinger 2007; see also Hahn 2010, 452–58; Hahn 2009, 137–85)

5. The Word as Normative for Theology, Because Performative in Liturgy

For Benedict, theology is more than information. When practiced as a spiritual science, theology is a real contact with the living Word. For Benedict, therefore, there is an intimate link between liturgy and the practice of theology, which ultimately undergirds his concept of “normative theology.”

For Benedict, God’s Word is “performative” and transformative. This again is the testimony of the normative theologians, the authors of sacred Scripture. Just as on the first page of Scripture we read of God speaking the world into existence, throughout the Old Testament, God’s Word is both speech and act.⁹ This is most of all true in the Eucharist, where the Word of the cross becomes the Word of salvation for all who believe. This belief flows from the nature of the divine speech-act: “Christianity was not only ‘good news’—the communication of a hitherto unknown content. In our language we would say: *the Christian message was not only ‘informative’ but ‘performative.’* That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing.” (SpS 2; emphasis added)

Jesus’ speech, too, was always sacramental—bringing into being the realities that his words signified. As God’s Word created the heavens and the earth, so Jesus’ was able to heal the sick and raise the dead: “Jesus’ proclamation was never mere preaching, mere words; it was ‘sacramental,’ in the sense that his words were and are inseparable from his ‘I’—from his ‘flesh.’ His word opens up only in the context of the signs he performed, of his life and of his death.” (Ratzinger 1997a, 50; Benedict XVI 2007f, 309)

⁹ “God reveals himself in history. He speaks to humankind, and the word he speaks has creative power. The Hebrew concept ‘*dabar*,’ usually translated as ‘word,’ really conveys both the meaning of *word* and *act*. God says what he does and does what he says.” (Benedict XVI 2006, 3)

The staggering reality of Jesus's presence in the Eucharist is, therefore, entirely consistent with his life as revealed in the Gospels (see Hahn 2010, 454–56; Hahn 2009, 151–57).

Jesus' Word in Scripture remains inseparable from his "I" in the liturgy. Through the structures of apostolic succession, priests are to stand *in persona Christi*, and to speak with the authority and power of God (Ratzinger 2005c, 165–66, 184).¹⁰ This understanding of the priest's representation of Christ in the liturgy is related to another concept that is important in Benedict's writings, what he refers to as "a structural law of biblical faith . . . [that] God comes to men only through men." (Ratzinger 1971, 34)

In the liturgy, God comes to us through the priest who becomes the voice of the divine Word. For Benedict, the priestly word is the word of faith and the sacramental word of Christ: "As Christians we believe in the Word that has become flesh. . . . What has become visible in the Word has been transformed into the sacrament, as St. Leo the Great once said. The words of faith are essentially sacramental words." (Ratzinger 1996a, 174)

Scripture is central to the Eucharistic celebration because the liturgy is an "actualization" and continuation of the story of salvation that begins in the pages of the Bible (Ratzinger 1996b, 76–77).¹¹ Indeed, Benedict is always aware that the Scriptures themselves have emerged from the context of the Church's liturgical worship. As he notes, cultic worship is "the intimate, vital atmosphere of the Bible, in both the Old and New Testament." (Ratzinger 1996b, 15) The biblical Word is normative because it is liturgically performative. The authority of the Bible proceeds directly from its liturgical setting.

To summarize, we can say that for Benedict the *performativity* of the Word implies a unity between Scripture and liturgy, and the resultant *normativity* of the Word implies a unity between Scripture and theology. Without these unities, and the spiritual life that flows from their recognition, there can be no theology in the true sense of the word (Ratzinger 1995, 57). There can be no true theology without these two unities precisely because they are not extrinsic to the reality of the Word, but derive from its identity with the risen Christ: "All Christian theology, if it is to be true to its origin, must be first and foremost a theology of resurrection" (Ratzinger 1987, 184–85). Thus, for Benedict, the biblical Word's liturgical setting is the source of its theological normativity.¹² This is not just a matter of history; it is also a matter of recognizing that the Word spoken at creation is the same Word spoken in the liturgy and in the Scriptures.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, we do not have the space here to develop Benedict's rich biblical, ecclesial, and christological understanding of the priesthood. See Benedict XVI 2017; Ratzinger 2017; Benedict XVI and Sarah 2020.

¹¹ See also Ratzinger 1996a, 129: "In the celebration of the liturgy, the Church moves toward the Lord; liturgy is virtually this act of approaching his coming. In the liturgy the Lord is already anticipating his promised coming. Liturgy is anticipated *parousia*." See also Hahn 2009, 181–85.

¹² For more on this theme, see Hahn 2009, 137–85.

6. *Verbum Domini* and the Task of Normative Theology

As I stated above, I take Benedict's articulation of the task of normative theology to be his most significant contribution to the practice of biblical theology, amidst many contributions that may render his biblical theology his most enduring legacy. The remaining task of this essay is to show how this legacy gained a magisterial voice in the exhortation *Verbum Domini*.

In *Verbum Domini*, Benedict began by developing what he called a "Christology of the Word," where Christ is himself the principle of unity between the Old and New Testaments.¹³ This revelation of Christ, however, "spoken in time, is bestowed and 'consigned' to the Church in a definitive way, so that the proclamation of salvation can be communicated effectively in every time and place" (VD 17). This bestowal and consignment is intrinsic to the Church's identity as the Body of Christ: "Christ Jesus remains present today in history, in his body which is the Church; for this reason our act of faith is at once both personal and ecclesial" (VD 25).

Christ is a living principle of unity, a living Word whose performative character is experienced above all in the liturgy of the Church:

The relationship between word and sacramental gesture is the liturgical expression of God's activity in the history of salvation through the *performative character* of the word itself. In salvation history there is no separation between what God *says* and what he *does*. His word appears as alive and active (cf. *Heb* 4:12) In the liturgical action too, we encounter his word which accomplishes what it says. By educating the People of God to discover the performative character of God's word in the liturgy, we will help them to recognize his activity in salvation history and in their individual lives. (VD 53)¹⁴

The liturgical action is, therefore, the "privileged place" for encountering the Word (VD 72). We might therefore call *Verbum Domini*'s "Christology of the Word" both ecclesial and liturgical.

In *Verbum Domini*, this ecclesial Christology of the Word ultimately provides the basis for the Church's unique authority with regard to Sacred Scripture:

¹³ See VD 11–13: "Here, at the heart, as it were, of the 'Christology of the word,' it is important to stress the unity of the divine plan in the incarnate Word: the New Testament thus presents the paschal mystery as being in accordance with the sacred Scriptures and as their deepest fulfillment. Saint Paul, in the *First Letter to the Corinthians*, states that Jesus Christ died for our sins 'in accordance with the Scriptures' (15:3) and that he rose on the third day 'in accordance with the Scriptures' (15:4). The Apostle thus relates the event of the Lord's death and resurrection to the history of the Old Covenant of God with his people. Indeed, he shows us that from that event history receives its inner logic and its true meaning."

¹⁴ See also VD 56: "Reflection on the performative character of the word of God in the sacramental action and a growing appreciation of the relationship between word and Eucharist lead to yet another significant theme which emerged during the synodal assembly, that of the *sacramentality* of the word."

Here we can point to a fundamental criterion of biblical hermeneutics: *the primary setting for scriptural interpretation is the life of the Church*. This is not to uphold the ecclesial context as an extrinsic rule to which exegetes must submit, but rather is something demanded by the very nature of the Scriptures and the way they gradually came into being. . . . The Holy Spirit, who gives life to the Church, enables us to interpret the Scriptures authoritatively. The Bible is the Church's book, and its essential place in the Church's life gives rise to its genuine interpretation. (VD 29)¹⁵

This is so not on the basis of an arbitrary imposition, but because of what the Word itself is: “[W]hile in the Church we greatly venerate the sacred Scriptures, *the Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book’; Christianity is the ‘religion of the word of God,’ not of ‘a written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word.’*” (VD 7)¹⁶

Hence, the Word received in Scripture is not a dead letter, but very much alive: “Here it might be helpful to recall the analogy drawn by the Fathers of the Church between the word of God which became ‘flesh’ and the word which became a ‘book.’ The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* takes up this ancient tradition which holds, as Saint Ambrose says, that *‘the body of the Son is the Scripture which we have received’* . . .” (VD 18)¹⁷

The living Word in the Scripture is also living in the Eucharist; Benedict recognizes a close analogy between these two forms of Christ's presence to the Church.

Hence, as in his prior work, for Benedict in *Verbum Domini* the Word's ecclesial setting is fundamentally liturgical:

15 See also VD 30: “The Bible was written by the People of God for the People of God, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Only in this communion with the People of God can we truly enter as a ‘we’ into the heart of the truth that God himself wishes to convey to us. Jerome, for whom ‘ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ,’ states that the ecclesial dimension of biblical interpretation is not a requirement imposed from without: the Book is the very voice of the pilgrim People of God, and only within the faith of this People are we, so to speak, attuned to understand sacred Scripture. An authentic interpretation of the Bible must always be in harmony with the faith of the Catholic Church.” (citing Benedict XVI 2007e; Hieronymus, *Commentarioum in Isaiam libri, Prol.* [PL 24, 17]) See also Ratzinger 2005d, 41–89, 53–54; Ratzinger 2005b, 120: “God's action thus appears as a principle by which history becomes comprehensible. The unifying principle of the whole of past and present ‘history, however, the only thing that gives meaning to it, is the historical Christ-event. This also gives the future its unity.” (citing Arias Reyero 1971, 106) See also Reno 2007.

16 Citing Saint Bernardus Claravellensis, *Homilia super missus est*, IV, 11 (PL 183, 86B). Emphasis added. See also Ratzinger 2005b, 117: “[P]reparation must be required to open up the inner dynamics of the word, and that can only be carried on through a sympathetic understanding, a readiness to experience something new, to be taken on a new path. . . . [The exegete] must be ready to let himself be taught by the phenomenon itself”

17 Citing Ambrosius, *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, 6, 33 (PL 15, 1677); DV 13. Emphasis added. See Ratzinger 2005d, 54. See also Ratzinger 1986, 23–24: “Scripture became flesh in him, became the actual passion of this Righteous One . . . he thus inserted his death into the Word of God, in which he lived and which lived in him, declaring itself in him.”

In considering the Church as “*the home of the word*,” attention must first be given to the sacred liturgy, for the liturgy is the privileged setting in which God speaks to us in the midst of our lives; he speaks today to his people, who hear and respond. . . . To understand the word of God, then, we need to appreciate and experience the essential meaning and value of the liturgical action. *A faith-filled understanding of sacred Scripture must always refer back to the liturgy*, in which the word of God is celebrated as a timely and living word. (VD 52; citing synodal Final Message, III, 6)

There is, consequently, a Eucharistic hermeneutic within which true understanding of the Scriptures may be found:

Scripture itself points us towards an appreciation of its own unbreakable bond with the Eucharist. “It can never be forgotten that the divine word, read and proclaimed by the Church, has as its one purpose the sacrifice of the new covenant and the banquet of grace, that is, the Eucharist.” Word and Eucharist are so deeply bound together that we cannot understand one without the other: the word of God sacramentally takes flesh in the event of the Eucharist. The Eucharist opens us to an understanding of Scripture, just as Scripture for its part illumines and explains the mystery of the Eucharist. Unless we acknowledge the Lord’s real presence in the Eucharist, our understanding of Scripture remains imperfect. (VD 55; citing *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, 10)

In these passages from *Verbum Domini*, we see Benedict’s prior concept of the “performative” Word gaining a magisterial voice. The liturgy is not only the home of the Word; the liturgy is also the guide to understanding the Word.

While he does speak of a “performative” Word, Benedict does not use the term “normative theology” in *Verbum Domini*. Acknowledging the logical connection of the two concepts, however, allows us to recognize his conception of “normative theology” in the exhortation. We have just seen the connection made with Benedict’s typical precision: He says quite clearly that without the Eucharist, true understanding of Scripture becomes impossible. There is therefore a living link between liturgy and Scripture, and between Scripture and theology, rooted in the liturgical experience of the Word. In his prior work, Benedict referred to this constellation of ideas as “normative theology”: Reading Scripture as the Church’s book, which is about the living Word. While the term “normative theology” is absent from the exhortation, the concept is very much present.

In *Verbum Domini*, Benedict accordingly repeats his earlier teaching that because the Word is a living Subject, conversion is required in order to enter into fruitful conversation with it—that is to say, with him. The Word is not “something” that one studies but “someone” to whom one listens. There is a necessary, interpersonal “drama” involved:

Indeed, the goal to which we are necessarily progressing is the one Word. There is an inner drama in this process, since the passage that takes place in the power of the Spirit inevitably engages each person's freedom. Saint Paul lived this passage to the full in his own life. In his words: "*the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*" (2 Cor 3:6), he expressed in radical terms the significance of this process of transcending the letter and coming to understand it only in terms of the whole. Paul discovered that "the Spirit of freedom has a name, and hence that freedom has an inner criterion: 'The Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor 3:17). *The Spirit of freedom is not simply the exegete's own idea, the exegete's own vision. The Spirit is Christ, and Christ is the Lord who shows us the way*" (VD 38; Citing Benedicto XVI 2008, 726; emphasis added)¹⁸

For Benedict, the living Word interprets itself—himself—to the heart of the believer who listens with faith. For this reason, Benedict depicts the Church as "the great teacher of the art of listening":

The Church draws life not from herself but from the Gospel, and from the Gospel she discovers ever anew the direction for her journey. This is an approach that every Christian must understand and apply to himself or herself. . . . *In the word of God proclaimed and heard, and in the sacraments*, Jesus says today, here and now, to each person: "I am yours, I give myself to you"; so that we can receive and respond, saying in return: "I am yours." (VD 51; citing Benedicto XVI 2005, 956)¹⁹

¹⁸ See also VD 51: "The relationship between Christ, the Word of the Father, and the Church cannot be fully understood in terms of a mere past event; rather, it is a living relationship which each member of the faithful is personally called to enter into. We are speaking of the presence of God's word to us today: 'Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Mt 28:20)." See also Ratzinger 1995, 51: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20). . . . [T]his one phrase, like a sudden bolt of lightning, reveals in its light the inner event which took place in those outer events [in Acts 9] and which lies at their very foundation. This inner event is at one and the same time wholly personal and wholly objective. It is an individual experience in the highest degree, yet it declares what the essence of Christianity is for everyone. . . . [C]onversion in the Pauline sense is something much more radical than, say, the revision of a few opinions and attitudes. It is a death-event. In other words, it is an exchange of the old subject for another. The 'I' ceases to be an autonomous subject standing in itself. It is snatched away from itself and fitted into a new subject. The 'I' is not simply submerged, but it must really release its grip on itself in order then to receive itself another in and together with a greater 'I.'" This "no longer I" is not merely personal, but ecclesial (Ratzinger 1995, 52–23).

¹⁹ See also VD 50: "To receive the Word means to let oneself be shaped by him, and thus to be conformed by the power of the Holy Spirit to Christ, the 'only Son from the Father' (Jn 1:14). It is the beginning of a new creation; a new creature is born, a new people comes to birth. Those who believe, that is to say, those who live the obedience of faith, are 'born of God' (Jn 1:13) and made sharers in the divine life: *sons in the Son* (cf. Gal 4:5–6; Rom 8:14–17)." See also Ratzinger 1997, 29–31: "To be handed over into the doctrine is to be handed over into Christ. We cannot receive his Word as a theory in the same way that we learn, say, mathematical formulas or philosophical opinions. We can learn it only in accepting a share in Christ's destiny."

The listening whereby the Word discloses his mysteries is not, therefore, primarily individual, but ecclesial and liturgical (cf. *VD* 54, 86).²⁰

The collective, liturgical listening of the Church through the ages simply is Tradition, through which Christ continues to speak (cf. *VD* 18; Ratzinger 1987, 321–22). This liturgical listening and subsequent missionary proclamation, furthermore, simply is “normative theology.” As we have seen, while Benedict does not use the term “normative theology” in *Verbum Domini*, the concept is readily recognizable when one is able to see *Verbum Domini* within the context of Benedict’s previous work. It is the “performativity” of the liturgical Word that makes the same Word normative for theology, because both worship and theology involves an encounter with the same living Christ. Accordingly, the theologian’s task, according to Benedict, is to enter into, be transformed by, and then transmit this normative theology in his own time and place.

Conclusions

In *Verbum Domini* and Benedict’s earlier work, theology is more than the study of God’s Word. For Benedict, God is always more than an “object” of study for theology. The theologian, following the lead of the normative theologians, the human authors of sacred Scripture, endeavors through his work to make God the living *subject* of his theology—to let God himself “speak” through his theological work.

Benedict therefore presents the theologian, in a way, as the servant or handmaiden of revelation.²¹ This is a lofty duty, one requiring deep commitment of heart and mind, deep faith as well as rational and methodological rigor. As Benedict states it: “Christian theology . . . is never a purely human discourse about God, but always, and inseparably, the *logos* and ‘logic’ of God’s self-revelation. For this reason scientific rationality and lived devotion are two necessarily complementary and interdependent aspects of study” (Benedict XVI 2007c).

For the theologian who reads them in faith, the Scriptures are far more than ancient texts to be studied; they are the divine speech of God in human language through which we encounter the living God. The theologian, then, must approach Scripture almost in an attitude of worship: “We have to enter into a relationship of

²⁰ See also *VD* 30: “The intensity of an authentic ecclesial experience can only lead to the growth of genuine understanding in faith where the Scriptures are concerned; conversely, reading the Scriptures in faith leads to growth in ecclesial life itself. Here we can see once again the truth of the celebrated dictum of Saint Gregory the Great: ‘*The divine words grow together with the one who reads them.*’” (Emphasis added; citing Gregorius Magnus, *Homiliae in Ezechielem* I, VII, 8 [PL 76, 843D]) See Ratzinger 1995, 51–53; Ratzinger 1986, 46.

²¹ Cf. the rich Marian typology of fruitful listening in *VD* 28–29.

awe and obedience toward the Bible which nowadays is frequently in danger of being lost” (Ratzinger 1996a, 50) As Benedict himself says in *Verbum Domini*, “In a word, ‘where exegesis is not theology, Scripture cannot be the soul of theology, and conversely, where theology is not essentially the interpretation of the Church’s Scripture, such a theology no longer has a foundation.’” (VD 35; citing Benedict XVI 2008b, 493–94) In other words, “normative theology” is simply the interpretation of Scripture as “the Church’s book” about the living Word (cf. VD 29).

This statement, in turn, brings us back to the liturgy, where the Word’s “performativity” establishes its “normativity” for theology (see VD 55). The authority of the Scripture as “the soul of theology” is ultimately grounded in its performative and transformative character as experienced above all in the liturgy. We might say, then, that for Benedict, for theology to have a true foundation requires a recognition of the Word’s privileged setting in the Church’s liturgy.²²

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