

INTRODUCTION

This volume of *Letter & Spirit* responds to the call of Pope Benedict XVI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* for a thoughtful return to the Fathers of the Church and how they approached Sacred Scripture. First and foremost, for the Fathers, the reading and interpretation of Scripture was something that took place within an *ecclesial setting*. Pope Benedict maintains that authentic biblical interpretation “can only be had within the faith of the church.”¹ The Pope cites St. Bonaventure on the necessity of faith, which acts as a “key” to “throw open the sacred text”: “...it is impossible for anyone to attain to knowledge of that truth unless he first has infused faith in Christ, which is the lamp, the gate, and the foundation of all Scripture.”²

To appropriate this ecclesial outlook, this faith-oriented approach, we need to return to the Church Fathers and understand their *tradition of interpretation*. This is not in any way to jettison historical-critical methods and the valuable insights that modern biblical scholarship has brought to light. It is simply to acknowledge what Pope Benedict calls for—again, in *Verbum Domini*—a measured return to the interpretive methods employed by the Fathers. Pope Benedict urges that the Church Fathers be given renewed attention—attention to the interpretive methodology they brought to the Sacred Text as well as the theology that flowed from their exegetical labors. Pope Benedict states that “The Church Fathers present a theology that still has great value today because at its heart is the study of sacred Scripture as a whole. Indeed, the Fathers are primarily and essentially *commentators on sacred Scripture*.” The Pope holds up the Church Fathers as examples that can “teach modern exegetes a truly religious approach to sacred Scripture, and likewise an interpretation that is constantly attuned to the criterion of communion with the experience of the Church.”³

Once we recognize the importance and relevance of the ecclesial setting for reading scripture, and recognize also the importance of the patristic interpretive tradition that enriches it, then we can see what the Fathers saw—that *the liturgy* was then, even as it is now, *the privileged setting for the Word*. It is a matter of historical fact that the Bible was compiled from the context of the liturgy, to be read in the liturgy, and was to be actualized by the liturgy. Pope Benedict expresses himself in precisely these categories, speaking of the liturgy as “the privileged setting in which God speaks to us in the midst of our lives; he speaks today to his people, who hear and respond.”⁴ He goes on to say how “Every liturgical action is

1 *Verbum Domini*, 29.

2 *Verbum Domini*, 29.

3 *Verbum Domini*, 37.

4 *Verbum Domini*, 52.

by its very nature steeped in sacred Scripture. In the words of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, ‘sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. From it are taken the readings, which are explained in the homily and the psalms that are sung. From Scripture the petitions, prayers, and liturgical hymns receive their inspiration and substance. From Scripture the liturgical actions and signs draw their meaning.’ Even more, it must be said that Christ himself ‘is present in his word, since it is he who speaks when Scripture is read in Church.’”⁵

Having formed this understanding—with respect to the ecclesial setting, the patristic traditions, and the privileged liturgical setting for the Word—we begin to discover the *sacramentality* of Scripture and experience its *performative power* precisely as it is proclaimed in the liturgy and then fulfilled in the celebration of the Eucharist. Christ himself is present when God’s life-giving word is proclaimed at the Eucharistic celebration. He who is the Way and the Truth and the Life speaks life to us, and, when we listen, we are transformed and renewed by that life-giving Word so that we can walk in His Way and live the Truth. Saint Jerome speaks of this wonderful mystery, almost *equating* the Eucharist *with* the Proclamation of the Word of God: “We are reading the sacred Scriptures. For me, the Gospel is the Body of Christ; for me, the holy Scriptures are his teaching. And when he says: *whoever does not eat my flesh and drink my blood (Jn 6:53)*, even though these words can also be understood of the [Eucharistic] Mystery, Christ’s body and blood are really the word of Scripture, God’s teaching. When we approach the [Eucharistic] Mystery, if a crumb falls to the ground we are troubled. Yet when we are listening to the word of God, and God’s Word and Christ’s flesh and blood are being poured into our ears, yet we pay no heed, what great peril should we not feel?”⁶

Saint Jerome had no intention of suggesting there be an eighth sacrament. His rhetoric was employed to emphasize and draw attention to the notion that as the Word is proclaimed and expounded in the Liturgical assembly of the Church, it has *performative power*—it functions *sacramentally* in renewing and elevating the life of the Christian.

None of the fathers set these ideas out in terms of an exacting theoretical framework, but all of them contributed significant insights that would lead to the sort of synthesis that Pope Benedict sets forth in *Verbum Domini*, especially recognizing the sacramentality of the word and its performative character. This volume of Letter & Spirit will explore the insights of the Fathers of the Church in the hope of bringing renewed interest in the contribution they bring to the study of the bible.

In his article, “Cures of the Soul and Correction of Heart: Pope Leo the Great on the Healing Power of Holy Week,” **Mark Armitage** explores how sermons by Pope Leo the Great on Christ’s agony in Gethsemane and cry of dereliction on

5 *Verbum Domini*, 52.

6 *Verbum Domini*, 56.

Calvary are designed to foster both contemplation of these events and participation in them. Pope Leo teaches that in the Sacraments, and particularly in the Eucharist, we participate in the paschal mystery, enabling us to experience something of the cross, to relive the passion with Christ, to share in the healing remedy of Christ's death and resurrection, and so to "pass over" with him from death to life. In other words, as mysteries and remedies the events of Christ's passion—effected in and through the Sacraments—bring healing and transformation. These remedies are thus ordered towards our participation with Christ in the brightness and glory of the kingdom of God. This participation confers inner healing and freedom from the fear of suffering and death. Anticipating the motto of John Paul the Great, the message "be not afraid" is also the gospel of his great predecessor Leo.

Fr. William Kurz, S.J., in his study, "Patristic Interpretation of Scripture within God's Story of Creation and Redemption," considers how two great Fathers of the church, Saints Irenaeus and Athanasius, teach us how to read Scripture in a way that will deepen us theologically as well as guide us practically. Fr. Kurz shows how Irenaeus and Athanasius read individual biblical passages as within and as part of God's overarching biblical story of creation and redemption. This approach provides the key to understanding the meaning of the entire canonical Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, as well as any individual passage. They were aided in deriving this overarching biblical narrative by a traditional and ecclesial reading and use of Scripture. Like most patristic biblical scholars, Irenaeus and Athanasius were both teachers and pastors in the Church, not academic biblical specialists, as is common today. Their context of interpretation was ecclesial, liturgical, and pastoral. Fr. Kurz demonstrates how patristic interpretative methods, far from being irrelevant for today, actually enable modern readers to attain greater theological and spiritual insight into any biblical passage.

Christine E. Wood's article, "Anamnesis and Allegory in Ambrose's *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis*," shows how St. Ambrose of Milan used typology to explain the notion of ritual memorial or *anamnesis*, something central to the early Church's understanding of making a past event present to those participating in the liturgical action. Ambrose understood the Sacraments, and the Eucharistic liturgy in particular, within the context of the Jewish liturgical tradition which was formed upon *anamnesis* or ritual memorial. Thus the event and effects of Jesus' paschal mystery are actualized for each generation of Christians through the mode of liturgical memorial. Without the liturgy, we would be incapable of being present at the Cross or the empty tomb. For Ambrose, as with many other fathers of the church, divine providence has provided a means by which we are not mere spectators in these pivotal events of human history, but are rather *actually present* as contemporaries with Mary and the others at the foot of the cross. For Ambrose, the Liturgy becomes our teacher and a primary source for our theology.

Michael Barber's "The Yoke of Servitude: Christian Non-Observance of the Law's Cultic Precepts in Patristic Sources," considers an important early Patristic interpretive tradition which understood Israel's sin of worshipping the golden calf as triggering dramatic changes in Israel's laws and its relationship with God, particularly with respect to the imposition of sacrificial and cultic laws that are no longer observed by Christians. Dr. Barber shows how this Patristic tradition, sadly neglected today, helps to explain the New Testament's continuity with the Old, in that certain precepts, instituted after the sin of the golden calf, were not originally part of God's covenant relationship with his people. Thus, patristic sources argue that Christian non-observance of certain Old Testament precepts results not from a "selective reading" of the Scriptures but from a holistic understanding of God's plan for humanity.

Matthew Levering's "Scriptural and Sacramental Signs: Augustine's *Answer to Faustus*," provides a much-needed overview of portions of Saint Augustine's *Answer to Faustus*. Dr. Levering shows how Augustine, in taking on the Manichean heretic Faustus, employs extensive use of typology, shows how the Old Testament foreshadows the New, and how the advent of Christ does not negate the Old Testament. For Augustine (unlike Faustus), the Old Testament remains absolutely necessary for attesting to the truth of New Testament realities. Having rejected the Old Testament, Faustus and the Manicheans are unable to understand accurately the New Testament. Dr. Levering demonstrates that, taken as a whole, Augustine's *Answer to Faustus* constitutes an extraordinary Christian theology of the Old Testament and its relation to the New.

In his article, "Scripture, Worship, and Liturgy in the Thought of St. Basil the Great," **Stephen Hildebrand** examines St. Basil's understanding of Scripture's relationship to dogma, tradition, and liturgy. We learn that for St. Basil, the Scriptures could not be rightly understood apart from apostolic and patristic tradition, a tradition that was liturgical. As with the Fathers and Apostles that came before him, Basil taught that the Scriptures do not interpret themselves, but rather that authentic tradition—consistent with and enshrined in apostolic liturgy and worship—holds a special and indispensable place in the question of Church authority and the formation of dogma.

Owen Phelan's "Patristic Exegesis and the Liturgy: Medieval *Ressourcement* and the Development of Baptism," traces how St. Jerome's late fourth-century commentary on the Gospel of Matthew influenced important early medieval theologians—Bede, Alcuin, Hrabanus Maurus, Paschasius Radbertus, and others—in their baptismal catechesis. Dr. Phelan shows how Jerome's comments on the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16–20) were transformed by Bede and then synthesized and made popular by Alcuin. These theologians practiced what we understand as *ressourcement*—a return to the (often ancient) sources of Christian tradition and Scriptural interpretation—in responding to their own contemporary pastoral

concerns. Dr. Phelan shows how Jerome's exegesis of Matthew 28:16–20 exemplifies the impact that patristic interpretation of the Bible had on later Christian liturgy and suggests the importance of engaging this same tradition and *ressourcement* methodology as we move forward in our own day on important questions of catechesis and conversion.

In 1988 then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger called for the development of a new exegetical method that would take advantage of the strengths of both the patristic-medieval exegetical approach and the modern historical-critical approach. In his article "Psalm 22 in Syriac Tradition," **Fr. Stephen Ryan, O.P.**, examines how early patristic Syriac commentary on Psalm 22 can contribute to Cardinal Ratzinger's appeal. After a brief survey of the reception of Psalm 22 in the Syrian Orient, Fr. Ryan suggests several areas in which this tradition might contribute to moving biblical scholarship forward. Though generally overshadowed by the ancient Greek, Latin, and even Coptic interpretive traditions, the Syriac tradition has distinctive and important features that should not escape the attention of scholars seeking to develop a more theologically relevant exegesis for today.

In his article "Interiority and Extroversion in Biblical Trinitarian Faith in Augustine's *De Trinitate*," **Khaled Anatolios** looks at St. Augustine's classic work, *De Trinitate*, from the perspective of the dialectic of interiority and exteriority in the appropriation of Trinitarian faith—and thus, of Christian faith in general. He shows that Augustine offers enduring resources for mediating and transcending this polarity. Three principles arise in Dr. Anatolios' treatment of this dialectic on the basis of a reading of *De Trinitate*: first, that the originating moment and enduring content of Christian faith is the inter-section of divine and human *extroversion* which is distinctly configured by the Christocentric-Trinitarian economy of revelation and salvation; second, that a crucial negative moment in the assent of faith is the repudiation of an interiorist foundationalism that allows the subject to judge the contents of faith by reference to the standards of his own interiority; and, thirdly, that Nicene Trinitarian faith views the human person as radically and irreducibly extroverted and defines the life of faith as a Christological reformation of this extroversion.

William Wright's "Patristic Biblical Hermeneutics in Joseph Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth*," reflects on Ratzinger's retrieval of patristic biblical hermeneutics by focusing in detail on his interpretation of a specific biblical text: the Good Shepherd discourse in John 10:1–18. Dr. Wright shows how *Jesus of Nazareth* offers a model for post-conciliar theological interpretation of the Gospels, which combines both "the new and the old" (Matt. 13:52), in service of the readers' spiritual transformation by Christ. Ratzinger's retrieval of patristic biblical hermeneutics allows God's Word to sound forth in the Church and in the world today, a task most appropriate to the man who serves as Chief shepherd of Christ's sheep.

Fr. Jared Wicks, S.J. offers a new translation of Joseph Ratzinger's (Pope Benedict XVI) entry, "Stellvertretung" (Vicarious Representation), originally published in *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe* [Manual of Basic Theological Concepts] in 1962–63. Joseph Ratzinger wrote this entry during the years 1959–63, when he was professor of Fundamental Theology in the Catholic Theology Faculty of the University of Bonn. Pope Benedict's article is an outstanding example of a *Christology* worked out from biblical sources, as well as being an exemplary presentation of central convictions about Christ and the Church which he has held throughout his theological career. The article also shows the foundational role played by the Pope's Christology in the two volumes of *Jesus of Nazareth*, in which the Pope speaks often of Jesus' representative role, and repeatedly takes the Servant of Deutero-Isaiah as the key to Jesus' understanding of his mission.

In his article, "Liturgy: The Context of Patristic Exegesis," **Patrick McGoldrick** examines the relationship between the liturgy and the interpretation of Scripture in patristic exegesis. Dr. McGoldrick will shed light on how for both the Church Fathers and for us, the liturgy will not allow the Scriptures to be treated simply as written texts. Because, in the final analysis, it is Christ who is present and who addresses the hearers of the Word, the reading of Scripture must be proclaimed by a minister so as to be heard. The setting of the proclamation must be such as to heighten expectation and engage the hearers actively. So too, from the early church and down through the centuries the liturgy has had the tradition of preaching and continues to insist on it. The word contained in the Scriptures and proclaimed in the Christian assembly is made alive and given its cutting edge in the celebration of the liturgy. In the celebration of the Sacraments the mysteries contained in Scripture are actualized for us and we are carried into reaches that lie beyond space and time. This is the understanding that liturgy has of itself, an understanding that the Fathers shared, and an understanding that influenced their exegesis.