

Scott Hahn, *Covenant and Communion: The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press. 2009. Pages 204. Hardbound. \$21.99

Near the beginning of *Covenant and Communion* Scott Hahn makes the following claim on behalf of Pope Benedict's theological importance:

“Close study of [his] body of writings suggests that, had professor Ratzinger been left alone to pursue his scholarly passions, his achievements would have rivaled or surpassed those of the greatest Catholic theologians of the last century — figures such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner” (p. 17).

Laudatory as it is, this assessment strikes me as too modest. To be sure, it is in large measure because of the high ecclesiastical offices he has held that Benedict has attracted a wider readership than other prominent theologians have. But it is equally true that Benedict writes with clarity and simplicity and that he is able to express profound truths in a way accessible not only to specialists but also to educated laymen. What's more, his writings are not just intellectually profound but spiritually insightful as well. Yet perhaps the surest indicator of Benedict's importance on the current theological scene is the fact that both by example and by active encouragement he is helping to foment a genuine revolution in the study of Sacred Scripture among young Catholic scholars. (Perhaps my sample of Catholic graduate students in theology is biased, though there is lots of evidence that suggests otherwise.)

The reason why Hahn's book is a really good introduction to the broad sweep of Benedict's theology is that Hahn knows precisely where to begin and precisely where to end. The ending is of special interest to readers of *Antiphon* and I will return to it below.

The beginning, on the other hand, is the methodological key unlocking the door through which the new Scripture scholars can escape the academically oppressive regime of the historical-critical method. Benedict has been one of the most unrelenting critics of the exclusive use of historical-critical exegesis in the study of Sacred Scripture. He does not reject the method *per se*, acknowledging that Christianity is a historically-based religion and that its sacred writings are historical documents. As such, they are legitimately subject to questions about the conditions under which they were composed and about the

history of their transmission. Nonetheless, in the last century the historical-critical method has been employed against the backdrop of highly questionable metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions that are inimical to the faith and inconsistent with the Church's own self-understanding. Accordingly, it has become fashionable in some circles to treat the writers of the New Testament, along with the leaders of the nascent ecclesial communities, as power-brokers bent on using the sacred writings to promote their own agendas, even at the cost of distorting the "real truth" about Jesus and his mission. What's more, this so-called "hermeneutic of suspicion" has been touted as the only reasonable and academically respectable method for interpreting the relevant texts. The Fathers of the Church and scholastic theologians have thus been set aside as naive (at best) readers of both the Old and the New Testaments.

Benedict rejects both the claim to exclusivity and the philosophical assumptions — especially those concerning the relation between faith and reason. In the first place, the canonical and extra-canonical stories about the early Christians, including the stories of the martyrs, are rendered absolutely incredible by the hermeneutic of suspicion. Why give your life for an obvious lie? Second, if it is indeed the case, as St. Augustine's own experience taught him, that the only way to understand the Scriptures deeply is by employing what Benedict calls a "hermeneutic of faith" instead, then those who rely exclusively on the historical-critical method are in effect cutting themselves off *a priori* from saving truth. Why run that risk? Besides, why shouldn't Catholic exegetes presuppose the truth of the doctrines of the Faith, given that assent to these doctrines is, as many past and present Christian philosophers have argued cogently, reasonable by any plausible test of reasonability?

But more important than Benedict's critique of the historical-critical method is his positive alternative. His entire theological project is predicated on the thesis, stipulated again and again in the New Testament itself, that the Old Testament and the Christ-event, i.e., the New Testament, are divine gifts that cannot be adequately understood apart from one another. In the middle sections of his book, Hahn demonstrates again and again the richness and depth of this hermeneutic of faith in understanding the history of salvation and, especially, in understanding the person and mission of the Incarnate Son of

God.

Of special interest to readers of *Antiphon* is Benedict's multifaceted argument for the conclusion that the Church's liturgy is the culmination of salvation history and makes the *parousia* present even now, before the second coming. More specifically, the Eucharistic liturgy is the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices wherein Jesus Christ offers his own humanly perfect obedience and love to the Father — in short, offers himself — in an act that we are unable to imitate on our own but are empowered to participate in to the extent that we are incorporated into the life of the Son of God in his Mystical Body. The heavenly liturgy spoken of in the Letter to the Hebrews and in Revelations becomes available to us through the Church. What had been prefigured in the Old Testament sacrifices — from Abel's sacrifice of the first fruits, to Abraham's sacrifice of the ram, to the slaughtering of the Passover lambs, to the Temple sacrifices prescribed by the Law — comes to fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

“For Benedict, the Church's sacramental liturgy — the new covenant's worship — is the goal and consummation of the biblical story and the history of salvation. If everything in Scripture is ordered to the covenant that God wants to make with his creation, then everything in the Church is ordered to proclaiming that new covenant and initiating people into it through the sacramental liturgy. The Church's mission, therefore, is liturgical; its identity and actions are defined by the Word revealed in history. The liturgy of the Church is the work of Jesus continuing in time, transforming history and divinizing men and women by transforming them into ‘new creations,’ children of God, and partakers of divine nature. The Church's worship, then, is far more than a congregational gathering. It is an act of *priesthood*, which has always been the duty of the people of God” (pp. 166-167).

This is why it is crucial that the faithful should have as deep an understanding as possible of what Jesus Christ is accomplishing in this liturgy and what he wants to accomplish in us. Anyone reading this penultimate chapter will understand why Benedict cares so deeply about liturgical reform.

The last chapter of the book outlines Benedict's ruminations on the "beauty and necessity" of the theologian's role in the life of the Church. Benedict sees this role as primarily one of service to the ecclesial community. In a sense, this role is less august than the analogous intellectual role assigned to the philosopher in Plato's *Republic*; for it is the saint, rather than the philosopher, who is the epitome of perfection from a Catholic perspective. But Benedict's own theological project, as well as that of the author of this book, demonstrates what an important gift to the Church the theologian is capable of rendering.

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