

Praise for *The Mind of Benedict XVI*

“DeClue’s survey of Benedict’s thought and legacy is truly exceptional. The most comprehensive accessible overview of this beloved pope’s theology available, it will lead a wide range of readers toward a deeper appreciation of Benedict’s incomparable brilliance and enduring relevance.”

—**Matthew Ramage**, Professor of Theology and Co-director of the Center for Integral Ecology at Benedictine College

“Unlike many other books on the theology of Pope Benedict, this work seeks to piece together the many occasional publications and public addresses of Ratzinger / Benedict XVI into a more systematic framework. It will be of great value to theology students as well as being accessible to a general readership. The early sections of the work on Ratzinger’s Bavarian childhood are the best accounts of this period of his life I have read.”

—**Tracey Rowland**, St. John Paul II Chair of Theology, University of Notre Dame (Australia)

“This book is a wonderful introduction to the theology of Joseph Ratzinger that is both accessible to anyone interested in his thought and a great addition to any serious student of Ratzinger’s theology. It will be an excellent overview for anyone who wants to study and to understand the thought of this theological giant. DeClue is able to highlight the notion of communion as the consistent note that brings unity and harmony to Ratzinger’s theological symphony, which consists of movements made up of fundamental theology, dogmatics, liturgy, and moral theology.”

—**Roland Millare**, Vice President of Curriculum and Director of Clergy Initiatives for the St. John Paul II Foundation, author of *A Living Sacrifice: Liturgy and Eschatology in Joseph Ratzinger*

The MIND of
BENEDICT XVI

The MIND *of*
BENEDICT
XVI A THEOLOGY
of COMMUNION

RICHARD G. DECLUE, JR.

FOREWORD BY FR. EMERY DE GAÁL

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Foreword

Fr. Emery de Gaál, PhD

Pope Benedict XVI's oeuvre is vast. His bibliography contains more than fifteen hundred titles. Dr. Richard DeClue presents us with a most readable, unifying synopsis of Ratzinger's writings, which permits us to easily access the central thoughts of "the Mozart of Theology," as Joseph Ratzinger is sometimes called. The terms "unity" and "whole" repeatedly occur in DeClue's excellent study. Structured in ten organically organized chapters, the author convincingly shows us that Ratzinger's thinking is characterized by an overarching coherence, a recurring *leitmotif*. DeClue argues that there is a *cantus firmus*, a unifying melody to all his writings.

Why unity? Is not postmodernity unity-resistant? Does it not delight in the fragmentary, scattered, and unreconciled? In the wake of Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), postmodernity rejects overarching grand narratives. To phrase it in language less familiar to our age's sensibilities: Can the multifarious and contingent, in principle, approximate the absolute and noncontingent God? And, vice-versa, can God communicate with mere mortals? These are valid questions that have been pondered by numerous serious minds throughout the centuries.

Ratzinger's theology is eminently concerned about the unity of God and humankind—a unity that signals the redeemability of creation. The God who created this world also mercifully restores it, after the fall, to a redeemed unity, from the Eucharistic

altar until the Second Coming of the Lord, which will render it most real. To render unity real is the work of redemption. Being a Christian, a priest, and a theologian means partaking in this unity and enabling such unity to come about tangibly for all. Pope Benedict XVI lived for this high-minded purpose.

Striving for unity is both primordial to the human condition and internal to the theological enterprise. Human thought in general, time and time again, has sought unity of some kind. Heraclitus (c. 540–c. 480 BC) apprehended the world as a constant interaction of a multitude of contraries. To him, this vibrant process is grounded in the one *Logos* that enables both cosmic vitality and integrity.¹ The *Logos* brings about a coherent symphony that allows every constituent its particular note. Plato (c. 428–c. 348 BC), in his enigmatic and challenging dialogue *Parmenides*, expanded on how the simple, common, and unitarian allows the multitude to come about: unity of the form guarantees for the human mind the recognizability of the particular in its specificity.² Perhaps echoing his teacher Plato, Aristotle (384–322 BC) seems to demonstrate in the *Metaphysics* the necessity of a whole in order for diversity, in its determinacy, to be appreciated at all.³

To the Christian imagination, Jesus Christ is the Heraclitan *Logos*, who brings about reconciliation with the source of all being: the Blessed Trinity.

According to the Church Fathers, the unity of the dynamic and creative Godhead somehow ineluctably longs to be mirrored in the redeemed world. In 1962, Ratzinger delivered a much-noted lecture on this very topic at the University of Salzburg. In and through the rich ethnic and cultural diversity of the

1. Heraclitus, *Fragments*, in *Die Vorsokratiker*, ed. Laura Gemelli Marciano (Darmstadt, DE: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), 1:300–307.

2. Plato, *Parmenides* 137c–166c.

3. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 998b–999a.

nations, a deep, underlying harmony resides, and must be lived in order for peace to come about.⁴

Ratzinger's lodestar, Augustine (354–430), is indebted to Plato's understanding of unity. The Bishop of Hippo argues that all being is constituted from an underlying oneness. This unity is not explained simply from ontological abstractions, but concretely and personally from the Eucharist. Fallen human nature partakes sacramentally in a unity with the crucified and exalted Lord, and is thereby called to live such unity in discipleship with fellow human beings.⁵ It is unity with the Eucharistic Lord that brings about unity in theology, the Church, humankind, and salvation history. Ratzinger unfolds this salient feature of Christianity early on in *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood* (1960).⁶ The human and philosophical quest for unity, integrity, and wholeness finds in Jesus Christ both its enabling ground and its fulfillment.

This is completely unlike the great synthesizer and philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). He strove for a forced and ersatz unity in the form of an absolute spirit—one lacking both personhood and mercy, and wholly incapable of evoking adoration and virtue. Less self-assured than Hegel, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) had earlier postulated that unity is the synthesizing achievement of the human mind that provides the condition for the possibility of insight in the first place.⁷ Probably unbeknownst to Kant, he echoes Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who had considered unity a transcendental.⁸

Ratzinger builds upon these insights when rejecting the French scientist Jacques Monod's (1910–1976) hypothesis that the world is the chance result of a giant lottery and, therefore,

4. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Unity of the Nations: A Vision of the Church Fathers* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

5. Augustine, *Sermo* 227 and 272.

6. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993).

7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 412–413.

8. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* 1.1.

that the cosmos is void of personal meaning.⁹ The Christian alternative of an undergirding unity to reality sounds at first vague, but Ratzinger finds it confirmed by another modern scientist: the German theoretical physicist and Nobel laureate Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976). Heisenberg, in his book *Das Teil und das Ganze* (1969), had discussed extensively, from the perspective of the natural sciences, the indispensable connection and interplay between the part and the whole.¹⁰

The director of Ratzinger's dissertation, Gottlieb Söhngen (1892–1971), had penned the 1952 book *The Unity of Theology*,¹¹ and in Ratzinger's eulogy for his director, he captures the essence of his own view of theology: "In the breadth of his thinking lay his greatness. . . . For he asks questions so comprehensively without presenting a closed synthesis. . . . He always tried to see the whole in the fragment [*das Ganze im Fragment*], to think the fragments from the whole and to design them as reflections of the whole."¹² It was precisely in seeing the whole as the vivifying source of all being, without reducing theology to a rationalistic system, that Söhngen showed himself both a believer and a scholar. The affirmation of the fragmentary nature of theology elevates the human imagination to higher plateaus.

Likewise, Ratzinger's conscious disavowal of the grand systems advanced by Hegel and neo-Scholasticism allows the greatness of his accomplishments to shine forth more luminously. Serving the "whole in fragment" permits the divine to enter into

9. Joseph Ratzinger, *'In the Beginning . . .': A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1990).

10. Cf. the English edition, which features a somewhat misleading title: Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Beyond: Encounters and Conversations*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

11. Gottlieb Söhngen, *Die Einheit der Theologie, Gesammelte Abhandlungen, Aufsätze, Vorträge* (Munich: Karl Zink, 1952).

12. Joseph Ratzinger, "Der Glaube ist es der das Fragen ermöglicht," *30 Giorni*, February 1, 2006, http://www.30giorni.it/articoli'_id_10221_15.htm.

contingent reality, “unveiling and veiling yet more”¹³ the divine truth. The fragment as fragment intimates the whole without taking control of it. From the Eucharist, the whole is suggested and, at the same time, is fully present in the *communio* of believers.

In DeClue’s comprehensive study we encounter Ratzinger’s gift of intimating and approximating the whole without reducing it to a suffocating, airtight system. This is the signal hallmark of Ratzinger’s theology: a systematician without a closed system. It is this that our author Richard DeClue most ably shares with us. He felicitously demonstrates that for Ratzinger, the unity of being does not translate into a rigid theological system, as was typical of university curricula well into the mid-twentieth century. Ratzinger thereby produced a “Symphony of Truth and Charity in Freedom.”¹⁴ In the final analysis, DeClue shows us how the richness of the Blessed Trinity is “completely incompletely” refracted in his theology. This constitutes the greatness of Joseph Ratzinger / Pope Benedict XVI, qualifying him to be declared, one joyful day, a Doctor of the Church.

13. A celebrated line coined by Romano Guardini (1885–1968), one of the formative thinkers for the student Ratzinger in Munich. Cf. Romano Guardini, *Vom Lob des Buches*, 3rd ed. (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1963).

14. Kurt Koch, “Symphonie von Wahrheit und Liebe in Freiheit,” *Forum katholische Theologie* 39 (2023): 81–102.

Introduction

Aim and Outline

Joseph Ratzinger's theological corpus is massive. Before he became Pope Benedict XVI,¹ he wrote at least fifty books and penned hundreds of articles. His productivity continued after his papal election. He issued encyclicals and apostolic exhortations; he authored (though as a private theologian) the three-volume *Jesus of Nazareth* series; and he delivered numerous public addresses. Moreover, his papal and pre-papal writings collectively cover nearly every major area of theology.

However, Ratzinger never published a complete work of systematic theology that lays out how his thoughts on each topic cohere with each other. Nevertheless, it is my contention that despite the enormous breadth of his work, Ratzinger's thought is fundamentally cohesive. Accordingly, this book provides a summary of his thought on several theological topics and attempts to demonstrate their inner relation. This aim is achieved through a very intentional order of presentation.

The first couple of chapters provide background information that prepare the reader to better understand the topical chapters that follow. The first chapter considers how certain themes in Ratzinger's theological work have roots in his life experiences. In fact, some hallmarks of his more developed thought are already seen in germ during his childhood. Before delving into specific

1. The names "Ratzinger" and "Benedict XVI" will both be used throughout this book. The choice is at the author's discretion. In general, Ratzinger is used when referencing works written before his election to the papacy, while Benedict XVI is used for works written thereafter. If a description of his thought could apply to both periods, either name may be employed.

theological topics, it is valuable to grasp Ratzinger's overall approach to theology. Hence, the second chapter offers insights into his theological method.

In the remaining chapters, a holistic vision of Ratzinger's thought is proposed. In order to help the reader see how the various topics form a whole, I have—to the best of my ability—arranged the chapters to produce a logical flow. In this schema, the Trinity is the foundation and goal of everything else. In fact, it is my contention that the Triune God is the source of the key leitmotif undergirding Ratzinger's theology: *communion*. Everything else comes from, relates to, and is ordered back toward the loving communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Ratzinger's views on creation; human nature and personhood; divine revelation; the Incarnation and salvation through the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ; the Church; the liturgy and sacraments; the moral life; and the four last things, especially heaven, are all best understood through the lens of *communion*, which has its origin and end in the Triune God.²

As the chapters progress, I will offer comments elucidating the connections between them, especially how one chapter leads to or flows from another as well as how a given chapter either harkens back to prior chapters or anticipates aspects of following chapters. By the end, it is my hope that the reader will understand these logical connections, which I will succinctly outline in the conclusion. The unity of theology through the analogy of faith is the key principle in this enterprise. Hopefully as a consequence, the reader will gain a greater understanding of the thought of

2. Rather than offer a separate chapter on Mariology, this book follows the example of Vatican II insofar as it includes its discussion of Mary in other chapters, showing how she relates to various aspects of salvation history. For fuller expositions of Ratzinger's Mariology, see especially two of his books: Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church's Marian Belief*, trans. John M. McDermott (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983); and Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 13–95.

INTRODUCTION

Benedict XVI and—through his theology—a better grasp of the Catholic faith itself.

1

Biographical Highlights

There is no shortage of Pope Benedict XVI biographies. They are well worth the read. A comprehensive presentation of his life is thus not necessary here. Nevertheless, this chapter will discuss highlights from his life that give significant insight into his thought. Rather than sticking to a strictly chronological order, key themes in Benedict's life will be presented in thematic categories.

PIETY AND HUMILITY

Pope Benedict XVI is widely regarded for his intellectual acumen. One of the things that makes him special, however, is how his intellectual life always remained rooted in the soil of piety and humility. In this regard, Thomas Rausch recalls something noteworthy about his first meeting with Ratzinger. In 1976, when Ratzinger was still a professor at Regensburg, Rausch visited Ratzinger at home. Rausch writes, "As our visit drew to a close, he [Ratzinger] said that he had to excuse himself as he was taking part in a *Mai Andacht*. . . . It was a special devotion to Mary in the month of May, and I remember thinking that for a professor he was quite pious."¹ Ratzinger's humble and pious disposition

1. Thomas P. Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI: An Introduction to His Theological Vision* (New York: Paulist, 2009), 8.

did not dwindle, even when he gained academic notoriety and rose through the ranks of the hierarchy. As Franz Niegel reports, “The pomp of being cardinal has never gone to his head. I believe he tries to live in a saintly way. There are people who are ruined by the world of scholarship, who become strange, and that was never the case with him.”²

Ratzinger’s humility was also reflected in his finances. He came from a family of meager means, and the frugality he acquired at home continued. “Later on,” writes Seewald:

Ratzinger also lived with monastic simplicity, without any luxury, and in an atmosphere that ignored and was indifferent to the essentials of comfort. When he was Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Lufthansa once offered him a new suitcase, as his shabby old one was bad for business. In his papal apartment he decisively rejected a new desk. “He always gave away a lot of his salary,” Peter Kuhn, Ratzinger’s academic assistant in Tübingen, reported. When he discovered a student or young priest in financial straits, his reaction was: “Write your account number on this paper.” After that, according to Kuhn, “a bank transfer was paid in every month.”³

For Ratzinger, rising in prominence was not an excuse to dispense with humility.

The value of humility is something Ratzinger encountered in his youth. In 1934, when Ratzinger was seven years old, Brother Konrad of Parzham (1818–1894) was canonized. He had been a porter at a Capuchin monastery in Altötting, near where Ratzinger grew up. Ratzinger was impressed with the

2. Peter Seewald, *Benedict XVI: An Intimate Portrait*, trans. Henry Taylor and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), 101.

3. Peter Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 1:71.

celebrations surrounding this canonization. Speaking of St. Konrad, Ratzinger writes:

In this humble and thoroughly kind man we saw what is best in our people embodied and led by faith to its most beautiful possibilities. I have often reflected since then on this remarkable disposition of Providence: that, in this century of progress and faith in science, the Church should have found herself represented most clearly in very simple people, in a Bernadette of Lourdes, for instance, or even in a Brother Konrad. . . . Is it a sign that the clear view of the essential, which is so often lacking in the “wise and prudent” (see Mt 11:25), is given in our days, too, to little ones?⁴

The contrast seen here between the “wise and the learned,” on the one hand, and the faith of simple people, on the other, was also reflected in Ratzinger’s experience of the rise of the Nazi regime. During that time, it was often the well-educated—doctors, lawyers, politicians, and professors—who were seduced by the malicious ideology. “But in those days,” writes Ratzinger, “such rhetorical formulas hardly impressed the sober mentality of Bavarian farmers.”⁵

“For a long time,” Seewald reports, “the Nazis found it difficult to gain a significant number of followers in strongly Catholic rural areas.”⁶ Ratzinger’s home region, Bavaria, was one such area. Speaking of Bavaria, Aidan Nichols relates, “There was the traditional Catholicism of an area where, by an almost exact inversion of the general pattern in Germany, nearly seventy per cent of the population had retained the old religion.”⁷

4. Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927–1977*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 9.

5. Ratzinger, 16.

6. Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, 1:39.

7. Aidan Nichols, *The Thought of Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (New York: Burns & Oates, 2005), 13.

Despite the immense power of the Nazi regime, in the end, it was the Church that perdured. For young Ratzinger, this experience confirmed his faith. Speaking of himself and his fellow seminarians after the war, he writes:

No one doubted that the Church was the locus of all our hopes. Despite many human failings, the Church was the alternative to the destructive ideology of the brown [i.e., Nazi] rulers; in the inferno that had swallowed up the powerful, she had stood firm with a force coming to her from eternity. It had been demonstrated: The gates of hell will not overpower her. From our own experience we now knew what was meant by “the gates of hell”, and we could also see with our own eyes that the house built on rock had stood firm.⁸

Hence, from a young age, Ratzinger learned the wisdom of humble, pious people and the power of faith in the face of immense evil. In his work as a theologian, he never forgot the value of piety and humility.

LITURGY

Ratzinger’s piety was fed by formative liturgical experiences, which began from the day of his birth. He was born on April 16, 1927. It was Holy Saturday, and the infant Joseph was baptized almost immediately after birth with the freshly blessed water. (In those days, the Easter Vigil was celebrated on Holy Saturday morning.)

Ratzinger saw significance in the timing of his birth. “I have always been filled with thanksgiving for having had my life immersed in this way in the Easter mystery, since this could only be a sign of blessing. To be sure, it was not Easter Sunday but Holy Saturday, but, the more I reflect on it, the more this seems to

8. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 42.

be fitting for the nature of our human life: we are still awaiting Easter; we are not yet standing in the full light but walking toward it full of trust.”⁹

Ratzinger’s parents continued to foster liturgical devotion throughout his childhood. His parents used a missal-based children’s prayerbook to help him and his siblings understand the Mass. Over time, he received his own liturgical books: one for children, one for Sundays and feasts, and eventually a daily missal. From a young age, then, Ratzinger became enthralled with the beauty of the liturgy. When he was only seven years old, he wrote a letter to the Child Jesus in anticipation of Christmas in which he asked for “the *Volks-Schott* [missal], a green Mass vestment and a JESUS heart.”¹⁰ His own words speak to the profound love for the liturgy he had even as a child:

Every new step into the liturgy was a great event for me. Each new book I was given was something precious to me, and I could not dream of anything more beautiful. It was a riveting adventure to move by degrees into the mysterious world of the liturgy, which was being enacted before us and for us there on the altar. It was becoming more and more clear to me that here I was encountering a reality that no one had simply thought up, a reality that no official authority or great individual had created. This mysterious fabric of texts and actions had grown from the faith of the Church over the centuries. It bore the whole weight of history within itself, and yet, at the same time, it was much more than the product of human history. . . . I started down the road of the liturgy, and this became a

9. Ratzinger, 8.

10. Archive of the Pope Benedict XVI Institute, Regensburg, quoted in Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, 1:31. On the same page, Seewald notes that on the flip side of that letter, Joseph’s siblings Maria and Georg wrote their letters to the Child Jesus as well. Prefiguring his later work as a cathedral choirmaster, Georg asked for “church music and, parallel to his brother, a white Mass vestment, so they could play at being priests together,” which is another foreshadowing of their lives; eventually, they would be ordained to the priesthood on the same day.

continuous process of growth into a grand reality transcending all particular individuals and generations, a reality that became an occasion for me of ever-new amazement and discovery. The inexhaustible reality of the Catholic liturgy has accompanied me through all phases of life, and so I shall have to speak of it time and again.¹¹

And speak of it time and again he did. His theology of liturgy and sacraments will be explored in chapter 8. One would do well to keep in mind while reading that chapter that his thoughts about the liturgy grew from a profound love for liturgy since his youth. In fact, around the age of fourteen, Ratzinger began to translate liturgical texts from the original Latin into his native German “in an improved and more vital way.”¹²

THE WAY OF BEAUTY

As attested to in the above reflections, Ratzinger saw the liturgy as beautiful. Beauty, for him, is a way of encountering the transcendent, and hence, a way of becoming aware of God. This process is sometimes called the *via pulchritudinis*, the way of beauty.¹³ In his youth, Ratzinger encountered beauty in many forms: nature, music, art, and architecture.

The Ratzingers lived in rural Bavaria in southeast Germany, near the Austrian border. The youngest child, Joseph, was born in Marktl am Inn, a village that borders the Inn River (hence its name). The family had moved three times by the time Joseph was

11. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 19–20.

12. Ratzinger, 29. Ratzinger’s proficiency with languages was largely due to his schooling, which was based upon classical languages. In addition to his translation of Latin liturgical texts, while still a young student, he “had begun translating the Greek original of the Gospels into German, in order to take in the material in his own way” (Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, 1:72).

13. For a reflection on the relation between beauty and truth, see Joseph Ratzinger, “The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty,” August 24–30, 2002, vatican.va: “The beautiful is knowledge certainly; but, in a superior form, since it arouses man to the real greatness of the truth.”

ten years old: to Tittmoning (1929), to Aschau am Inn (1932), and to Hufschlag on the edge of Traunstein (1937).¹⁴ As Ratzinger recalls, their “moves occurred within a limited radius—in the triangle formed on two sides by the Inn and Salzach rivers, whose landscape and history marked my youth.”¹⁵

Geographically, as Nichols describes, “The region is one of wooded hills, small lakes, and waterways.”¹⁶ The Ratzingers went on hikes together as a family and would sometimes cross the border into Austria. “In the fields in the fall we looked for wild lettuce, and by the Salzach in the meadows Mother showed us how to find many useful things for our nativity scene, of which we were particularly fond. . . . We often went with our parents to nearby Salzburg, where we never failed to make the pilgrimage up to Maria Plain, visit the glorious churches, and breathe in the atmosphere of this unique city.”¹⁷ In Hufschlag on the outskirts of Traunstein, their old farmhouse was bordered by a large meadow; cherry, apple, pear, and plum trees; a grove of oak trees; a pine forest; and a view of two mountains.¹⁸ The beauty of creation that surrounded him as well as the piety of the Bavarian people made their impressions on Joseph. “In this setting, almost impossibly picture-book as it is, the young Ratzinger became aware of a possible vocation to the Catholic priesthood while still a boy. No doubt this sense was mediated by the fervent piety of the region.”¹⁹

The grandeur of the well-designed buildings also impacted the young Ratzinger. Baroque and Salzburg-style architecture decorated his second hometown, Tittmoning, which Ratzinger describes as “my childhood’s land of dreams. There is the big, even majestic, town square with its noble fountain, bordered by

14. See Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI*, 11.

15. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 7.

16. Nichols, *Thought of Benedict XVI*, 5.

17. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 11–12, 24.

18. See Ratzinger, 21–22.

19. Nichols, *Thought of Benedict XVI*, 5.

the Laufen and Burghausen Gates, surrounded by the proud old houses of burghers—truly a square that would do great honor to bigger cities.”²⁰

A monastic church and the Ponlach Chapel, both examples of beautiful Baroque architecture, also fascinated Ratzinger. The Ponlach Chapel sat on top of a hill in the woods above the river valley. There, the natural and architectural beauty mixed with religious devotions to help form the future pontiff. “Near it [the chapel] you can hear the clear waters of the Ponlach rushing down to the valley. We three children would often make a little pilgrimage with our dear mother to this spot and allow the peace of the place to have its effect on us.”²¹

These are more than mere biographical details. Looking at his childhood memories through the lens of his later works, one can see seeds of important issues in his theology. The fact that he was immersed in an almost idyllic natural landscape, which points toward the beauty of the Creator, leads him later on to recognize and to lament the antithesis: the rise of atheism in industrialized cities.²² Similarly, the impact of beautiful architecture—especially that of churches, chapels, and shrines—foreshadows Ratzinger’s later works on the liturgy and the importance of art and architecture for the life of faith. In a multitude of ways, then, the young Ratzinger saw how external beauty—natural and artistic—can move the heart, which, in turn, raises the mind to divine realities. In other words, Ratzinger’s own faith developed profoundly through the *via pulchritudinis*.

Sacred music was also influential in Ratzinger’s youth. After the annexation of Austria into the German Reich, Georg and Joseph Ratzinger were able to get tickets to the world-renowned Salzburg Music Festival, where they heard, among other things, Mozart’s

20. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 10.

21. Ratzinger, 11.

22. Ratzinger’s observations about the impact of industrial and urban life on belief in God will be discussed in the chapter on divine revelation.

Mass in C-minor as well as a concert by the Regensburg Cathedral's boys' choir.²³ It is well known that Ratzinger remained a lifelong Mozart fan and even played piano. "Mozart, so to speak, permeated us right through; he has always moved me profoundly because he is so light and at the same time so deep."²⁴

A particularly vivid expression of Joseph Ratzinger's love for sacred music is found in his book *Im Angesicht der Engel: Von der Musik im Gottesdienst (In the Presence of the Angels: Music in the Liturgy)*: "When a Mozart Mass was sung on feast days in our Traunstein parish church, then for me as a little country boy, it was as if the heavens opened. Ahead in the sanctuary, pillars of incense rose, which the sun broke into. On the altar, the sacred rites were performed which we knew opened heaven for us. And the choir sang music that could only have come from heaven. Music which conveyed to us the angels' rejoicing over God's beauty. It brought something of that beauty down into our midst."²⁵ No doubt those early experiences with sacred music formed Ratzinger's notions of what is suitable for the liturgy.

As is now clear, Pope Benedict had a lifelong appreciation for beauty. He saw it as a way of expressing and encountering the divine. Thus, for him, it is something to be fostered and promoted in the Church's art, architecture, music, and liturgy.

INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Shortly after the end of the war, Joseph and his brother, Georg Ratzinger, entered major seminary. This period of priestly formation was foundational for Ratzinger's intellectual development.

23. See Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 25.

24. Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, 1:62.

25. Quoted in Seewald, 1:182. The original work is Joseph Ratzinger, *Im Angesicht der Engel: Von der Musik im Gottesdienst* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2008).

A wide variety of authors and professors left their mark upon his thought. As he recounts:

We wanted not only to do theology in the narrower sense but to listen to the voices of man today. We devoured the novels of Gertrud von Le Fort, Elisabeth Langgässer, and Ernst Wiechert. Dostoevsky was one of the authors everyone read, and likewise the great Frenchmen: Claudel, Bernanos, Mauriac. We also followed closely the recent developments in the natural sciences. We thought that, with the breakthroughs made by Planck, Heisenberg, and Einstein, the sciences were once again on their way to God. . . . In the domain of theology and philosophy, the voices that moved us most directly were those of Romano Guardini, Josef Pieper, Theodor Häcker, and Peter Wust.²⁶

Ratzinger was also enthralled by the literary works of Hermann Hesse, such as his *Glass Bead Game* (*Glasperlenspiel*) and *The Steppenwolf* (*Der Steppenwolf*), as well as by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*.²⁷

The philosopher and physicist from Munich, Aloys Wenzl, informed Ratzinger's studies on the intersection between philosophy, science, and religion. "Wenzl had tried to show that the deterministic world view of classical physics, which left no more room for God, had been superseded."²⁸ Wenzl and the giants of science mentioned above (Planck, Heisenberg, and Einstein) were not the only ones offering an enlivening rapprochement between faith and science. "Didn't the findings of leading researchers sound completely different from the Enlightenment mantras, which proclaimed that progress in the sciences meant the end of the old faith in God? Physicists like the German Pascual Jordan,

26. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 42–43.

27. See Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, 1:180–187, 189–191.

28. Seewald, 1:167.

the co-founder of quantum mechanics, were suddenly talking about a ‘creator God.’”²⁹ Such educational experiences fueled his later rebuttals to scientific reductionism, busting the myth of a conflict between science and faith.

The desire for a holistic approach to education that incorporates literature, science, philosophy, and theology is part of Ratzinger’s genius as a thinker. His thought is characterized by concern both for maintaining a solid foundation in Catholic tradition and for addressing the problems and questions of contemporary humanity.

In order to understand the world of today, Ratzinger saw the need to engage with modern philosophy, and he was eager to do so. In this pursuit, Ratzinger gained an important mentor in Alfred Läßle, a prefect at the seminary in Freising who was working on a dissertation about Cardinal Newman’s understanding of conscience.

Through Läßle, Newman influenced Ratzinger as well.

Newman’s teaching on conscience became an important foundation for theological personalism, which was drawing us all in its sway. Our image of the human being as well as our image of the Church was permeated by this point of departure. . . . Precisely because Newman interpreted the existence of the human being from conscience, that is, from the relationship between God and the soul, was it clear that this personalism is not individualism.³⁰

Newman’s understanding of conscience, then, was formative for Joseph Ratzinger’s own thought. For Newman and Ratzinger alike—in contrast to misconceptions prevalent in our own

29. Seewald, 1:167.

30. Joseph Ratzinger, “Discorso introduttivo alla III giornata del Simposio di Newman,” *Euntes Docete* 43 (1990): 432–433, quoted in Andrzej Proniewski, “Joseph Ratzinger’s Philosophical Theology of the Person,” *Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej* 17, no. 3 (2018): 222–223.

day—the importance of conscience cannot be reduced to mere personal tastes or inclinations. As Pablo Blanco Sarto explains, “This appeal to the voice of conscience on Newman’s part does not suppose taking refuge in one’s own subjectivity, but is, rather, a constant search for truth in the light of reason itself.”³¹

Läpple’s influence on Ratzinger was multifaceted, extending far beyond introducing him to Newman. “With his far-ranging knowledge of the history of philosophy and his taste for argumentation, Läpple became a great stimulus for us.”³² Läpple’s dissertation director was Theodor Steinbüchel, who had written two volumes on the philosophical foundations of moral theology.

Through the works of Theodor Steinbüchel, Ratzinger “found a first-rate introduction to the thought of Heidegger and Jaspers as well as to the philosophies of Nietzsche, Klages, and Bergson.”³³ Steinbüchel “gave a comprehensive overview of contemporary philosophy, which I sought to understand and inhabit.”³⁴ Ratzinger also studied Edmund Husserl, Jean Anouilh, and Jean-Paul Sartre.³⁵

Above all, Steinbüchel offered a foray into the realm of personalism, which was then augmented by the works of Martin Buber, a Jewish thinker. “This encounter with personalism was for me a spiritual experience that left an essential mark, especially since I spontaneously associated such personalism with the

31. Pablo Blanco Sarto, *La Teología de Joseph Ratzinger: Una introducción* (Madrid: Pelicano, 2011), 19. Translations from foreign language sources, unless otherwise noted, are my own. N.b.: I think that Pablo Blanco Sarto’s book is among the best secondary resources available on the thought of Pope Benedict XVI. It covers a wider range of topics than many others, and—although following a different order of presentation than this book—it is organized intentionally and logically.

32. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 43.

33. Ratzinger, 43.

34. Benedict XVI and Peter Seewald, *Last Testament: In His Own Words*, trans. Jacob Phillips (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 75–76.

35. See Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, 1:164–165.

thought of Saint Augustine, who in his *Confessions* had struck me with the power of all his human passion and depth.”³⁶

Personalism became an important aspect of Ratzinger’s own thought. In personalism, Ratzinger found a way to synthesize elements of medieval and modern thought as well as to address his own questions. In an interview with Peter Seewald, Ratzinger remarked that “just as I had my questions, my doubts, and didn’t simply want to learn and take on a closed system, I also wanted to understand the theological thinkers of the Middle Ages and modernity anew, and to proceed from this. This is where personalism . . . particularly struck me, and seemed to be the right starting point of both philosophical and theological thought.”³⁷

Martin Buber’s dialogical personalism influenced Ratzinger’s own works about God. “Ratzinger shared Buber’s approach when he constantly stressed that God did not come to people as an abstract definition: God was a ‘You’. God accepted people, communicated with them, either in prayer or in the liturgy.”³⁸ The I–You relation is an important theme in Ratzinger’s works on God and the Church, as we shall see.

Like his predecessor as the bishop of Rome, John Paul II, Ratzinger had a fondness for the thought of Max Scheler, a convert to Catholicism from orthodox Judaism. Scheler thought depersonalization was a main force behind contemporary people’s sense of separation from God and that humanity’s glory is found precisely in cooperating with God. Scheler contrasted his thought with Kant and “was excited by Edmund Husserl’s ideas, finally getting back to the ‘objective’ and the ‘essence’ of things.”³⁹

Ratzinger’s philosophical education was also greatly enhanced by a four-semester course taught by Jakob Fellermeier, “who provided us with a comprehensive overview of the intellectual

36. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 44.

37. Benedict XVI and Seewald, *Last Testament*, 76.

38. Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, 1:174–175.

39. Seewald, 1:162.

struggle, beginning with Socrates and the pre-Socratics up until the present. This gave me a foundation in philosophy for which I am still grateful today.”⁴⁰

Unfortunately, Ratzinger did not have such a good experience with the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. As Tracey Rowland reports, “Ratzinger was never enchanted by pre-conciliar Thomism and he has been quite frank about this in several interviews.”⁴¹ The extent to which Ratzinger’s struggles with Aquinas were rooted in the Angelic Doctor’s works themselves or due to the manner in which they were taught is not entirely clear; perhaps it was both. As Ratzinger himself openly admits:

I had difficulties in penetrating the thought of Thomas Aquinas, whose crystal-clear logic seemed to me to be too closed in on itself, too impersonal and ready-made. This may also have had something to do with the fact that Arnold Wilmsen, the philosopher who taught us Thomas, presented us with a rigid, neoscholastic Thomism that was simply too far afield from my own questions. . . . His enthusiasm and deep convictions were impressive, but now it seemed that he himself no longer asked questions but limited himself to defending passionately, against all questions, what he had found.⁴²

Thus, the Thomism Ratzinger encountered stood in stark contrast to the personalism and openness to new questions that were so important for his own thinking.

It is safe to say, then, that Benedict XVI is not a Thomist. As will be discussed in more detail later, Ratzinger’s thought is much more deeply rooted in St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure than in St. Thomas Aquinas. However, it would be an

40. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 45.

41. Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.

42. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 44.

over-exaggeration—if not downright false—to say that Ratzinger is *anti*-Thomist.

In this connection, Joseph Ratzinger would treat the question of the relationship between Bonaventure, Augustine, Aristotle, and Aquinas in his *Habilitationsschrift*,⁴³ where he makes the claim (contra Étienne Gilson) that St. Bonaventure was not anti-Thomist.⁴⁴ The same can be said of Ratzinger himself. As Fergus Kerr notes, “‘Non-Thomistic’ is one thing; to regard Ratzinger as ‘anti-Thomist’ would, of course, be absurd.”⁴⁵ Thus, Joseph Ratzinger’s preference for the thought of St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure does not mean he rejects St. Thomas Aquinas’ thought in itself.

On the contrary, Ratzinger’s work with the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas was not entirely negative. In fact, “His first work was a German translation of the *Quaestio disputata* of St. Thomas on charity, put together in 1946, and throughout his studies he makes reference to the stance of St. Thomas whenever he thinks there is a valuable insight. He is not shy about using Aquinas as a source.”⁴⁶

Again, Alfred Läßle was influential here. Läßle was the one who assigned the translation of Aquinas’ *Quaestio disputata de caritate* (“Disputed Questions on Charity”) to the young Ratzinger. At that time, there was no German edition of that work.⁴⁷ The final text was about one hundred pages, and Ratzinger learned a lot from the project. He was grateful to Läßle for the benefits the assignment afforded him. As Seewald relates, “Through it he learned how Thomas constructed his writings, how he formulated

43. In Germany, after one completes a doctorate, it is common to seek a postdoctoral degree: a *Habilitation*. It is achieved through writing and successfully defending what amounts to a second dissertation, called a *Habilitationsschrift*.

44. See Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1989), 136.

45. Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mystery* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 187.

46. Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith*, 4.

47. See Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, 1:164.

ideas and argued. Five decades later, he wrote to Läßple: ‘By giving me the job of translating St. Thomas’ *Quaestio disputata* on love, you . . . led me into the sources and taught me to create from first hand and be schooled by the Masters themselves.’⁴⁸ This methodology of working with the masters themselves would become a hallmark of the *ressourcement* movement in which Ratzinger was a key figure.

In addition to assigning Ratzinger the translation of Aquinas’ work and introducing him to Steinbüchel’s thought, Läßple and Ratzinger also shared literary interests. In particular, they both had an appreciation for Romanticism. That fact should not be surprising, given Ratzinger’s own sensitivity and interest in the whole person, not just pure logic. One book that Ratzinger and Läßple discussed with each other positively was Rilke’s *Stundenbuch* (*Book of Hours*). As Läßple recalls, “With Rilke it was also that softness, almost too soft, the emotional side, which attracted us.”⁴⁹ Goethe, especially *Faust*, was another favorite for them.

Arguably the most important influence that Alfred Läßple had on Joseph Ratzinger was introducing him to the works of Henri de Lubac. “In the fall of 1949, Alfred Läßple had given me *Catholicism*, perhaps Henri de Lubac’s most significant work, in the masterful translation by Hans Urs von Balthasar.⁵⁰ This book was for me a key reading event. It gave me not only a new and deeper connection with the thought of the Fathers but also a new way of looking at theology and faith as such. Faith had here become an interior contemplation and, precisely by thinking with the Fathers, a present reality.”⁵¹ The impact of de Lubac upon Ratzinger would be hard to overestimate. “With de Lubac, whom

48. Seewald, 1:165–166.

49. Seewald, 1:177. Seewald’s quote comes from a personal interview with Läßple.

50. About twenty-three years later, in 1972, Joseph Ratzinger cofounded the journal *Communio* along with both Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar. For a timeline of Pope Benedict XVI’s life, see *The Pope Benedict XVI Reader* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), xiii.

51. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 98.

he [Ratzinger] described as his most important and formative theologian (besides Hans Urs von Balthasar), he had experienced the joy ‘of being able to see Christianity released from its rather stale formulations and newly embedded in modern life.’”⁵²

De Lubac particularly impacted Ratzinger’s ecclesiology. Through de Lubac, Ratzinger gained a greater appreciation for the communal/social dimension of the Christian faith. Through another book by de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, Ratzinger found the deep roots of this *communio* ecclesiology, “in which a new understanding of the unity of Church and Eucharist opened up to me beyond the insights I had already received.”⁵³

After two years of studies devoted mostly to philosophy,⁵⁴ which ended in the summer of 1947, Ratzinger had to make a decision about where to go for the higher theological studies portion of his priestly formation. Normally, the seminarians would study with the theology faculty in Freising. However, Ratzinger “decided to ask the bishop to allow me to study in Munich. . . . My hope was to become more fully familiar with the intellectual debates of our time by working at the university, so as some day to be able to dedicate myself completely to theology as a profession.”⁵⁵

There in Munich, Ratzinger met Hubert Luthe, a fellow student who was the same age. Later, Luthe became the secretary for Cardinal Joseph Frings, who was responsible for getting Ratzinger appointed as an official *peritus* at the Second Vatican Council. Thus, Luthe and Ratzinger’s working relationship extended beyond their student years.⁵⁶

Ratzinger’s main subjects were fundamental theology and

52. Seewald, *Pope Benedict XVI: A Life*, 1:233.

53. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 98.

54. I say “mostly” philosophy, because, as Seewald notes, “The subjects in Joseph’s philosophy course were general philosophy, history of philosophy, secular history, biology, educational theory, and psychology” (Seewald, *Pope Benedict XVI: A Life*, 1:145).

55. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 47.

56. See Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, 1:208.

dogmatic theology. Of course, he also took courses in other theological fields, such as biblical theology. During his theological studies in Munich, Ratzinger gained further influences, both positive and negative.

Friedrich Wilhelm Maier, professor of New Testament in Munich, was formative for Ratzinger. According to Ratzinger, biblical exegesis—especially of the New Testament—is the soul of theology. He learned a great deal about scriptural interpretation from Maier, even if he was cognizant of Maier’s weaknesses as well. Positively, Maier helped Ratzinger see value in the historical-critical method. On the other hand, Ratzinger also perceived the limitations of that liberal method. He saw in Maier someone who viewed dogma as a shackle to which he submitted begrudgingly. By contrast, Ratzinger saw dogma “as the living source that made knowledge of the truth possible in the first place.”⁵⁷ Thus, Ratzinger sought a fruitful balance between approaches to exegesis, as we will discuss in more detail in chapter 2.

For Old Testament studies, Ratzinger learned from Friedrich Stummer. Through those studies, the Old Testament became precious to Ratzinger, and he began to see the inherent link between the two testaments. “The New Testament,” writes Ratzinger, “is nothing other than an interpretation of ‘the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings’ found from or contained in the story of Jesus.”⁵⁸

Josef Pascher, a pastoral theologian, led Ratzinger to be more open to the liturgical movement, about which he had been quite skeptical initially. “In many of its representatives I sensed a one-sided rationalism and historicism that . . . exhibited a remarkable coldness. . . . I was bothered by the narrow-mindedness of many of the movement’s followers, who wanted to recognize only *one* form of the liturgy as valid.”⁵⁹ Despite these concerns, Pascher

57. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 57.

58. Ratzinger, 53.

59. Ratzinger, 56–57. Perhaps in this statement against seeing only one form of the liturgy as valid, we can detect an early premonition of one reason Pope Benedict XVI allowed for greater

won him over to the liturgical movement through his instruction and “the reverential manner in which he taught us to celebrate the liturgy in keeping with its deepest nature. . . . Just as I learned to understand the New Testament as being the soul of all theology, so too I came to see the liturgy as being its living element, without which it would necessarily shrivel up.”⁶⁰ The Scriptures and the liturgy continued to be major emphases of Ratzinger’s theology throughout his life and into his pontificate.

Some of the early reticence he had about the liturgical movement, however, also wound up being accurate. He was quite forlorn about how the liturgy would be treated after the Second Vatican Council in unexpected ways. What he saw in the Vatican II document on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and what he observed in the concrete reforms actually enacted were not the same in his estimation. The latter, in his view, had dire consequences. “I was not able to foresee that the negative sides of the liturgical movement would afterward reemerge with redoubled strength, almost to the point of pushing the liturgy toward its own self-destruction.”⁶¹

On a more positive note, Gottlieb Söhnngen was arguably the most important figure in Ratzinger’s theological formation. He directed both Ratzinger’s doctoral dissertation and *Habilitationschrift*. The former was a work in ecclesiology on *The People and the House of God in Augustine’s Doctrine of the Church* (*Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche*). The latter was originally on St. Bonaventure’s understanding of revelation and theology of history, but it wound up being drastically reduced to *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, omitting the parts on revelation for reasons to be discussed in more detail later. Through his intense work on those two massive projects under the direction of Söhnngen, Ratzinger gained a greater mastery and lifelong

access to the Extraordinary Form of the Mass.

60. Ratzinger, 57.

61. Ratzinger, 57.

appreciation for St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure. They have always remained central figures in his theology.

Söhngen was somewhat of an eclectic figure with interests that ranged widely. Ratzinger himself would also become a fairly eclectic theologian, drawing from a wide range of sources. The ability to bring those varied sources to bear in a unified way is part of his genius. No doubt Söhngen's example helped form Ratzinger, who has emulated Söhngen's method. "Characteristic of Söhngen above all was the fact that he always developed his thought on the basis of the sources themselves, beginning with Aristotle and Plato, then on to Clement of Alexandria and Augustine, Anselm, Bonaventure, and Thomas, all the way to Luther and finally the Tübingen theologians of the last century. Pascal and Newman, too, were among his favorite authors. . . . He always asked the question concerning the truth of the matter and hence the question concerning the immediate reality of what is believed."⁶² We will discuss Ratzinger's theological method more in the next chapter, but this description of Söhngen does provide an apt foretaste.

The affinity for St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure that Ratzinger developed in his studies provided a counterbalance to other approaches to theology that were more common at the time, such as neo-Scholasticism. As Rowland describes Ratzinger's thought, "The Augustinian-Bonaventurian emphasis on love provides an antidote to the tendency of some scholastics, particularly the late nineteenth-century Neo-Scholastics, so heavily influenced by the intellectualism of Aristotle, to neglect this dimension."⁶³ Because his dissertation on St. Augustine and his *Habilitationsschrift* on St. Bonaventure were formative for his own thinking, it is important to mention the biographical details of both.

62. Ratzinger, 56.

63. Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith*, 3.

First, Ratzinger did not choose the topic of his doctoral dissertation. Each year, the theology faculty proposed a theme as part of a competition. Students who entered the competition were given nine months to complete a dissertation on the specified theme. The winner would receive a small sum of money and—more importantly—an automatic acceptance of the dissertation with the distinction *Summa cum laude*. In 1950, Gottlieb Söhngen chose the topic “The People and the House of God in Augustine’s Doctrine of the Church,” and he encouraged Joseph to enter the competition. Ratzinger had already taken Söhngen’s seminar on Augustine and felt confident he could do the work.⁶⁴

He worked on the draft intensely during a semester break from July to October 1951. At the end of October, he was ordained to the subdiaconate and diaconate and then had to engage intensely with final preparations for priestly ordination, while still working on the dissertation. It was a lot to accomplish at the same time. His siblings were a great help to Joseph. His brother took care of most of the practical details for their ordination and first Masses, while his sister prepared a typed copy of his work, enabling him to submit the dissertation before the deadline.⁶⁵ The hard work paid off, as Joseph Ratzinger won the competition.

Ratzinger related to the writings of St. Augustine, who grappled personally with difficult questions and feverishly sought after the truth with a tremendous humility, due to the recognition of his own many grave sins. He combined philosophical genius with poetic expression to generate deep reflections on the truth about God and humanity. “St. Augustine was a passionate seeker of truth. . . . Philosophy, especially that of a Platonic stamp, led him even closer to Christ, revealing to him the existence of the *Logos* or creative reason,” Pope Benedict XVI remarks. “Augustine converted to Christ who is truth and love, followed him throughout

64. See Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 97.

65. See Ratzinger, 99.

his life and became a model for every human being, for all of us in search of God. . . . Even today, as in his time, humanity needs to know and above all to live this fundamental reality: God is love, and the encounter with him is the only response to the restlessness of the human heart.”⁶⁶ Benedict XVI was always attracted to the cooperation of a robust intellectual search for truth with the full force of a loving heart expressed in profoundly personal terms that he found in St. Augustine. The symbiosis of mind and heart, of intellect and will, of truth and love is a characteristic shared by St. Augustine and Benedict XVI alike.

His early work on Augustine’s ecclesiology is important for understanding Ratzinger’s theology. In his conversion process, Augustine wrestled with philosophical questions, including questions about skepticism and authority. In response, faith became a determinative aspect of Augustine’s thought. Love also played a large role. “Here Ratzinger identifies two main elements that form the *Ansätze*, ‘starting-points’ of Augustinian ecclesiology. Augustine’s reflections on the concept of faith will be vital for his understanding of the Church as *people* of God. By contrast, his concept of love is more important for his portrait of the Church as the *house* of God: the other wing of the diptych which the title of Ratzinger’s thesis evokes.”⁶⁷ The issues of faith, charity (love), and ecclesial unity have remained an integral part of Ratzinger’s own ecclesiology.

Additionally, Ratzinger is keen to maintain the integration of both metaphysical and salvation-historical views in the realm of theology. Both aspects are found in Augustine’s corpus. Most importantly, Ratzinger adopts from Augustine “the union in the Church of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, holiness and visible—even governmental—structure, the key to which union is the Eucharist.”⁶⁸

66. Benedict XVI, General Audience, February 27, 2008, vatican.va.

67. Nichols, *Thought of Benedict XVI*, 32–33.

68. Nichols, 37. Nichols notes that Ratzinger sees Tertullian as influencing Augustine on this point but without the dualism that led to Tertullian’s eventual rupture with the Catholic

Eucharistic ecclesiology, as we will see in a later chapter, is the best description of Ratzinger's understanding of the Church. Both Augustine and de Lubac were highly influential on Ratzinger in this regard. "The Christian is the *communicator*, conjoined with Christ in the unity of the body of Christ, itself at once the Church and the eucharistic sacrament."⁶⁹

A key element in Ratzinger's Eucharistic ecclesiology is the Church's universality, which is reflective of Augustine's own emphasis. "Augustine's defence of the Catholic Church against the Donatists consisted in the claim that the true Church must be *ecclesia omnium gentium*, the 'Church of all nations.'"⁷⁰ With these examples, it becomes clear how Ratzinger's dissertation on Augustine is reflected in Ratzinger's own later works in ecclesiology, which are among the best and most well-known of his theological writings.

Shortly after turning in his dissertation, Ratzinger was ordained to the priesthood alongside his brother, Georg, on the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, June 29, 1951. On August 1 of the same year, Ratzinger began his assignment as an assistant pastor in the Munich parish of the Precious Blood. The pastor was Fr. Blumschein, who was a good example to the newly ordained priest, especially in his servant mentality.

Fourteen short months after beginning his parish assignment, the young priest was reassigned back to the academy, beginning on October 1, 1952. He became an instructor to seminarians in their final year. This transition back into higher education led to interior ambivalence for Ratzinger. "On the one hand, this was the solution I had desired, the one that would enable me to return to my theological work, which I loved so much. On the other

faith via his adoption of Montanism. Cyprian was helpful to that end by his emphasis on the unity of the Church through hierarchical structure. Alas, Ratzinger also sees a devolution in Eucharistic ecclesiology starting with Cyprian that led to the loss of a robust Eucharistic ecclesiology in the later Middle Ages. See Nichols, 38–39.

69. Nichols, 38.

70. Nichols, 41. Dan. 2:35 and Luke 24:46–47 serve as biblical bases here.

hand, I suffered a great deal, especially in the first year, from the loss of all the human contacts and experiences afforded me by the pastoral ministry. In fact, I even began to think I would have done better to remain in parish work.”⁷¹

Ratzinger did have some pastoral work alongside his academic duties. He presided over liturgies at the cathedral and heard confessions. So, Ratzinger was not totally removed from the care for souls. But his main work was to finish his doctorate. With the dissertation long behind him, Ratzinger still had to complete a series of oral and written examinations. Finally, in July of 1953, Ratzinger completed his studies and became an official Doctor of Theology.

As if earning a doctorate is not hard enough, in Germany, there is a further degree called a *Habilitation*. It basically involves writing a second dissertation, called a *Habilitationsschrift* (habilitation writing). Ratzinger began this work almost immediately.

Since Ratzinger had written his dissertation on a Church Father (St. Augustine) in the area of ecclesiology, Söhngen recommended that, for his *Habilitationsschrift*, Ratzinger should write on a medieval, Scholastic theologian in the area of fundamental theology. Doing so would expand Ratzinger’s expertise regarding theological specialties and allow him to engage with different eras of Catholic thought. St. Bonaventure was determined to be a fitting choice, and so Ratzinger began to work on St. Bonaventure’s understanding of revelation and theology of history. His investigation into St. Bonaventure’s thought proved illuminating for Ratzinger: “New worlds opened up as I made progress with my work.”⁷² He turned in his first typed draft to the theology faculty of the University of Munich in the fall of 1955.⁷³

Söhngen read Ratzinger’s work and gave his enthusiastic approval. Ratzinger’s *Habilitationsschrift* still needed to go through

71. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 102.

72. Ratzinger, 104.

73. See Ratzinger, 105.

a reader, in this case, Michael Schmaus. Schmaus told Ratzinger that “he had to reject my *habilitation* thesis because it did not meet the pertinent scholarly standards.”⁷⁴

One naturally wonders what “scholarly standards” Schmaus deemed Ratzinger to have failed to meet. After all, Ratzinger was a star pupil, and his academically accomplished *Habilitation* director, Söhngen, found the work to be exemplary. Unfortunately, Schmaus’ specific criticisms will never be known in detail. He had written them directly on the typed copy of the work itself, which he gave to Ratzinger. That copy with Schmaus’ handwritten critical notes no longer exists; Ratzinger burned it in an oven.⁷⁵

Despite not accepting Schmaus’ criticisms of the original work, Ratzinger—again exemplifying his humility—saw the trial of passing his postdoctoral degree as somehow good for him personally.⁷⁶ As he told Seewald, “I believe that it is dangerous for a young person simply to go from achieving goal after goal, generally being praised along the way. So it is good for a young person to experience his limit, occasionally to be dealt with critically, to suffer his way through a period of negativity, to recognize his own limits himself, not simply to win victory after victory. . . . Then he will not simply judge others hastily and stay aloof, but rather accept them positively, in his labours and his weaknesses.”⁷⁷ In other words, experiencing such humiliation helps keep one grounded and less prone to being egotistical; it also enables one to be more sympathetic and merciful to others and their failures.

In the end, the faculty of the university had decided that Ratzinger would be given an opportunity to revise the text to bring it up to the expected standards. Ratzinger made an important observation that gave him an easy way around the problem. The vast majority of Schmaus’ criticism was levied against the

74. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 107.

75. See Benedict XVI and Seewald, *Last Testament*, 95.

76. See Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 112–113.

77. Benedict XVI and Seewald, *Last Testament*, 95.

first two parts of his work, which discussed Bonaventure's understanding of revelation. The third and final part, which focused on Bonaventure's theology of history, was relatively unscathed. Hence, Ratzinger simply removed the earlier parts and with some revision used the third part as the core of the whole work. Ratzinger's new plan made it possible to be done in only about two weeks, surprising the faculty. He submitted it in October and found out the following February that it had been accepted.⁷⁸

JOSEPH RATZINGER'S ACADEMIC AND ECCLESIAL CAREERS

Shortly thereafter, Ratzinger took a lecturer position at the nearby University of Munich, before returning to Freising as a professor of dogmatic and fundamental theology in January 1958.⁷⁹ In 1959, Ratzinger took a chair in fundamental theology at the University of Bonn, near Cologne. In 1963, he moved to the University of Münster until 1966. From 1966 to 1969, Ratzinger taught at the University of Tübingen. Ratzinger's final and longest stint as a professor was at the University of Regensburg, in his beloved home region of Bavaria (1969–1977). On March 24, 1977, Ratzinger was consecrated as the Archbishop of Munich and Freising, being designated as a cardinal by Pope Paul VI on June 27 of the same year.⁸⁰

Ratzinger's humility made him hesitant about accepting the appointment as archbishop, which he had not anticipated, expected, or even wanted. The apostolic nuncio informing him of his appointment allowed Ratzinger to consult with his confessor before rendering his decision. "So," Ratzinger writes, "I went to Professor Auer, who had very realistic knowledge of my limitations, both theological and human. I surely expected him to

78. See Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 110–111.

79. See Ratzinger, 112.

80. See *Benedict XVI Reader*, xiii.

advise me to decline. But to my great surprise he said without much reflection: ‘You must accept.’”⁸¹ Still uneasy with the prospect, Ratzinger accepted.

Ratzinger’s outlook for the work he had and would later undertake is encapsulated in the episcopal motto he chose: “Co-workers of the Truth.” This motto means, in Ratzinger’s own words, “to follow the truth, to be at its service. And, because in today’s world the theme of truth has all but disappeared, because truth appears to be too great for man and yet everything falls apart if there is no truth, for these reasons this motto also seemed timely in the good sense of the word.”⁸²

As if being named a cardinal-archbishop were not enough, in short order the pope wanted to promote him even higher within the Church’s hierarchy. A mix of his humility and his concern for the Bavarian people under his care led Ratzinger to resist such promotion. He felt that it would be unfair to the people of his diocese to lose their archbishop after such a short period of time. Thus, Ratzinger turned down a call to head the Congregation for Catholic Education. Eventually, however, Pope John Paul II, despite Ratzinger’s objections, appointed the Bavarian cardinal as the prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on November 25, 1981.⁸³

After this, Ratzinger’s elevations continued. In 2002, Ratzinger was made Dean of the College of Cardinals. Then, on April 19, 2005, Ratzinger was elected as the 265th pope, taking the name Benedict XVI.⁸⁴ This, too, was something Ratzinger had not expected or wanted.

Famously, Benedict XVI shocked the world when, on February 11, 2013, he declared his intention to resign the papacy,

81. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 152.

82. Ratzinger, 153.

83. See Seewald, *An Intimate Portrait*, 212.

84. See *Benedict XVI Reader*, xiii.

which went into effect on February 28 of the same year. What are we to make of that surprising decision?

First, it is illuminating to note that his resignation announcement was not the first time he had tried to retire to a life of research, writing, and prayer. In fact, on multiple occasions, Ratzinger had tried to retire as Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. In 1986, he made the case that since he had served for five years, his term was up. John Paul II dismissed the idea. Then, in 1991, after suffering a brain hemorrhage, he again pleaded to be dismissed from his onerous role. Yet again, John Paul II denied the request. Later, the pope preemptively told Ratzinger to not even bother asking, insisting that as long as he was pope, he would not allow Ratzinger to leave his post.⁸⁵ I think this is important, because, after becoming pope, the only person who could deny his request to retire would be himself. Eventually, he granted himself the permission to do what he had already wanted to do for a very long time: retire, study, and prepare his soul for eternity.

Additionally, as mentioned before, Ratzinger never wanted to become pope. He was perhaps one of the few people who did not see it as a real possibility during the conclave that elected him. “Of course I’d been mentioned a lot beforehand. But I really wasn’t able to take it seriously. I thought it couldn’t happen, that it was unreasonable.”⁸⁶ When he was elected, he compared that moment to an execution: “The thought of the guillotine occurred to me: Now it falls down and hits you.”⁸⁷

I think Pope Benedict XVI’s humility—which we have highlighted repeatedly in this book—also played a role. In the end, I think he felt that he needed the Church more than the Church

85. See Benedict XVI and Seewald, *Last Testament*, 174–175.

86. Benedict XVI and Seewald, 183.

87. Benedict XVI and Peter Seewald, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Michael J. Miller and Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2010), 3. See also Benedict XVI and Seewald, *Last Testament*, 184–185.

needed him. Still more, I think he saw himself as being a hindrance, honestly thinking that someone younger would be better able to manage the huge task of leading the Church throughout the world. He genuinely thought he was doing what was best for the Church.

In this regard, I think Benedict XVI exhibited a virtue complementary to that embodied by his predecessor Pope St. John Paul II. The latter was an example of perseverance and endurance, carrying on to the very bitter end. John Paul II's example of working tirelessly even as he contended with the deteriorating effects of Parkinson's disease was certainly a holy example of faithful long-suffering. In many ways, it evokes the image of Jesus carrying his own cross on the way to Calvary. Benedict XVI, on the other hand, evokes another image, found in John the Baptist's humble words: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Benedict was asking himself in all humility whether he remained the best person for the role of chief shepherd of the Church, or whether it would be better to pass the baton on to another who could better serve the Church. Together, both pontiffs show how different persons can exemplify different virtues according to their unique personalities and self-awareness.

Benedict XVI passed away on December 31, 2022. Given his sentiments about his birth, I think he would have found it very appropriate that he died "on the last day."

**JOSEPH RATZINGER AT THE
SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL**

On January 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convoke an ecumenical council, and more than three years of preparation ensued. A few months after this unexpected announcement, Ratzinger moved to the University of Bonn, near Cologne. The Archbishop of Cologne at the time was Cardinal

Josef Frings, one of the eldest and most senior ranking members of the College of Cardinals. Cardinal Frings and Ratzinger developed a good rapport with one another, and Frings relied heavily upon Ratzinger both prior to and during the Second Vatican Council.

Cardinal Frings was asked to give a speech comparing the situation and circumstances of Vatican I with those of the upcoming council. Frings asked Ratzinger to write a draft to help him prepare. Frings was deeply impressed with Ratzinger's text and decided to use it—in Italian translation from Ratzinger's German—as his own speech, which he gave on November 20, 1961, in Genoa, Italy. Before delivering the speech, Frings gave copies of the German version to “his fellow German bishops at their meeting at Fulda, August 29–30, 1961.”⁸⁸

Pope John XXIII read the Italian version, much to his delight. He “summoned Card. Frings to a private audience to thank and commend him for setting forth ideas which agreed with ways in which he, Pope John, saw the situation and tasks of the coming Council.”⁸⁹ This shows that Ratzinger's thought aligned well with the purposes for which the pope had called the council.

Cardinal Frings was eventually appointed as a member of the Central Preparatory Commission (CPC) for Vatican II. As the time for the council approached, Frings' dissatisfaction with the preparations increased. In order to help mitigate such frustrations, Frings recommended to the CPC that an introductory constitution be prepared to explain the council's goals. He asked Ratzinger to write just such a draft, which Ratzinger completed

88. Jared Wicks, “Six Texts by Prof. Joseph Ratzinger as *Peritus* before and during Vatican Council II,” *Gregorianum* 89, no. 2 (2008): 234. From 1945 to 1965, Cardinal Frings was the Chairman of the Fulda Conference of Catholic Bishops, redesignated in 1966 as the German Bishops' Conference (*Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*).

89. Wicks, “Six Texts,” 235. For a presentation of the text, including an outline and summary of its contents with English translations of select portions, see Wicks, “Six Texts,” 253–261. For the full German text, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Joseph Ratzinger: Gesammelte Schriften* [henceforth, JRGS] 7/1, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller (Freiburg: Herder, 2012), 73–91.

in June of 1962.⁹⁰ While no such introductory constitution was adopted by the council, its contents are a valuable resource for understanding Vatican II and Ratzinger's perspectives about its purpose.

A couple of months after Ratzinger finished that draft, Cardinal Frings once again sought Ratzinger's assistance. In August of 1962, seven preparatory schemas were sent to the members of the council for them to review and offer their impressions and recommendations before the commencement of the council in October. Frings sent his copy of the schemas to Ratzinger and asked him to review them. Ratzinger submitted his analyses of the texts (in Latin) to Frings on September 14, 1962. Only three days later, Cardinal Frings—sufficiently pleased with Ratzinger's evaluations—submitted their contents to Cardinal Cicognani (the papal secretary of state).⁹¹

In Ratzinger's opinion, out of the seven draft schemas, only two of them were suited for the council without significant revision. Additionally, some of his remarks regarding a draft text (or schema) on revelation (*De Fontibus Revelationis*) echo elements of the original version of his *Habilitationschrift* that had been rejected by Schmaus. In his criticism of that schema, Ratzinger made a number of suggestions that Vatican II did end up employing in *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.⁹² Ratzinger followed up his evaluations of the draft schemas with a more detailed explanation of his rationale that he gave to Cardinal Frings on October 3, 1962.⁹³ We will go into

90. See Wicks, "Six Texts," 237. Ratzinger's draft of an introductory constitution was first published in Wicks, 262–264 (in English translation) and 293–295 (in the original Latin).

91. See Wicks, 240.

92. See Jared Wicks, *Prof. Ratzinger at Vatican II: A Chapter in the Life of Pope Benedict XVI* (New Orleans: Loyola University Press, 2012), 7. Here, Wicks does not suggest that Ratzinger was the sole cause of these changes; he merely highlights that some of Ratzinger's recommendations correspond to the final document of the council.

93. See Jared Wicks, "Light from Germany on Vatican Council II," *The Catholic Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 734n22. For the German text of Ratzinger's rationale for his recommended changes, see Joseph Ratzinger, "Begründung der Änderungsvorschläge zu Band I der Schemata »Constitutionum et Decretorum«,“ in *JRGS* 7/1, 142–156.

some of the details of Ratzinger's analyses of the draft texts later in this book. For now, it suffices to highlight the fact that Ratzinger had a profound impact on Cardinal Frings, who himself was one of the most vocal and widely respected members of the council during its deliberations.

A week after giving the expanded rationale for his comments on the schemas, on October 10, 1962—the day before the council officially opened—Ratzinger gave a lecture to German-speaking bishops expressing his views on revelation by means of a lengthy criticism of *De Fontibus Revelationis*. This speech delivered to the very active German-speaking contingent at Vatican II is important, because, as Kurt Koch writes, “Theological criticism and reorientation in the Council through the cooperation of Joseph Ratzinger become visible primarily and most palpably in his opinions on the prepared schema, ‘*De fontibus revelationis*.’”⁹⁴ It also indicates the fact that, despite being left out of his final *Habilitationsschrift*, Ratzinger's research on St. Bonaventure's theology of divine revelation was providentially given a means to be much more influential than he, or Schmaus, could have imagined.

Once the council began, Ratzinger continued to act as an advisor to Cardinal Frings. Ratzinger's role was expanded as he was also named an official *peritus* (theological expert) of the council itself through Frings' influence.

During the council, Ratzinger worked intensively to move the discussions forward through a number of ways. As one example, Ratzinger wrote his own alternate schema on revelation, which he read in the presence of seven cardinals on October 25, 1962, at a meeting arranged by Cardinal Frings.⁹⁵

94. Kurt Koch, “Ein konsequenter Papst des Konzils: Joseph Ratzinger—Benedikt XVI. und das Zweite Vatikanum,” *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift: Communio* 43, no. 4 (2013): 385.

95. See Wicks, *Prof. Ratzinger*, 9. See also Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 128. A German translation is presented alongside the Latin original in JRGS 7/1, 177–182. The title was “*De voluntate Dei erga hominem*” (“The will of God for man”) [henceforth “*De voluntate Dei*”].

Around the time of that presentation, Ratzinger teamed up with Karl Rahner, who had written his own version of a draft text, and the two German scholars blended their works together into a short text, *The Revelation of God and Man in Jesus Christ*.⁹⁶ This combined draft had a much wider circulation than the seven cardinals who listened to Ratzinger's solo draft, having been distributed in around two thousand copies.⁹⁷ "This second text," Ratzinger admits, is "much more Rahner's work than my own."⁹⁸ It also did not seem to have much impact on the council, so its value is limited to those interested in Rahner's thoughts on revelation during the council.

Of more import, however, is a speech written by Ratzinger but delivered by Frings during oral interventions at the council. Because he missed part of the text in the first speech on November 14, 1962, Frings added the other portion on November 17. These were not the only speeches of Frings that Ratzinger helped to draft. In fact, there were at least ten speeches by Frings that Ratzinger was directly involved with generating. Through Frings, Ratzinger was able to have a broad influence on Vatican II's work. As Jared Wicks notes, speaking of Frings, "His speeches in St. Peter's had a notable impact since as a senior Cardinal he was often among the first to address a topic. Also, his promotion of development aid by the West German church for third-world and especially Latin American churches had gained him many grateful friends among the bishops of those areas, who would listen carefully to the points he made when speaking in St Peter's."⁹⁹

Between the first two sessions of Vatican II, in the spring of 1963, twelve schemas were sent to the council fathers. Once

96. See Wicks, *Prof. Ratzinger*, 9. The Latin with an English translation can be found in Brendan J. Cahill, *The Renewal of Revelation Theology (1960–1962): The Development and Response to the Fourth Chapter of the Preparatory Schema "De deposito Fidei"* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1999), 300–317.

97. See Wicks, *Prof. Ratzinger*, 9.

98. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 128.

99. Wicks, *Prof. Ratzinger*, 11.

again, Frings gave a copy of the schemas to Ratzinger, asking for his input. Ratzinger obliged via handwritten comments in the margins, which Frings brought with him to Rome. On June 8 and June 15 of 1963, Rahner sent some letters to Ratzinger asking for his thoughts on the new schemas. Ratzinger wrote a response on June 19. In that letter, Ratzinger tried to recreate the substance of the marginal notes he had given to Frings, to the best of his recollection.¹⁰⁰ Without going into details here, once more, some of Ratzinger's comments are echoed in subsequent drafts of the documents, especially the later drafts on revelation, including the final document, *Dei Verbum*.¹⁰¹

Ratzinger also had a more direct mode of contributing to the council. He "was drawn into the service of Commissions of the Council in their work of entering revisions into draft texts to make them ready for voting and promulgation as final Vatican II documents."¹⁰² He assisted the doctrinal commission in its work on the constitution on the Church, especially in the sections that produced paragraphs 21 through 23 of *Lumen Gentium*. He also assisted the doctrinal commission with work on *Dei Verbum*, particularly chapter 6 on "Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church." Additionally, he worked on a subcommission of the council's commission on the missions, where he helped formulate the doctrinal basis of the Church's missionary activity, which is presented in *Ad Gentes*. Thus, Ratzinger was directly employed by the council to assist with three of the council's documents.

Following the various sessions of the council as well as after the end of the council, Ratzinger offered helpful reports and

100. A copy of that letter is available in Joseph Ratzinger, "Brief von Joseph Ratzinger," in "Texte im Umfeld des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils," in *Mitteilungen Institut Papst Benedikt XVI.*, (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2012), 5:13–16.

101. For comparisons of various drafts leading to the promulgation of *Dei Verbum*, see Francisco Gil Hellín, *Constitutio dogmatica de divina revelatione Dei Verbum: Concilii Vaticani II synopsis in ordinem redigens schemata cum relationibus necnon patrum orationes atque animadversiones* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993).

102. Wicks, *Prof. Ratzinger*, 2.

reflections on its proceedings and documents. He is among the most respected commentators on Vatican II.

Ratzinger's writings have been a source of inspiration for theologians and the common faithful alike. By exploring the breadth and depth of his vast theological corpus, his ideas can be better understood both individually and in their mutual relation.