

INTRODUCTION

The hermeneutic of continuity is hardly a term of art in biblical theology. In fact, as near as we can tell the term itself is of fairly recent vintage, perhaps originating from the deliberations of the Synod of Bishops in 1985.

The synod had been convened to discuss the reception and interpretation of the Second Vatican Council (1963–1965). The synod fathers were disturbed by a tendency in the post-conciliar era for theologians and pastoral leaders to interpret Vatican II's teachings as marking a sharp break or departure from the teachings of earlier Church councils. To the contrary, they affirmed that by its very nature the Council stands in an unbroken line of continuity with the whole of the Church's doctrinal, liturgical, and moral tradition.

The actual expression, "hermeneutic of continuity," did not appear in the synod's final report. But the principle was crisply stated: "The Council must be understood in continuity with the great tradition of the Church, and at the same time we must receive light from the Council's own doctrine for today's Church and the men of our time. The Church is one and the same throughout all the councils."¹

For us, the *hermeneutic of continuity* describes something more than the officially preferred way of reading Vatican II. The hermeneutic of continuity is in fact the original and authentic Christian approach to understanding and interpreting divine revelation in general and sacred Scripture in particular.

The Church has always thought in an organic way about the truths of the faith and the revelation and proclamation of those truths. The entire edifice of Christian thought, worship, discipleship, and mission is founded on a series of core conceptual unities—between Christ and the Church; the old and new covenants; Scripture and tradition; Word and sacrament; dogma and exegesis; faith and reason; heaven and earth; history and eternity; body and soul; God and man.

The Church's outlook, in other words, has always been *catholic*, recalling that the original Greek term means "according to the totality." This holistic vision in turn rests on an act of faith—in the unity of the divine plan, the economy of salvation (ὁικονομία) revealed in the pages of sacred Scripture and continued in the life of the Church (Eph. 1:9–10).

At the heart of this divine economy is the incarnation, the self-emptying of

¹ "The Church, in the Word of God, Celebrates the Mysteries of Christ for the Salvation of the World," Section 1, no. 6, in Second Extraordinary Synod, *A Message to the People of God and The Final Report*. (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986). For a discussion of the hermeneutic in relation to Vatican II see Avery Cardinal Dulles, "Vatican II: Myth and Reality," *America* 188 (February 24, 2003); Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia Offering them his Christmas Greetings (December 22, 2005), at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html.

the Word of God, who humbled himself to come among us as a man. The very name by which we call him, Jesus Christ, constitutes a confession of faith in the unity of God's saving plan. By this name we confess that the historical personage, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, is the *Christ*—the anointed of God, the Messiah promised and hoped for in the Scriptures of the Jews.

The incarnation, then, marks the fulfillment of all God's promises in salvation history. This historical event reveals that history and creation were, from the beginning, "for us" and "for our salvation." The repetition of this idea in the Nicene Creed represents the Church's official interpretation of the biblical data. Creation is ordered to the new covenant, to the divine filial relationship that the Father seeks to establish through his Son with the men and women he creates in his image and likeness.

In the person of Jesus Christ, in the hypostatic union of true God and true man, we see God's original intent and will for every human life—that we be "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). Christ's command established the Eucharist as the liturgical worship of the new covenant people, the Church. The Eucharist is the memorial of the covenant made in the blood of his sacrifice on the cross. The sacrament symbolizes and actualizes the communion of divinity and humanity, the communion of saints that God desired in creation.

The hermeneutic of continuity is needed both to understand and to enter into these sacred mysteries of our salvation. This is clear in the New Testament witness. The portrait of Christ in the gospels—as the new Adam, the new Moses, the new Temple, the new David, and the like—bears the imprint of his own preaching. It conforms to the instruction he gave on the first Easter night, when he opened his apostles' minds to understand the Scriptures.

Christ came, he insisted, not to abolish the old covenant, but to fulfill it. His words and actions were prepared and prefigured in "all the Scriptures"—in the old Law, in the prophets, and in the psalms (Luke 24:27, 44). This hermeneutic of continuity, rooted in the teaching and in the person of Christ, undergirds all the Old Testament quotation, allusion, and interpretation found in the New Testament, especially in the writings of the greatest of exegetes, St. Paul. It undergirds the sacraments of the Church, by which believers receive the Spirit of adoption (Rom. 5:5; 8:23; Gal. 4:6).

This hermeneutic is symbolized dramatically in the evangelists' accounts of the Transfiguration. That is why for the cover of this issue we chose the powerful rendition by Duccio di Buoninsegna (1255–1319).² Christ is flanked by Moses on his left and Elijah on his right, symbolizing as they do in the gospels respectively, the Law and the prophets. Recoiled at the base of the hill are the apostles, from left to right, James, John, and Peter.

Represented here in almost perfect symmetry is the continuity between the

2 *The Transfiguration*. Photo Credit: Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

old covenant and the new covenant of Christ. But more, we see the continuity between the Old Testament people of God and the Church. The hinge, of course, is Christ. Here we notice that the transfigured Christ in Duccio's canvas is clothed in blue and red robes, just as Peter is. Peter who, in the gospel accounts, has just confessed that Jesus is the Christ, and has been conferred with a new name and duty—to be the rock upon which Christ builds his Church.

The whole of the “great tradition of the Church,” including the rich patrimony of Christian art and iconography, presumes the hermeneutic of continuity. One simply cannot understand Christian art or the tradition's literary and spiritual treasures without sharing or at least appreciating this interpretative frame of reference.

Unfortunately, what the great tradition has always seen is no longer obvious or self-evident in our day. For more than a century in the academy and in some Church intellectual circles, a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture has been the preferred model of interpretation. This alternative hermeneutic has a long history, going back at least to the nominalist revolt and the Protestant Reformation, especially the latter's efforts to sunder the basic continuities of Scripture and tradition and Church and doctrine under the banner of *sola Scriptura*. As has been recognized by conservative and liberal Protestant scholars, the reformers' project resulted in the Enlightenment and the subsequent rise of historical criticism.³ With historical criticism, the Scriptures are regarded more or less as ideological constructs, composed to reinforce the agendas of Church leaders, and effectively covering up or distorting the “historical” Jesus and his original message.

Obviously, we are painting here with a broad brush. And there have been notable exceptions to this hermeneutical norm. For instance, the movement of canonical exegesis has been invaluable in helping us to see the literary and narrative

3 “Indeed, I venture to assert that the Protestantism of the nineteenth century, by deciding in principle for the critical historical method, maintained and confirmed over against Roman Catholicism in a different situation the decision of the reformers in the sixteenth century.” Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 55. Typology, the hermeneutical process by which the New Testament writers found prefigurings of Christ and his work in the Old Testament, is a cornerstone of intrabiblical exegesis and is built on a belief in the unity of the divine plan. The Protestant scholar, Emil Brunner, has written that the discrediting of typology was the “victory [that] constituted the Reformation.” *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952), 213. Typology and spiritual exegesis are likewise invalidated in historical criticism. See also Roger Lundin, “Interpreting Orphans: Hermeneutics in the Cartesian Tradition,” in *The Promise of Hermeneutics*, eds. Anthony C. Thiselton, Clarence Walkout, and Roger Lundin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 1–64, at 25–45. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger has written: “If we are ever to understand modern exegesis and critique it correctly, we must simply return and reflect anew on Luther's view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. For the analogy model that was then current, he substituted a dialectical structure.” See “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today” (1988), in *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*, eds. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 243–258, at 251.

unity of the Bible as a whole. There have also been important critical contributions to our understanding of the literary, narrative, and symbolic continuities found already present within the Old Testament canon and in the Jewish interpretative tradition.

But it is undeniable that the drift has been away from a hermeneutic of continuity and toward a hermeneutic of discontinuity. In large parts of the academy, exegesis and theology begin by assuming a kind of professional agnosticism and skepticism about the interpretative claims of the Christian tradition. Much of the work itself proceeds by means of dissection or breaking down in an attempt to discover some more original, presumably more authentic, form and meaning of the text.

To our way of thinking, these hermeneutical assumptions limit the possibilities and the effectiveness of historical-critical methods. The methods themselves are crucial, indispensable to understanding the Scriptures. The problem is that they are just that—tools and methods. But, detached from any larger hermeneutical understanding or purpose, these methods are often wielded today as if they are ends in themselves. Our hope is to bring about an intellectual reconciliation between faith and reason, by restoring the historical-critical method to its most fitting place—within a hermeneutic of continuity.

The classical statement of the hermeneutic of continuity is found in the Second Vatican Council's document on revelation, *Dei Verbum* (The Word of God). The Council shows us that the true task of interpretation begins where the historical-critical method stops. After stipulating that exegetes must "carefully investigate" the literary and historical forms and contexts of the texts, the Council goes on to say that

no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture. . . . The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith.⁴

The hermeneutic of continuity considers Scripture to be a single corpus inspired by God and understandable only in light of the Church's living tradition of doctrine and liturgy. The Council's criteria for biblical interpretation express the hermeneutic principles we see at work throughout the New Testament. That perhaps explains why Pope Benedict XVI, himself an accomplished academic exegete and theologian, has provocatively called the New Testament writers the "normative theologians."⁵

4 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965), 12, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchar, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 19–31.

5 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental*

The hermeneutic of continuity is first and foremost, a hermeneutic of faith. The exegete begins, not from a stance of detachment or in pursuit of the illusory goal of “objectivity.” Rather we begin in empathy, desiring to identify with the object of our study. This is perhaps a more philosophical way of describing the classical definition of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, “faith seeking understanding.” To believe, in the Christian sense, is to seek to better know and to *better love and serve* the object of our faith. Authentic theology and exegesis, then, cannot be separated from discipleship and worship. There is, then, a necessary continuity between knowledge and praxis, study and prayer, and liturgy and ethics.

The hermeneutic of continuity is necessarily ecclesial and liturgical. We receive the faith and the Scriptures in the Church. The Church is the living subject to which Scripture always speaks. Theology and exegesis, then, are in the service of the Church’s mission of hearing the Word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith. Through exegesis and theology, the Church seeks to know the Word, to discern its meaning for today, and to call men and women to discipleship—to conform their lives to the Word. Discipleship again culminates in worship, in the liturgical offering of ourselves in love and thanksgiving to the God who reveals himself in the sacred page and comes to us in the sacraments.

One more observation must be made about the hermeneutic of continuity. The truths of Scripture and the faith are not monologic. Truth is *symphonic*, especially divine truth. This is an important recovery of a patristic insight that has been made by modern scholars such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger. What it recognizes is that there can be dissonance, which is not the same as contradiction. The unity of truth is not threatened or diminished by diverse readings or historical-critical interpretative methods. Rather it is deepened and enhanced. The believing theologian and exegete becomes like the scribe in Christ’s parable, trained for the kingdom of God and bringing forth out of the treasury of the great tradition, what is new and what is old (Matt. 13:52).

Christ, Kingdom, and Creation

All the contributions to this volume of *Letter & Spirit* demonstrate the explanatory power of a hermeneutic of continuity.

In “The Impression of the Figure: To Know Jesus as Christ,” **Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, O.P.** warns that it is a “momentous misunderstanding” to assume discontinuity between the testimony of Jesus and the faith of the early Church. From a sensitive reading of the New Testament evidence, he shows that belief that Jesus is the “Son of God” was not a creation of later Church dogma, but rather reflects the lived experience of the biblical witnesses, especially St. Paul. The

Theology (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987 [1982]), 321. See the discussion of this concept in Scott W. Hahn, “The Authority of Mystery: The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI,” *Letter & Spirit* 2 (2006): 97–140, at 116–119.

New Testament writers, following the example of Christ, reflected and proclaimed their faith by “continuous reference back . . . to the Law, the prophets, and the psalms,” Cardinal Schönborn shows. He concludes that if christology is to remain true to its subject, it must “always be an attempt to understand Christ in light of his own self-understanding—that is, in light of the Old Testament.”

Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J. explores one of the knottiest questions in exegesis and biblical theology—the meaning of “the kingdom of God” in the preaching of Christ. “The Church and the Kingdom: A Study of their Relationship in Scripture, Tradition, and Evangelization,” is a fine study of this question in light of the “great tradition,” exploring the biblical, patristic, scholastic, dogmatic, and magisterial record. Indeed, he shows that serious distortions arise when the question is considered apart from the tradition. This article has implications not only for theology and exegesis, but also for ecumenical dialogue and for understanding the Church’s evangelical mission in a pluralistic world.

“Redeem Your Sins by the Giving of Alms: Sin, Debt, and the ‘Treasury of Merit’ in Early Jewish and Christian Tradition,” the contribution by **Gary A. Anderson**, also has important ecumenical implications. This ambitious article explores the roots of the complex spiritual and theological tradition that became a flashpoint in the Reformation—“the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints.”

The idea of sin as a kind of debt owed to God is seen in the Our Father (Matt. 6:12). Likewise, the notion that charity covers a multitude of sins is clear enough from the New Testament record (1 Pet. 4:8). But Anderson locates the roots of this tradition much deeper in the Jewish scriptural and interpretative tradition. He then traces the nuances of its development through the New Testament, the rabbis, and the witness of early Syriac Christianity. This is serious exegesis and theology with significant implications for apologetics and ecumenical dialogue, as Anderson concludes with not a little understatement: “I think it is fair to say that the practice of issuing an indulgence is not as unbiblical as one might have imagined.”

Romanus Cessario, O.P. has contributed an elegant meditation on the *imago Dei*, the core biblical doctrine that man is created in the image of God. “Sonship, Sacrifice, and Satisfaction: The Divine Friendship in Aquinas and the Renewal of Christian Anthropology” is a close study of St. Thomas Aquinas, whom Cessario rightly acknowledges as the Church’s master theologian, whose work is able “to display the interconnectedness between elements of Catholic teaching.”

This article is an example of Catholic theology at its finest, as Cessario ranges widely, drawing from Scripture; from patristic, medieval, and modern theology; from the Catholic magisterium, and even from modern film. Cessario explains that the divine image in us makes it possible for us to know and to love God and to grow into the image of his Son, as children of God. The *imago Dei* tradition, then, is central not only to Christian anthropology, but has implications for soteriology, sacramental theology, and moral theology.

“Divine Liturgy, Divine Love: Toward a New Understanding of Sacrifice in Christian Worship,” by **David W. Fagerberg**, also takes up the themes of divinization and the sacramental liturgy. Fagerberg’s insight is that Christian worship is fundamentally different from the worship of other religions. The difference precisely is Christ, and the hypostatic union in his person of the divine and human natures. We are especially pleased at Fagerberg’s recovery of some important, though long-neglected thinkers—the Jesuit theologians Emile Mersch and Maurice de La Taille, and the French Oratorian Louis Bouyer. Drawing on their contributions, Fagerberg helps us to see the sacrifice of the Eucharist as both the fulfillment of the divine plan of love and our gateway into the promises of that love.

“Christ, Kingdom, and Creation: Davidic Christology and Ecclesiology in Luke-Acts,” by **Scott W. Hahn**, is an exploration into the deep Old Testament substructures of Luke’s portrait of Christ and the Church. Through a close study of the Old Testament types, Hahn demonstrates that “Luke’s hermeneutic of continuity enables him to see Christ as not only the Davidic Messiah, but the definitive ‘new man.’ This hermeneutic also enables him to see the Church as the restoration of the Davidic kingdom, but also as the new creation.”

We are also delighted to present two excellent shorter works. **Michael Waldstein** studies the work of the seminal 19th-century thinker Matthias Joseph Scheeben, one of the Church’s most creative theologians. Waldstein helps us to see that the image of the nuptial union of man and woman is the key locus of Scheeben’s theology, and that this nuptial form is a revelation of the love of God. **R. R. Reno** reflects many of our own concerns in his essay on the need to bridge the gap between theology and exegesis by a return to a notion of tradition that he identifies as “apostolic legitimacy.”

In our *Tradition & Traditions* section, we retrieve an important theological motif from the early Christian tradition. **Emmanuel Kaniyamparampil** looks at feminine-maternal images of the Holy Spirit in Syriac Christianity, a tradition with close linguistic and historic roots to the first Jewish Christians. This is a careful study that shows the biblical roots of this metaphor and its possibilities for fruitful reflection on the role of the Spirit in the life of the believer.

Finally, we present what we consider to be one of the more important articles written by **Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger**, now **Pope Benedict XVI**. His “Seven Theses on Christology and the Hermeneutic of Faith” sets the agenda for our future work in christology. His takes as his context the “danger today of divorcing scholarship from tradition, reason from faith.” He also provides us with a definitive statement of the power of the hermeneutic of continuity, which he understands as “faith’s hermeneutic”:

Jesus did not come to divide the world but to unite it (Eph. 2:11–22). It is the one who “gathers” with Jesus, who works against

the process of scattering, ruin, and dismemberment, who finds the real Jesus (Luke 11:23). Here, at any rate, we come face to face with the question of which hermeneutics actually leads to truth and how it can demonstrate its legitimacy. . . . From a purely scientific point of view, the legitimacy of an interpretation depends on its power to explain things. In other words, the less it needs to interfere with the sources, the more it respects the corpus as given and is able to show it to be intelligible from within, by its own logic, the more apposite such an interpretation is. Conversely, the more it interferes with the sources, the more it feels obliged to excise and throw doubt on things found there, the more alien to the subject it is. To that extent, its explanatory power is also its ability to maintain the inner unity of the corpus in question. It involves the ability to unify, to achieve a synthesis, which is the reverse of superficial harmonization. Indeed, only faith's hermeneutic is sufficient to measure up to these criteria.

The hermeneutic of continuity is not today a term of art in biblical theology. We hope it will be some day. And we hope that this volume, which displays the full explanatory power and creativity of this approach, will make a small contribution to that.