
Integral Faith Formation in the Spirit of the Second Vatican Council

Joseph Ratzinger's *Introduction to Christianity* (1968)

MOST REV. RUDOLF VODERHOLZER

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I thank you very cordially for the invitation to your Symposium on the occasion of the "Fiftieth Anniversary of *Introduction to Christianity*" by Joseph Ratzinger. Your initiative in planning this event and the invitation to it made me almost a little ashamed. For in all of Europe—apart from a few articles in Catholic newspapers and scholarly journals—nobody even thought to make use of this truly noteworthy date for such a large-scale re-reading of this work, and for an evaluation of its place in intellectual and theological history, as your Symposium is doing. The *Introduction to Christianity* was not only a bestseller, but as an epoch-making work helped many readers, both men and women, to understand the faith more deeply, and to experience new joy in being Christian. Allow me in this connection to start with a short autobiographical note.

I. Personal Introductory Note

I myself perhaps would not be standing here, if I had not read—besides many other important books—Joseph Ratzinger's *Introduction to Christianity* too in the final phase of my secondary-school years, which were very influential for me and my vocational decision. I had the good fortune of taking a very demanding religious course that was offered in the final year of *Gymnasium* in Munich. Our religion teacher, a Capuchin priest, who expected a lot of "conceptual effort" from us, assigned us to read selected chapters from Karl Rahner's *Foundations of Christian Faith*, and then for

“recreation,” so to speak, from Joseph Ratzinger’s *Introduction to Christianity*, which for me acquired additional significance from the fact that in 1977 its author, the successor to Julius Cardinal Döpfner (1915–1976), who had died so surprisingly early, had just become Archbishop of Munich and Freising, and therefore my local ordinary. I still remember so many exhilarating reading experiences. Karl Rahner’s transcendental-anthropological method confirmed me in the conviction that every human being, in his spiritual self-transcendence, by an intrinsic necessity not only poses the question about a final horizon of being, but existentially *is* that question. On the other hand, in the discourse of Joseph Ratzinger, which was rich in imagery and stylistically beautiful as well, arguing in turn biblically, philosophically, and on the basis of the history of dogma, the answer of faith acquired for me flesh and blood, so to speak, as well as a face. What has stuck with me in particular since this reading has been the conviction that the Mystery of the Holy Trinity is not the “translation of the inconceivable into the incomprehensible” (Jörg Splett), but rather the interpretation of the sure tenet of faith: “God is Love.”¹ This fundamental article of faith presupposes differentiation in God and the relatedness of Persons to one another.² The fact that “Father” and “Son” are relational concepts and refer to the unity and differentiation in God became clear to me then as a student, and I am profoundly grateful that, since then, the central mystery of the Christian faith never again became a hurdle or a puzzling wall set up in front of the faith, but rather its center, which is comprehensible in principle although still inexplicable. As in my case, countless readers—a whole generation of theologians and lay persons—found that the *Introduction to Christianity* by Joseph Ratzinger, either in the original German edition or in one of the by now twenty-three translations, became for them a genuine aid to understanding the faith. After graduating and serving in the military, I applied in the summer of 1980 for admission to the major seminary in Munich, where I then met Joseph Ratzinger personally too for the first time. Re-reading the *Introduction to Christianity* is for me therefore always an encounter with my own faith history, too. Again and again I notice how many of the topics that I reflected on for the first time while reading

1. “To him who believes in God as tri-une, the highest unity is not the unity of inflexible monotony. The model of unity or oneness toward which one should strive is consequently not the indivisibility of the atom, the smallest unity, which cannot be divided up any further; the authentic acme of unity is the unity created by love. The multi-unity that grows in love is a more radical, truer unity than the unity of the ‘atom.’” Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 179.

2. See de Lubac, *The Christian Faith*. Inspired by the motto, “*De la Trinité à la Trinité*” (“from the Trinity to the Trinity”—compare Joseph Ratzinger’s Preface to the book), I myself as a professor began my introductory seminar with an analysis of the Trinity.

it—without me being aware of *this* origin—have belonged since then to the inventory of my deepest theological convictions.

II. My Thesis: A Question Worth Asking

Against this personal background, I have already dealt for some time with a particular question in relation to the *Introduction*, which brings me to the thesis of my lecture. I will try to demonstrate that the *Introduction to Christianity*, which had already been planned in the 1950s and was then published three years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council by a young theology professor who had collaborated influentially at that Council, is an analysis of the Christian faith precisely in the spirit of this Council also.

This thesis is less trivial than it looks at first. After all, one could ask: What else should this *Introduction* have breathed but the spirit of this great ecclesiastical assembly and of its teaching, especially since it was penned by one of those who knew the Council best and helped to shape it? As the *peritus* of Cardinal Frings, Joseph Ratzinger had collaborated influentially in drafting the Dogmatic Constitutions. In highly-acclaimed talks about the Council, he lectured on the Council for countless people who were interested in it. His four small published volumes of Council reports are among the most substantial and most lucid things that were written about it.³ The first two years after the Council were the time of the composition of the major series of German commentaries on the conciliar documents, and Joseph Ratzinger participated very actively in that. How could all this not flow automatically into the *Introduction*? On the other hand, we should consider that, very soon after the conclusion of the Council, a vehement dispute started precisely about the interpretation of the conciliar statements. At first Joseph Ratzinger could still speak positively about a spirit of the Council,⁴ but then after 1972 talk about the “spirit of the Council” becomes for him more connected with the attempt to pursue a particular ecclesiastical-political agenda contrary to the insights set down in print in the conciliar documents. Then too, some may find it downright exasperating that nowhere in his early masterpiece does Joseph Ratzinger explicitly cite the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Not one single verbatim citation can be found. Only in the context of ecclesiology does the author point out that the Council struggled

3. The four volumes were translated into English and published as one: Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*.

4. Cf. Voderholzer, “Der Geist des Konzils.”

to arrive at the decision no longer to speak merely about the “holy” Church but also about the “sinful” Church.⁵

So to me it seems theologically exciting to find evidence for the following thesis: The *Introduction*, without saying so explicitly, adopts the decisive insights and messages of the ecclesiastical assembly, and presents an analysis of the Christian faith that is both well explained (philosophically and theologically) and also appealing (existentially and spiritually). Now this is to be demonstrated.

III. On the Systematic Methodology of the Conciliar Statements (or: “The Spirit of the Council”)

1. A Council of the Church about the Church?

Looking at the sixteen documents, can we discern at all an inner systematic methodology of the Second Vatican Council? Is there anything like a theological blueprint that brings the different texts into relation again and allows us to speak about the Council’s message? Can we identify something like the chief statement of the Council? In the *Kleines Konzilskompendium* edited by Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, it says that the Council was a Council of the Church about the Church, therefore a Council of the Church about herself.⁶ Accordingly, the documents are divided into two groups, in the first texts that concern “the inner life of the Church,” and in the second texts about “the external mission of the Church.”⁷ I consider this systematization dubious, if not even misleading. It is correct, though, that, with regard to its historical proposal of its tasks, Vatican II had to work through the unfinished ecclesiological themes of Vatican I: the contextualization of its statements about the papal ministry in ecclesiology as a whole, in particular a theology of episcopal ministry, was the major challenge.

5. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 344. Ratzinger plainly refers here to *Lumen gentium*, §8: “Christ, ‘holy, innocent and undefiled’ (Heb 7:26) knew nothing of sin (2 Cor 5:21), but came only to expiate the sins of the people (cf. Heb 2:17). The Church, however, clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal.”

6. Rahner and Vorgrimler, *Kleines Konzilskompendium*, 24: “Dieses Konzil war ein Konzil der Kirche über die Kirche.”

7. Rahner and Vorgrimler, *Kleines Konzilskompendium*, 25.

2. The Christocentrism of the Dogmatic Constitutions

With its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* (1964), the Second Vatican Council then in fact produced—for the first time in history—a comprehensive presentation of the Church's self-understanding, and integrated into it an understanding of the episcopal ministry. Yet we must not overlook the fact that the Council's document starts with a “self-relativization” of the Church.⁸ The programmatic opening words of *Lumen gentium* take up an expression of the prophet Isaiah (Isa 42:6) that the aged Simeon, according to the Gospel of Luke, uses in reference to Jesus (Luke 2:32). They do not refer to the Church—as was apparently intended at first and as the reader might assume at first glance now as before—but rather to Christ: *Lumen gentium, cum sit Christus*: “Christ is the light of the world!” We cannot emphasize enough the importance of this: the first statement in the Church's presentation of herself in Vatican Council II is a profession of faith in Christ. The nature of the Church, accordingly—to use the old symbol of the moon that was already so dear to the Church Fathers—is to let the light of Christ be reflected on her face. It is essential for the Church to point away from herself—not to revolve around herself, but to become transparent to God, who in His Son became man. The statements about the sacramentality of the Church follow the same lines.⁹ The Church is not an eighth sacrament alongside the seven classic sacraments, but rather the theandric reality that lives on the celebration of the sacraments, is constituted anew again and again through them, and precisely in this way becomes a “sign and instrument both of communion with God and of unity among all men.”

Similarly we have the same result in the second Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965). The programmatic opening words do not mean Sacred Scripture but rather mean Christ, the Eternal Word of the Father, the Logos, who in the fullness of time became man. God's revelation is not the entrusting of a book or the communication of particular truths about God. According to the Christian understanding of faith, revelation is a Person, indeed Jesus Christ. In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, finally, the orders of creation and salvation are related to each other, and the importance of Christ as the New Adam is defined as follows: “Christ, the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of His love, fully reveals man to [man] himself and

8. Karl Rahner was the one who campaigned for the replacement of *ecclesia* with *Christus* in the first sentence of the schema. Cf. Wassilowsky, *Universales Heilssakramen Kirche*, 366.

9. See *Lumen gentium*, §1.

brings to light his most high calling.”¹⁰ Gaining clarity about who this Jesus of Nazareth is whom the Church professes as the Christ (cf. Matt 16:16) and after whom the disciples were named “Christians” already in the New Testament period (Acts 11:26), must be one concern—if not the chief concern—of an introduction to “Christian-ity.”

3. The Responsorial Character of Faith and the Ecclesial Character of Faith

This Word is aimed at a word in response (in German: *Ant-Wort*); this Word is an invitation to dialogue. In his studies on Bonaventure, Joseph Ratzinger had already elaborated in the 1950s the thesis that, generally speaking, revelation fully becomes revelation only in man’s faith-response, because without acceptance in faith nothing would be revealed to anyone. “The receiving subject is always also a part of the concept of ‘revelation.’”¹¹ In §5 of the Constitution on Divine Revelation, faith is then presented also as the response owed to God who reveals Himself. This response, just like revelation itself, has a historical character, which means a human and, most importantly, a communal character. Without using the word a single time, Ratzinger analyzes the nature of Tradition in the corresponding chapter.¹² The conciliar document reads as follows: “What was handed on by the Apostles comprises everything that serves to make the People of God live their lives in holiness and increase their faith. In this way the Church, in her doctrine, life, and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes.”¹³

Thus even the conciliar documents leave no doubt about the essential connection between faith and the Church. With all due recognition for the historical-critical methods, exegetes must refer to the spirit in which Scripture came to be, and that is the Church’s faith, which precedes the writing-down of Scripture—as a previous Tradition, etc. I do not need to spell that out further here. Ratzinger’s analysis in the *Introduction*, however, is noteworthy: “Faith demands unity and calls for the fellow believer; it is by nature related to a Church. A Church is not a secondary organization of

10. *Dei Verbum*, §22.

11. This remark, taken from Ratzinger’s autobiographical *Milestones*, 108, serves as the motto to Volume 2 of Joseph Ratzinger Gesammelte Schriften (JRGs), which contains his studies on Bonaventure.

12. Shortly before that (1965), he had composed the article “Tradition” for the *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*. It is now reprinted in JRGs 9:432–41.

13. *Dei Verbum*, §8.

ideas, quite out of accordance with them and hence at best a necessary evil; it belongs necessarily to a faith whose significance lies in the interplay of common confession and worship.”¹⁴

When we talk about the “spirit of the Council” which, according to my thesis, the *Introduction to Christianity* breathes from start to finish, then after these thematic aspects we must also discuss two more aspects that are rather formal.

4. Two “Formal” Aspects: *Aggiornamento* and the Biblical Orientation

The first formal aspect is *aggiornamento*, the demand of Pope John XXIII, associated already with the convocation of the Council, to “update” the proclamation of the faith, not in the sense of a superficial adaptation of the faith to the spirit of the age, but rather by taking up and taking seriously contemporary questions, whether philosophical or scientific or of other sorts, which cannot be answered adequately by merely repeating well-known abstract formulas. The accuracy with which the young professor managed to put into words the questions and needs of his contemporaries in relation to the faith (and to let his own analysis of the faith be challenged by them) may have contributed substantially to the extraordinary success of Ratzinger’s *Introduction*.¹⁵

The second formal aspect is the biblical orientation of the whole book. The Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* had cited in §24 the statements of Leo XIII and Benedict XV that the study of Sacred Scripture must be “the soul of sacred theology.” What may appear self-evident to us today was modeled in an exemplary fashion not least importantly by Ratzinger’s work,

14. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 98.

15. One example from among many others is found in *Introduction*, 52–3: “The basic paradox already present in belief as such is rendered even more profound by the fact that belief appears on the scene in the garb of days gone by and, indeed, seems itself to be something old-fashioned, the mode of life and existence current a long time ago. All attempts at modernization, whether intellectual, academic ‘demythologization,’ or ecclesiastical, pragmatic *aggiornamento*, do not alter this fact; on the contrary, they strengthen the suspicion that a convulsive effort is being made to proclaim as contemporary something that is, after all, really a relic of days gone by. It is these attempts at modernization that first make us fully aware just how old-fashioned what we are being offered really is. Belief appears no longer as the bold but challenging leap out of the apparent all of our visible world and into the apparent void of the invisible and intangible; it looks much more like a demand to bind oneself to yesterday and to affirm it as eternally valid. And who wants to do that in an age when the idea of ‘tradition’ has been replaced by the idea of ‘progress’?”

which thus also sets standards. Reference to Sacred Scripture, not by lining up proof texts (“*dicta probantia*”) but rather through a theology and analysis of the faith that draws from the overall dynamic of Sacred Scripture, observes the Old and New Testaments in their tension and unity, is in dialogue with the leading representatives of the exegetes, and is one of the outstanding hallmarks of the *Introduction to Christianity*.

5. Lectures about the Apostles’ Creed as an Introduction to Christianity

Against this background it becomes clear: The plan for a series of lectures on the Apostles’ Creed for auditors from all faculties, sponsored by the Faculty of Theology in Tübingen in the summer semester of 1967, which resulted in the book *Introduction to Christianity*, is the royal road of introduction to Christianity, once again precisely in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

This characteristic of Ratzinger’s *Introduction* once again acquires sharper contours if we compare the work with other books of this “Introduction” genre. In the year 2000, Mariano Delgado, Professor of Church History on the Faculty of Theology of the University of Fribourg, had taken the one hundredth anniversary of the lectures by Adolph von Harnack about the nature of Christianity as the occasion to sift through and describe all comparable publications.¹⁶ Often a glance at the table of contents of the books in question is enough to see how different Ratzinger’s work is. Karl Adam’s *The Spirit of Catholicism* (1924), for example, lays emphasis on Christ’s relation to the Church. Karl Rahner’s *Foundations of Christian Faith* (1976) certainly does have the main themes of the Christian creed in view in its nine “courses” (*Gängen*) and is oriented to them. Transcendental-theological reflection dominates, of course, in a language that is far removed from the biblical message. Walter Kasper’s *An Introduction to Christian Faith* (1972) makes the concept of faith the red thread running through his remarks. Similar explanations of the Creed were produced by Wolfhart Pannenberg, Hans Küng, and Theodor Schnitzler. Wolfhart Pannenberg tries to make accessible the “reasonable character of the Christian faith”; Hans Küng claims to develop the “Creed for Contemporaries” (1992), but leaves unanswered the question of whether many statements of faith are not stifled after all by the doubt of our contemporaries. In his larger book, *On Being a Christian* (1974), he probably did succeed in formulating the questions of

¹⁶ See Delgado, *Das Christentum der Theologen*. This collection also includes the essay by Wiedenhofer, “Joseph Ratzinger.”

his contemporaries, but not in answering them in a way consonant with the traditional faith. That is the difference. The introduction that comes closest to Ratzinger's is surely the very substantial book by Theodor Schneider, *Was wir glauben* (*What We Believe*, 1985). I can only suggest this here and make you curious about these other books, which are in some ways comparable. They are apt to make us understand better the uniqueness and the quality of Ratzinger's work, which of them all surely had the widest circulation and also the most thoroughgoing reception.

In the Preface to the new edition in the year 2000, the author writes that, in comparison to the years immediately after the Council, further questions and topics have been raised (in particular, in interreligious dialogue), which in a revision of the book would have to take up more room, but that he “was not mistaken as to the fundamental approach,” inasmuch as he “put the question of God and the question about Christ in the very center.”¹⁷ As a result of this concentration on the question of God and Christology, we must turn to this presentation in the following sections.

IV. The Logos as Dialogue—the Question of God

Faith in the Divine Trinity is not just one aspect of the Christian faith among others, but the *specificum christianum*—the specifically Christian belief—that helps to define all articles of the faith. From their original *Sitz im Leben* (setting in Christian life) in the baptismal liturgy, where candidates were (and are) questioned about their faith in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, both the Apostles' Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed have a Trinitarian structure. With regard to the Apostles' Creed, a secondary observation caused this Trinitarian structure to recede into the background for a long time. Namely, the fact that it is composed of exactly twelve articles of faith gave the legend about the apostolic origin of the Apostles' Creed its plausibility. Thus, for good reasons, Part One of the *Introduction* about the question of God has to focus mainly on an analysis of the Trinitarian faith.¹⁸

17. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 29.

18. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 331: “To that extent the oldest form of the Creed with its tripartite arrangement is indeed one of the main roots of the trinitarian image of God. It was only the gradual expansion of the baptismal questions into a detailed creed that somewhat obscured the trinitarian structure.”