Introduction

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Prologue

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Einführung in das Christentum* in 1968, released in 1969 in the English Translation of J. R. Foster as *Introduction to Christianity*, the contributors present this collection of essays intended to honor the remarkable achievement of a book that has been continuously in print since its publication, still in use up to the present day in courses both undergraduate and graduate, and translated into twenty-two languages in addition to the English. The papers in this volume were presented at an international conference sponsored by the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame in October, 2018, to mark the anniversary of publication. They have been revised for inclusion here.

Why has this book managed to capture the attention of so many teachers and scholars of theology for so long? What is the secret of its appeal? Perhaps it is only after the passing of time that this question can be answered. Perhaps it is only now that we have sufficient perspective to notice what the singular genius of this book is that has caused it to outlast many similar efforts at "introducing" Christianity to various audiences.

Perhaps it is the act of "introducing" itself that shines forth as a theological activity worthy of consideration in its own right as a perpetual task that is, again perhaps, mostly overlooked as something "preliminary" or "elementary," and therefore merely propaedeutic to theology proper. Perhaps in this book "introducing" is itself "introduced" as an element proper to all theology, at least if its message is to be taken seriously, unlike that of the circus clown in the famous story Ratzinger cites.[1]

1. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 39–40.

Perhaps as the default temperament of our age has grown more and more secular since the publication of the *Introduction*, we can see even more clearly the importance of beginning, as this text does in so many instances, with the difficulty of believing, with the obstacles to faith, with all of the ways it seems implausible, outdated, and irrelevant to life today. Even we believers can wonder if we have actually "outgrown" the faith once and for all, along with the rest of our scientific age. "In a situation like this," Ratzinger comments, "what is in question is not the sort of thing that one perhaps quarrels about otherwise—the dogma of the Assumption, the proper use of confession—all this becomes absolutely secondary. What is at stake is the whole structure; it is a question of all or nothing."[2] A theology which holds ever before itself the difficulty of believing, the seeming implausibility of the Christian message and its irrelevance to an age of scientific maturity, to which is added "the petty spectacle of those who, with their claim to administer official Christianity, seem to stand most in the way of the true spirit of Christianity"[3]—such a theology will always be "introducing" Christianity, not as an attempt to re-package it and enclose it in a new "structure" or system, but as part and parcel of a re-proposal of the very invitation of "God," from the "fullness of his love" that, in revelation, "addresses men and women as his friends, and lives among them, in order to invite them into his own company."[4] Ratzinger realizes that no one can accept an invitation they are not able to "hear" spiritually. A theology that is always aware of itself as "introducing" will always operate from the awareness of the difficulties people have in "hearing." But since faith comes through hearing, it will be one that tries to make this invitation audible, even if it is finally left to the work of the Spirit to convert the heart.

All of the contributors to this volume recognize in one way or another, and call attention to, the way in which Ratzinger has featured and therefore made visible the element of "introducing" as an element proper to all of theology. We could call this theology under the exigence of "introducing" the invitation of revelation to hearts, including our own, that seem to have closed themselves to it on intellectual grounds. And, although the division of papers into the sections provided in the Table of Contents has an element of arbitrariness because the papers themselves cross the boundaries, it is designed to help the reader see this fundamental connection among all of them, in that each of them have noted, and uplifted, some dimension of Ratzinger's fundamental contribution in this book, which is to have called

2. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 43.
3. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 340.
4. *Dei Verbum*, §2.

attention to theology in its "introductory" mode, which is to say all of theology at its best, which is to claim that all of theology, at its best, is properly speaking "introductory," which ultimately is to offer a model for the renewal of theology in the spirit of Vatican II.

Section One: Overview and Context

This is nowhere more evident than in the first group of papers, those in the section of "Overview and Context," all of which treat the *Introduction* as a post-conciliar work that had its genesis in the work of the Council itself. The title of the first and keynote essay, by Bishop Rudolf Voderholzer, announces this idea in so many words, treating the *Introduction* as "integral faith formation in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council." Voderholzer emphasizes the value of "re-reading the *Introduction to Christianity*" after the passage of so many years since its publication, and the value of this retrospect in understanding its significance and impact. He observes, "again and again I notice how many of the topics that I reflected on for the first time while reading it—without my being aware of *this* origin—have belonged since then to the inventory of my deepest theological convictions." Voderholzer's thesis is that the *Introduction* "is an analysis of the Christian faith precisely in the spirit of this [Second Vatican] Council." This spirit is "Christocentric," following the orientations of the two dogmatic constitutions *Lumen Gentium* and *Dei Verbum* and the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, thus "gaining clarity about who this Jesus of Nazareth is . . . must be one concern—if not the chief concern—of an introduction to Christian-ity [sic]" in the spirit of the Council. The spirit is also one of *aggiornamento*, and in this connection Voderholzer notes that "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.*" Finally, the spirit of the Council is biblical, and Voderholzer adds that Ratzinger's *Introduction* models "in an exemplary fashion" what *Dei Verbum* meant when it said that the study of Sacred Scripture must be "the soul of sacred theology." Ratzinger accomplishes this "not by lining up proof texts" but rather "through a theology and analysis of the faith that draws from the overall dynamic of Sacred Scripture . . . "

The title of the second keynote contribution, that of Fr. Richard Schenk, OP, also gets at the deeper meaning of what "introducing" Christianity means in the *Introduction*. Schenk proposes that the various types

of critical reception of Ratzinger's *Introduction* generally tended to sort themselves out according to the various types of critical reception of the Council itself. Criticized by traditionalists as "modernist" because of its "alleged adoption of subjectivism, historicism, and relativism," it also faced "the precisely opposite criticism" from those liberals who critiqued it as "Platonist," even while the precise content of that charge remained mostly unarticulated. Recalling the distinction between "memory" (*mneme*) and "recollection" (*anamnesis*) made by Plato himself and then by Aristotle and, following him, Ricoeur, Schenk characterizes Ratzinger's *Introduction* as "The Articulation of Faith Between Memory and Recollection." For between memory and recollection lies the relation of both to "forgetting." Both traditionalist and liberal critics have a stronger confidence in their "memory" of the tradition than does the *Introduction*. The former "display little worry that their own memory of the tradition is a faded one, which might require extensive anamnetic efforts at ressourcement," while in the latter there is "an unstated 'Platonic' confidence that Catholic identity is already well enough established and present within us to recognize with ease and facility the pastoral and theological significance of trends read simply as benevolent 'signs of the times.'" Theology under the exigence of "introduction" goes deeper into our own collective forgetfulness: "In comparison to its accommodationalist and traditionalistic critics, the *Introduction* is less sanguine about, because more familiar with, the painful godlessness that continues to haunt the faithful." Its concern for ressourcement, from this perspective, turns out to be "a search in the imagination for places of the earliest experience of what in good part has been forgotten." Ironically, in that sense, the *Introduction* "was arguably less 'Platonic' than many of its sharpest critics." In any event, it is clear that the *Introduction* is an "introduction" more by way of "re-introduction" to what our attachment to an idealized past or present has caused us to forget, namely, the "very basics of faith in the personal divine Other" and the difficulties in understanding what they mean for the contemporary faithful.

Tracey Rowland's contribution is devoted to a more detailed analysis of the critical reception of Ratzinger's *Introduction*. This essay is especially valuable for providing Ratzinger's reactions to the criticisms, especially to that tendered by Walter Kasper, who, it should be noted, also praised the book for its "profound theological depths," especially in the sections on Christology, atonement, the theology of the cross, and the connection between pneumatology and ecclesiology. Kasper noted that in these areas, "Ratzinger succeeds in a valid new interpretation" of these dogmas of the Church, "a courageous effort and a notable achievement." And while these laudatory comments can be easily overlooked because of the criticism

Kasper also tendered, it is interesting to note that these areas are all singled out for their "notable achievement" by contributors to this volume as well. Kasper famously went on to indict Ratzinger's theology as Platonizing—as prescinding from, rather than proceeding from "'the concrete complexity of man and his embedded state within nature, society, culture and history.'" In Rowland's analysis the accusation of Platonism is something of a red herring: "Rather than Plato being the problem, it might be argued that the reception of Hegel is the point of issue between Ratzinger and Kasper, and especially the idea, made fashionable by the Hegelians of the Left, of the priority of *praxis*." Kasper's criticism had echoed an earlier charge of Platonism, leveled by an anonymous reviewer in the journal *Kritischer Katholizismus*, and Ratzinger's response tends to support the thesis of Rowland, since he alleged that, for the group behind *Kritischer Katholizismus*, "'which pays homage to a consequential Neo-Marxism, there is no enduring truth towards which man can stand receptive, but rather reality is constant change. . . . Truth exists as *pragma* alone; as intervention within the process of changing the world.'" Ratzinger noted further that it is true that "'theology does not revolve upon itself,'" and that "'its goal is praxis,'" but that "'the properly practical task of theology lies in teaching men to believe, to hope and to love and thereby opens up meaning which helps him to live.'" Again, "'its proper praxis consists in giving man something which other "organizations" are not in a position to give,'" and then adds, hoping, he says, not to appear boastful, that theologians who had originally judged his theology as "'impractical,'" later confessed to him "'that they had completely revised their opinion, because they find that neither children in schools, nor the sick, nor the helpless are interested in which changes to ecclesial structures are still possible, but rather wish to know what message the Church still now has to offer.'" Here is the idea surfacing, once again, of what I am calling theology under the exigence of "introducing." It is that which addresses the thirst to find meaning in life and so reaches the profundity that Kasper himself acknowledged. Interestingly, Ratzinger begins to sound like Pope Francis here, who has repeatedly warned us against a Church that is too inwardly focused, too interested in internal matters, and not in evangelization: "'In loudly proclaiming reform we speak only of ourselves; the Gospel hardly seems to rate a mention.'" In fact, the *Introduction*, drawing attention to the "gulf between [the biblical] conception and Platonic, absolute Being," mentions in particular God's naming of Himself in Exodus 3 as an invitation to relationship, once again foreshadowing Pope Francis in that "a fundamental feature of Christianity is that it is personal. It is not I believe in something, but 'I believe in Thee.'"