



The Holy See

Self-Presentation of His Eminence Card. Joseph Ratzinger as member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences

Mr. President, dear colleagues, I was born in 1927 in Marktl, in Upper Bavaria. I did my philosophical and theological studies immediately after the war, from 1946 to 1951. In this period, theological formation in the faculty of Munich was essentially determined by the biblical, liturgical and ecumenical movement of the time between the two World Wars.

Biblical study was very fundamental and essential in our formation, and the historical-critical method has always been very important for my own formation and subsequent theological work.

Generally, our formation was historically oriented, and so, although my area of speciality was systematic theology, my doctoral dissertation and my postdoctoral work presented historical arguments. My doctoral dissertation was about the notion of the people of God in Saint Augustine; in this study, I was able to see how Augustine was in dialogue with different forms of Platonism, the Platonism of Plotinus on the one hand and of Porphyry on the other. The philosophy of Porphyry was a re-foundation of Politeism and a philosophical foundation of the ideas of classical Greek religion, combined with elements of oriental religions. At the same time, Augustine was in dialogue with Roman ideology, especially after the occupation of Rome by the Goths in 410, and so it was very fascinating for me to see how in these different dialogues and cultures he defines the essence of the Christian religion. He saw Christian faith, not in continuity with earlier religions, but rather in continuity with philosophy as a victory of reason over superstition. So, to understand the original idea of Augustine and many other Fathers about the position of Christianity in this period of the history of the world was very interesting and, if God gives me time, I hope to develop this idea further.

My postdoctoral work was about St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan theologian of the thirteenth century. I discovered an aspect of Bonaventure's theology not found in the previous literature, namely, his relation with the new idea of history conceived by Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century. Joachim saw history as progression from the period of the Father (a difficult time for human beings under the law), to a second period of history, that of the Son (with more freedom, more openness, more brotherhood), to a third period of history, the definitive period of history, the time of the Holy of Spirit. According to Joachim, this was to be a time of universal reconciliation, reconciliation between east and west, between Christians and Jews, a time without the law (in the Pauline sense), a time of real brotherhood in the world. The interesting idea which I discovered was that a significant current among the Franciscans was convinced that Saint Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan Order marked the beginning of this third period of history, and it was their ambition to actualise it; Bonaventure was in critical dialogue with this current.

After finishing my postdoctoral work I was offered a position at the University of Bonn to teach fundamental theology, and in this period ecclesiology, history and the philosophy of religion were my main areas of work.

From 1962 to 1965 I had the wonderful opportunity to be present at the Second Vatican Council as an expert; this was a very great time of my life, in which I was able to be part of this meeting, not only between bishops and theologians, but also between continents, different cultures, and different schools of thinking and spirituality in the Church.

After this I accepted a position at the University of Tübingen, with the idea of being closer to the 'school of Tübingen', which did theology in a historical and ecumenical way. In 1968 there was a very violent explosion of Marxist theology, and so when I was offered a position at the new University of Regensburg, I accepted not only because I thought it would be interesting to help develop a new university, but also because my brother was the choirmaster of the Chapel of the Cathedral. I hoped, too, that it would be a peaceful time to develop my theological work. During my time there I wrote a book about eschatology and a book about the principles of theology, such as the problem of theological method, the problem of the relationship between reason and revelation, and between tradition and revelation. The Bible was also always the main point of interest for me.

While I was beginning to develop my own theological vision, in 1977 Pope Paul VI named me Archbishop of Munich, and so, like Cardinal Martini, I had to stop my theological work. In November of 1981, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, asked me to become the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Prefect of the Congregation is also President of two important Commissions, the International Theological Commission and the Pontifical Biblical Commission. The work of these two bodies, each composed of twenty or thirty professors proposed by the Bishops of the world, is carried out in complete freedom and acts as a link between the Holy See and the offices of the Roman Curia on the one hand, and the theological world on the other. It has been very helpful to me to serve as the President of these two

Commissions, because it has permitted me to continue somewhat my contact with theologians and with theology. In these years, the two Commissions have published a good number of very important documents.

In the Biblical Commission two documents in particular were very well received in ecumenical circles and in the theological world in general. The first was a document about the methods of exegesis. In the fifty years since the Second World War we have seen interesting developments in methodology, not only the classic historical-critical method, but also new methods that take into account the unity of the Bible in the diverse developments in this literature, and also new methods. I think this document was really a milestone; it was very well accepted, as I said, by the scholarly community. The second document was published last year and concerns the relationship between the Holy Bible of the Jewish people, the Old Testament, and the New Testament. It treats the question of the sense in which the two parts of the Bible, each with very different histories, can be considered one Bible, and in what sense a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament – not so evident in the text as such – can be justified, as well as our relationship to the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament. In this sense, the meeting of two books is also the meeting of two histories through their cultures and religious realisations. We hope that this document will also be very helpful in the dialogue between Christians and Jews.

The Theological Commission published documents on the interpretation of dogma, on the past faults of the Church – very important after the confessions made repeatedly by the Holy Father – and other documents. At the moment we are publishing a document on the Diaconate and another on revelation and inculturation.

This last argument, the encounter between different cultures, that is, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, is at the moment the main topic for us in our Congregation. After the disappearance of liberation theology in the years following 1989, there developed new currents in theology; for example, in Latin America there is an indigenous theology. This idea is to re-do theology in the light of the pre-Columbian cultures. We also are dealing with the problem of how Christian faith can be present in the great Indian culture with its rich religious and philosophical traditions.

The meetings of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with Bishops and with theologians, aimed at finding how an intercultural synthesis in the present moment is possible without losing the identity of our faith is exciting for us, and I think it is an important topic even for non-Christians or non-Catholics.

Thank you for the honour of being present with you.
