

Explorations *in the* Theology of
BENEDICT XVI

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BENEDICT XVI



Edited by
JOHN C. CAVADINI

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN C. CAVADINI

“God Is Love.” Such is our faith, the faith of the Church. As theologians and colleagues from other disciplines, we seek to understand this profound truth ever more clearly, to discover it ever anew, and to be able to communicate what we have discovered ever more persuasively. In doing so, we acknowledge ourselves to be following the footsteps, most proximately, of Pope Benedict XVI, whose first encyclical was named after this passage from Scripture. For such is the task of the theologian according to Saint Augustine that there is the first phase, that of discovery, *modus inveniendi*, and then the second phase, that of communication, *modus proferendi*. The conviction of Saint Augustine is that God has himself spoken so precise, so persuasive, and so moving a Word of Love in the Incarnation that to “discover” it adequately and anew must mean to allow oneself to be informed, persuaded, and moved in one’s own heart ever anew and ever more profoundly, and so to want to impart an understanding of that Word that can pierce through the hardness of our age—hard as the pavement on the streets that the indigent poor must walk every day, as

Dorothy Day put it—to allow God’s Word of Love to be spoken in someone else’s heart.

The two phases of theology are therefore mutually implicated; they are not really separable, because to want to discover God’s Word of Love anew, to want to understand it better, means at the very same time to want to discover how to say it better, how to articulate it in a way that it can be heard in one’s own time and that is true to the original Truth, the original Logos or Meaning, the original Light. “Love is the light—and in the end, the only light—that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage to keep living and working. . . . To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter the world—this is the invitation I would like to extend with the present Encyclical,” writes Pope Benedict just before the conclusion of the encyclical letter *God Is Love*. Is this the *modus inveniendi* or the *modus proferendi*? It is really the description of the union of both. Benedict’s encyclical seeks understanding (“to experience love”) in order to engender understanding (“to cause the light of God to enter the world”). It performs the union between the desire to understand and the desire to engender understanding and invites everyone in his or her own way, including theologians, to do the same. How else can a work of theology issue an “invitation” to “experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world”? One seeks an “understanding” that can be the occasion for the original Understanding, the original Light, to find a place in someone’s heart, to move someone deeply in the experience of being loved and cherished and so nourished by God, and thus to cause the light of God to enter, ever ancient and ever new, into the world.

We have chosen to study the theology of Benedict XVI not only out of what is called or sometimes passes for “academic” interest, by which is sometimes meant a neutral, objectifying (if not objective!) interest, but also in order to take up his invitation, and so to honor him, as theologians. We study his theology throughout his career, for its intrinsic interest but also so that we can understand how it surfaces and comes to a fruition in his letters and statements as Supreme Pastor. We hope thereby to hear the invitation he has issued as Benedict

XVI more precisely and more clearly, so that we can receive most fully the invitation “to experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world more faithfully and fruitfully.” We are convinced that one of Benedict’s major achievements is the demonstration of Augustine’s original insight into the unity of the theological tasks of understanding and of engendering understanding. We propose that, among other things, this is the “invention,” in the sense of “discovery,” of a new apologetics founded not so much on the desire to outdo one’s opponent in dialectical victory but to allow the Love in which the original Word was spoken to be heard anew and to make its own case, its own “apologia,” in the hearts of those who hear. If “love alone is credible,” to borrow from Balthasar, love alone needs no apology, or, better, provides its own. “Let love speak,” could perhaps be the motto of the encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est* and, as such, the motto for Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI’s theology over his life’s work as a theologian, and we take it as our own. Ultimately we will see that even this is actually not the discovery of a new apologetics so much as the recovery and reinterpretation of something ancient.

Cyril O’Regan’s essay, first in this collection, offers an overview of Benedict’s theology by analyzing it, as a whole, and so it stands by itself here. In characterizing Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI’s theology as a “constitutively Augustinian” enterprise, a “figuring” of Augustinian theology for the contemporary period, O’Regan’s essay opens up what we might call the interior life of this theology as a way of giving an account of its power and its depth. To denominate it as “constitutively” Augustinian means simultaneously displacing clichés about Benedict and, even more, about Augustine. “Ruled out from the beginning is deploying ‘Augustinian’ as a trope for a dialectical or negative view with regard to the saeculum,” for such a view “fails to capture either Augustine’s or Benedict’s complex and highly nuanced negotiation with culture,” as O’Regan puts it. Instead of dialectically opposed pairs, this means a series of thematic and structural integrations, beginning first and foremost with theology as “faith seeking understanding” which integrates faith and reason and results in a theology that is integrated with the pastoral. “Theology is irreducibly

pastoral,” for both Augustine and Benedict. I take this to be a re-description of the intrinsic connection between the *modus inveniendi* and the *modus proferendi* I have already noted.

The “irreducibly pastoral” character of Benedict’s theology signifies also the integration of the “faith of the theologian and simple faith” as it exists in any member of the Church. These reflect and enact the even more “constitutive” integration of faith and reason. For Benedict, “faith and reason are made for each other,” but “even more than Augustine, Benedict is alive to the prospect that they will separate and become alien to each other and, as such, will be damaging to the Church.” In fact, for Benedict, “separate from each other, faith and reason become pathologies.” Other Augustinian-style integrations: the balance between a critically informed approach to the Bible and an overall hermeneutic of Scripture as the Word of God; the integration of Christianity as a cultural reality and at the same time the bearer of a unique and unsurpassable revelation; the integration of theology and prayer, each mutually implicating and recommending and even enacting the other; and an apocalyptic sensibility that views the consummation of history as still to arrive and yet as mysteriously present in the sacramental life of the Church in the midst of the “drama” of its journeying, pilgrimwise, through the ambiguities of history as we know them now.

If there is a critical edge to Benedict’s theology, it is, like Augustine’s, in defense of the integrations that his theology upholds as fundamental against the “pathologies” that would dis-integrate them. One specific element of Augustinian theology, the relation between Christ and culture as explicated in the *De Doctrina Christiana*, for example, is brought forward in Benedict, and that is the uniqueness of the Christian claim that “Christ is the eschatological disclosure of God,” and as such offers an unsurpassable truth, even if elements of truth may be found outside the sphere of Christian revelation and there is a valuation of dialogue which is not one-sided and yet does not renounce the claim to truth. Benedict, like Augustine, argues against the premature foreclosure of dialogue in the renunciation of the uniqueness of the Christian claim, partly from failure to understand it and to respect the integrations that it entails. “That history,” O’Regan points

out, “according to Benedict, will prove a battleground of claims does not provide sufficient reason to surrender them. In the meantime, other religions and cultures are to be treated with more than tolerance; they are to be treated with love.”

Benedict’s criticism of the contemporary tendency to accept no truth as universal, what he referred to as a “dictatorship of relativism,” is addressed most specifically in the next group of essays in the volume, under the rubric “The Dynamic of Advent.” Peter Casarella’s essay on culture and conscience leads off here, reminding us that Benedict’s opposition to the “dictatorship of relativism” is not to be taken “as if it were a blast from a bunker in the U.S. culture wars,” or as if the dictatorship of relativism were ideally to be overturned only to be replaced by a new dictatorship, that of faith. The profoundly Augustinian character of Benedict’s opposition to the dictatorship of relativism is reflected, as Casarella reminds us, in his invocation of an “advent dynamic” to describe the interaction of cultures and their progression “toward the Logos of God, who became flesh in Jesus Christ.” This is not a statement of triumphalism but an interpretation of the Augustinian drama of pilgrimage. It is based on the conviction of “the capacity of any culture—Christian or non-Christian—to remain open to an *encounter* with another culture without sacrificing *either* its religious foundation *or* the necessary stance of openness.”

This is not to unsay a nonrelativistic conception of human nature. Instead, Casarella goes on to point out, “Ratzinger’s resolute commitment to intercultural dialogue is nurtured by his confidence in the ability of our contemporaries to recover the lost language of human nature.” Here is another integrative moment in the thought of Benedict XVI, in which intercultural dialogue is not set off against and opposed to the idea of a transcultural human nature but based on such an idea. The formation of conscience is seen not in a narrow, moralistic way but rather as a formation of the person in the freedom to bear witness to the truth of human nature and human dignity in such a way that it permits the renewal of the cultural imagination and preserves it from developing hardened complacencies about the relative nature of truth that in turn promote, rather than stem, violence and cultural decadence. Cannot one hear echoed the Augustinian claim,

from *City of God*, book 5, that the witness of the martyrs demystifies the imperial chauvinism that marks the Roman quest for cultural prestige (“glory”) as nothing other than the subjection of virtue to opinion rather than to truth? “Relativism,” no matter how “liberal,” is in its essence an imperial dynamic (and in that sense, a “dictatorship”) that leads both for Augustine and for Benedict inevitably to cultural incoherence and social decline.

That relativism could become, paradoxically, a new dogmatism is the subject of the next essay by Fr. Edward T. Oakes. He begins with quotes from Allan Bloom that make it seem, contrary to Casarella’s claim, that Benedict’s opposition to the “dictatorship of relativism” does in fact come from a bunker in the U.S. culture wars after all. By the end of the essay, however, it is clear that the forceful evocation of these “paradoxes” of relativism serve only to emphasize the terms, and so to heighten the “resolution,” of the “relativity paradox” of which the title speaks. The essay relates to the contemporary breakdown of the Augustinian balance between the uniqueness of Christ and the claims to (and presence of!) truth found in non-Christian cultural achievements.

Fundamentally the challenge, and therefore the resolution, is Christological. The “challenge of Christological relativism” is first posed in its modern form most acutely by Troeltsch’s book *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, so, as Father Oakes demonstrates, the resolution of the paradoxes of relativism is itself Christological. Acceptance of the Incarnation in faith is acceptance of a “stumbling block” for reason. It “overturns” our “normal approach to reality,” a “folly” that “requires the overthrow of worldly norms of rationality.” This does not destroy reason but provides it with an ideal of love which amazes and informs reason, humanizes it and heals it as it plumbs the depths of a love it could not have imagined on its own. Reason is healed because on the one hand it accepts as the norm of truth something fixed and unsurpassable, rejecting the relativism that leads to the reduction of itself to the purely technical. Yet even as it does accept such absolute truth, because it is the truth of an absolute love, such acceptance opens reason to listening to the other instead of closing it off. Listening will be with an openness based on love, an openness hitherto

unimaginable. It will not fail to discern as error anything which contradicts the truth that makes the listening possible, and yet it will be open to a depth of truth it may not have expected to hear. In any event it is precluded from “setting limits on God’s behalf; the very heart of faith [and thus of reason] has been lost to anyone who supposes that it is only worthwhile, if it is, so to say, made worthwhile by the damnation of others,” as Father Oakes quotes Benedict as saying.

The right kind of listening must in fact learn to appreciate a “depth” of otherness, if Robert M. Gimello is correct. He uses this idea in the main title for his essay, which is subtitled “Buddhism and Benedict’s Theology of Religions.” This essay comes from the depth of Gimello’s lifelong scholarly acquaintance with Buddhism. Its erudition forestalls a superficial account of interreligious dialogue which requires each party, in effect, to “suspend, treat as merely provisional, and perhaps even relinquish one’s own beliefs.” This would mean, in the case of Christianity, that Christian doctrine could be understood as “‘true’ only in a ‘relative’ sense.” For Benedict, as Gimello points out, such a dialogue is bound to be “superficial,” and its listening to the other not very disciplined or deep. More than likely it will merely “conceal in the cloak of one’s own desires the true, demanding otherness of the other.”

The right kind of listening will be able truly to see in other religions, in this case Buddhism, “many things that are both true and holy,” but it will also become aware of aspects “that are simply incompatible with Christian belief and the Christian life, or are deficient unto Christian ends, aspects overlooked in undisciplined haste to form liberating bonds with the other.” Gimello lists eight examples of “sharp antinomies” that present themselves in the “depth of otherness” that Buddhism exhibits in relation to Christianity. These are fundamental differences, and unless one faces them, one does not really see the other, or oneself for that matter, very clearly. In fact, the other so construed can turn out to be an (imperial?) “misappropriation,” an abuse of the other who is constructed—distorted—so as to serve as a critique of those aspects of one’s own religious orthodoxy one does not like. In the process one loses a sense of what criteria one is using to judge what is true and what is not; what is revealed and

what is not. How would one know that the Buddhist experience of emptiness, for instance, is the equivalent of the Christian experience of the grace of the Risen Lord, as some have claimed? In fact a sense of absolute truth is deployed in such claims to equivalency, only in a hidden way, masked by the assertion of relative truth itself in each concrete instance. Gimello offers an extended comparison of the Christian doctrine of love (charity) to Buddhist doctrines of compassion, opening our eyes to a vast landscape of beauty in either case, but also to an equally vast incommensurability between the two, if one resists the temptation to reduce both to a supposed position imperially hovering above either. For example, “the suffering beings who are the foci of the bodhisattva’s compassion . . . have no independent, fixed identities, and, lacking such identities, they have neither intrinsic worth nor claim of their own on the bodhisattva’s pity [and thus] are pitied, so to speak, not for their own sakes but as instantiations of the impersonal truth of pervasive suffering,” but this is radically different from the Christian basis for love of the other.

Thus, also disclosed in a truly loving and disciplined “discriminate attention that other religions deserve” are “elements of the other religion that can . . . help Christianity more deeply to plumb its own depths.” Gimello gives as an example of this the “epistemological sophistication” that discerns “the subtle and complex relations between desire and [ignorance,] the failure to know,” the “inveteracy of cognitive concupiscence . . . to fabricate desired falsehood.” Buddhism’s “astute, fine-grained analysis of the psychology of error, the intricate ways in which the conscious and unconscious mind constructs falsehood,” provides riches that can enhance Christianity’s understanding of its faith rather than relativize its faith. A dialogue that arose out of a true sense of what is incommensurable *belief* and what arises from the kind of spermatic *reason* that Christians have held to have been available to non-Christians such as Socrates (as O’Regan pointed out for Benedict)—would not this dialogue be a participation in the “advent dynamic,” the interaction of cultures and their progression “toward the Logos of God, who became flesh in Jesus Christ”? Would not such dialogue be an example of a loving encounter with the other, truly attempting to see the other instead of constructing him or her as

merely an instrument to “think with” about one’s own religious discomfitures? The work that it would then take to “understand” one’s own faith in a way that can engender understanding of that faith in the concrete other before you would be a kind of self-giving, the giving of one’s best self in love, a witness of the heart and thereby the creation of a kind of communion. Perhaps this would be the “apologetics of love” at its deepest level, the union of the *modus inveniendi* and the *modus proferendi* in the medium of frank, clear, and loving conversation. This is to recapture the balance advanced as an ideal in the *De Doctrina* of Saint Augustine in a wholly new context.

This mention of apologetics brings us to the concluding essay of this section of the book, “Reflections on *Introduction to Christianity*,” by Lawrence S. Cunningham. Cunningham points to the consistency of Ratzinger’s thought throughout his theological career that enables a return to the *Introduction* to serve in its turn as recapitulation. The *Introduction* originated in a series of lectures offered to an audience of both believers and nonbelievers. Therefore it has what Cunningham calls “the ring of both catechesis and apology.” It is the attempt to engage in theology so that what one “discovers” in the *modus inveniendi* is discovered in the attempt to engender understanding of what Christians believe in a way that serves believers and nonbelievers at the same time. It is “both a proclamation of the faith and, however tacitly, an apologia for the faith.”

Can the same exposition actually serve both purposes? If the very same exposition that can prompt conversion to Christianity can also provide “understanding” to what a Christian already believes, it implies that Christian conversion is never fully accomplished, is never a settled achievement that can be left behind once and for all with baptism, but is an ongoing reality. This balances the possession of the fullness of truth in Christianity with the humility required to possess the truth, larger than oneself and received as a gift, properly. One possesses it properly in an openness to others, in a way that the theological task of “faith seeking understanding” discovers the “understanding” that makes the faith “understandable” to others, not by giving up its uniqueness, but by interpreting it in terms that allow it

to be heard as “reasonable” and so inviting at least to dialogue. If this seems like the opening of a dialogue that will be in medias res for a longer rather than a shorter time, that is probably a correct intuition of Ratzinger’s sense of things. The overcoming of the dictatorship of relativism is not the replacement of it with another dictatorship, this time of faith, but with an “understanding” that is at once an “invitation.” The invitation is based not on a comfortable “imperial” sense of Truth as implying the equivalency of all “truths” but an uncomfortable bearing of witness in humility and generosity, “toward the Logos of God, who became flesh in Jesus Christ.” Ratzinger speaks as “a pilgrim of faith inviting others to join that journey,” as Cunningham puts it. Here we are, with the beginning as our end, in the advent dynamic mentioned by Casarella. And, as Cunningham points out, this integrating dynamic does arise from Ratzinger’s lifelong dedication to holding together faith and reason in the fundamental belief that the Word, Reason itself, became flesh.

But how well does this theology translate into prescriptions for action in a world where not all are believers and yet all must learn to live together not in a distant future but now? If we really do believe that God is Love, then it must so translate. The next two essays, in the section “*Caritas in Veritate*,” attempt to answer that question, by reviewing and by developing Benedict’s theology. Daniel Philpott’s essay, “God’s Saving Justice: Faith, Reason, and Reconciliation in the Political Thought of Pope Benedict XVI,” addresses the topic of the reconciliation of peoples after upheavals caused by aggression, war, persecution, and genocide. Philpott argues that at the heart of Benedict’s perspective lies the synthesis, already insistently noted in the previous essays, of faith and reason. He explains that Benedict argues in the first instance for the purification of reason by faith. Justice is a concept accessible to reason alone, of course, but true justice presupposes something which reason cannot provide for itself or account for on its own, and that is love. The love in question is not just a subjective feeling but “the love of God in the Bible, revealed and shared through Jesus Christ.” The justice enacted on our behalf by Jesus Christ discloses that “even justice itself depends on the love that exceeds justice.” On the other hand, religion or faith alone—“religion decoupled

from reason”—“is liable to collapse into sectarianism and violence.” In terms of a logic of reconciliation, reason demands that justice be done in terms of the rights of all involved. But reconciliation, conceived in biblical terms received in faith, discloses a justice that goes beyond rights (“what is due to each”) and thus beyond the limitation of the reconciling imagination simply to “what is due” based either on the pathology of reason alone, disconnected from faith, or of faith alone, disconnected from reason. “The justice of reconciliation . . . encompasses but exceeds rights,” as Philpott summarizes, and it “takes on even more fullness through its connection with two other concepts derived from the Bible: peace and mercy.”

Operating, then, on the principle, following Benedict, that the sustaining of justice, the justice of rights and due, “itself depends on love,” Philpott enumerates six “wounds” and six corresponding “practices” that illustrate the need for a reconciliation that is effective because, while encompassing rights, it goes beyond rights. Perhaps in the context of this brief introduction, we can mention only one, the sixth practice, namely, forgiveness. “*Forgiveness* [is] the rarest of the six practices to take place in political orders but also the most distinctively Christian and,” Philpott argues, “the most potentially transforming.” It is of course not practiced in isolation from the other five practices, which include “punishment” and “apology,” though it is not necessarily directly connected to these either. Philpott observes that “for societies recovering from past injustices, forgiveness helps to defeat the standing victory of injustice, contributes to the restoration of victims, and helps to work against cycles of revenge and counter-revenge.” He concludes, “The balm of reconciliation redresses wounds that are wider than those that human rights can describe, involves measures wider than restoring human rights, and indeed effects the kinds of restoration that greatly strengthen a regime based on human rights.” This reflects the justice that is rooted in reason, enhanced and given grounding in its dependence on the mercy, love, and grace found in faith, even as it also connects faith to the reasonableness that arises out of the sense of human nature and its concomitant sense of human rights.

The second essay in this section speaks directly out of the encyclical that has given the section its title. Simona Beretta's essay on Benedict's *Caritas in Veritate* is titled "Development Driven by Hope and Gratuitousness: The Innovative Economics of Benedict XVI." The question of Catholic social teaching arises here, with respect to the unique perspective it brings to the question of the economic and political development of peoples. One of Benedict's characteristic reminders is that Catholic social teaching loses what it uniquely has to offer if it cuts itself off from the rest of Catholic teaching, especially if it concentrates on "justice" apart from Catholic teaching on love, and on the faith and hope which provide the full dimensions of love. Economic development, if it is to be authentic human development and not simply technocratic solutions to technical problems, must be "driven" by values that are authentically human. Just social structures are necessary, but once established they do not function by themselves, and neither capitalism nor Marxism has been able to make good on the promise that just social structures, in themselves, can or have delivered a consistent justice. These structures are administered and supported by free agents and a free community who must be "animated" ever and anew "by convictions capable of motivating people to assent freely to the social order" and by a hope that is large enough to guarantee a place for the value of human freedom itself and for its proper exercise. In the economic sphere, "gratuitousness" plays a more important role than one might first imagine, even from the perspective of reason alone. There are many gifts given and received, gifts of trust, for instance, of initiative, of truth, of all kinds of "relational goods" that are more difficult to sustain than the material goods they help to create. Nor is the "gift" economy without its pathologies in a fallen world, for some of the worst corruption arises from bribes and other "gifts" and so-called gratuities that have taken on a life of their own. The economy of gifts cannot be noticed for what it is, assigned its true and fullest meaning, purified and supported apart from *caritas*. *Caritas* in turn has no objective dimensions apart from the faith that discloses the immensity and purity of God's love and the world as a place in which love is not a subjective illusion but is actually itself a gift. The idea of "gift" makes sense because it is engraved in the very