Truth Couplets in the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger

Conceptos *pareados* con la verdad en la Teología de Joseph Ratzinger

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Abstract: Truth is a key concept in the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. It appears in a number of contexts throughout his publications. This paper summarises some 9 *critical couplet*s where the concept of truth forms part of the couplet.

Keywords: Ratzinger, truth, Theology

Resumen: "Verdad" es un concepto clave en la Teología de Joseph Ratzinger/Benedicto XVI. Aparece en varios contextos a lo largo de sus publicaciones. Este artículo resume nueve *pareados críticos* donde el concepto de verdad forma parte del pareado.

Palabras clave: Ratzinger, verdad, Teología

When he was named Archbishop of Munich in 1977, Joseph Ratzinger chose for his motto: *cooperatores veritatis* (co-workers in the truth), taken from the *Third Letter of John* (3 Jn 1:8). For Ratzinger therefore truth is not something humanly constructed, but something received as a gift, and mediated through the Scriptures and the sacred tradition of the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Throughout his publications the word "truth" appears in multiple contexts and often as one half of a critical couplet. This paper offers an overview of such *critical couplets* in Ratzinger's pre-papal and papal publications.

Truth and Love

Ratzinger (2003) argues that "truth and love are the twin pillars of all reality" (p. 183). It follows from this that human receptivity to the truth re-

quires that both the cognitional and affective dimensions of the soul be in good operational order. As he wrote in *Jesus of Nazareth*:

> the organ for seeing God is the heart. The intellect alone is not enough. In order for man to become capable of perceiving God, the energies of his existence have to work in harmony. His will must be pure and so too must the underlying affective dimension of his soul, which gives intelligence and will their dimension. (Benedict XVI, 2007, pp. 92-93)

This understanding of the relationship between truth and love is often described as neo-Augustinian. Such an understanding of the heart as the site of the soul's integration is also consistent with the anthropology of St. John Henry Newman, one of the intellectual heroes of Ratzinger's youth, whose motto on his coat of arms was *Cor ad cor loquitur*[1]. It also resonates well with a Bonaventurian approach to revelation. As Christopher Collins (2012) explained in his work *The Dialogical Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*:

> As Ratzinger interprets Bonaventure, then, the understanding of God that comes in revelation is not what is apprehended in isolation by one thinker but rather is a discovery that is made in union with the community of the whole Church over the course of salvation history. Consequently, what comes to be known by the human person in the process of revelation is not some kind of "clear and distinct" *idea* about God, but rather the kind of knowledge that only comes from personal encounter with God in history. (p. 44)

Again, to quote from *Jesus of Nazareth*, "man's perceptive powers play in concert" (Benedict XVI, 2007, p. 93). Truth and love operate in tandem. *Veritas* and *Caritas* work together. As he explained in his St. Patrick's Day homily of 2010:

> Along these lines we could also say that the loftiest category for St. Thomas is the true, whereas for St. Bonaventure it is the good. It would be mistake to see a contradiction in these two answers. For both of them the true is also the good, and the good is also the true; to see God is to

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[1] For works that examine in depth the place of the heart in Ratzinger's anthropology see: McGregor (2016); Collins (2013) and Lanzilotti (2022).

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love and to love is to see God. Hence it was a question of their different interpretation of a fundamentally shared vision. Both emphases have given shape to different traditions and spiritualities and have thus shown the fruitfulness of the faith: one, in the diversity of its expressions. (Benedict XVI, 2010a)

The theme of the nexus between truth and love also appears as the central theme of Pope Benedict's third encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* where the contours of his theological anthropology are spelled out in §3:

> *Only in truth does charity shine forth*, only in truth can charity be authentically lived. Truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity. That light is both the light of reason and the light of faith, through which the intellect attains to the natural and supernatural truth of charity: it grasps its meaning as gift, acceptance, and communion. Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way. In a culture without truth, this is the fatal risk facing love. It falls prey to contingent subjective emotions and opinions, the word "love" is abused and distorted, to the point where it comes to mean the opposite. Truth frees charity from the constraints of an emotionalism that deprives it of relational and social content, and of a fideism that deprives it of human and universal breathing-space. In the truth, charity reflects the personal yet public dimension of faith in the God of the Bible, who is both *Agápe* and *Lógos*: Charity and Truth, Love and Word. (Benedict XVI, 2009)

This truth and love relationship is then reiterated in *Lumen Fidei*, the final encyclical in Benedict's suite on the theological virtues, drafted by him but settled and promulgated by Francis. The first chapter of *Lumen Fidei* carries the title "we have believed in love" while §26 is titled "Knowledge of the Truth and Love" and carries the statement:

> In the Bible, the heart is the core of the human person, where all his or her different dimensions intersect: body and spirit, interiority and openness to the world and to others, intellect, will and affectivity. If the heart is capable of holding all these dimensions together, it is because it is where we become open to truth and love, where we let them touch us and deeply transform us. (Francis, 2013)

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This summary of the anthropology is followed in §27 with an affirmation of the statement of Saint Gregory the Great that "amor ipse notitia est", that is to say, love is itself a kind of knowledge possessed of its own logic. This, the encyclical asserts, is "a relational way of viewing the world". To echo Christopher Collins, it is a dialogical account of the reception of truth.

Truth and Reason

Such a dialogical approach is obviously at odds with the eighteenth century separation of reason from revelation effected most famously by Immanuel Kant. In his *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Blocks for a Fundamental Theology*, Ratzinger (1987) declared that:

> the crisis we are experiencing in the Church and in humanity is closely allied to the exclusion of God as a topic with which reason can properly be concerned - an exclusion that has led to the degeneration of theology first into historicism, then into sociologism and, at the same time, to the impoverishment of philosophy. (p. 316)

According to Ratzinger (2005a), the typical philosophy of the eighteenth century that seeks a sharp separation between faith and reason:

> does not express human reason in its fullness, but only a part of it, and because it thus mutilates reason, it cannot be considered rational. By the same token, it is also incomplete, and it can heal only by re-establishing contact with its roots. (p. 352)

In the words of Robert Spaemann (1927-2018), a philosopher frequently cited by Ratzinger, "Ohne Gott gibt es keine Wahrheit" [Without God there is No Truth!]

In an essay written as a commentary on the Conciliar document *Gaudium et spes*, Ratzinger (1969) explicitly stated that a non-historical *ratio naturalis* "just does not exist" (p. 155). In short, so-called "pure reason" that expressly excludes an openness to revelation is not the way to pursue truth. While this statement was made in a publication in 1969 it was affirmed in a 1996 speech to the bishops of Mexico in which a then Cardinal Ratzinger stated that "neo-scholastic rationalism failed in its attempts to reconstruct the *preambula fidei* with wholly independent reasoning, with pure rational

certainty" (1996b, p. 6). This stance is consistent with the statement found in §31 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

> Created in God's image and called to know and love him, the person who seeks God discovers certain ways of coming to know him. These are also called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of converging and convincing arguments, which allow us to attain certainty about the truth.

Such an understanding of the relationship between reason and truth is more Newmanian than Leonine Thomist, and within the tradition of Thomism, it resonates with the positions of Etienne Gilson and Josef Pieper. Specifically, Aidan Nichols (2009) has suggested that Razinger seeks to unite "philosophy and theology" in a "single internally differentiated but also internally cohesive, intellectual act", giving rise to a "convergence of the mainly philosophical disclosure of *logos* with the chiefly theological revelation of love" (p. 228).

Ratzinger also rejected the notion that a pure enlightened reason might be able to stand outside of all religious traditions and judge them from a neutral standpoint. The concept of a neutral standpoint is for him a kind of eighteenth century mythical dream.

Truth and Scripture

Consistent with this belief in the non-neutrality of reason was Ratzinger's argument that the Scriptures need to be read from within the horizon of the faith itself. This was the central theme of his 1988 Erasmus Lecture where he declared that:

> the exegete must realise that he does not occupy a neutral position above or outside Church history and he must acknowledge that the faith is the hermeneutic, the locus of understanding, which does not dogmatically force itself upon the Bible, but is the only way of letting it be itself. (Ratzinger, 1988/2008a, p. 29)

He further argued that in order to understand Christianity it is necessary to experience it from within, to have a personal encounter with Christ. This conviction was something that he learned from Romano Guardini. As he wrote:

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For Guardini the first step is always attentive listening to the message of the scriptural text. In this way the real contribution of exegesis to an understanding of Jesus is fully acknowledged. But in this attentiveness to the text, the listener, according to Guardini's understanding, does not make himself to be the Master of the Word. Rather, the listener makes himself the believing disciple who allows himself to be led and enlightened by the Word. It is precisely by repudiating a closed merely human logic that the greatness and uniqueness of his Person becomes apparent to us. It is precisely in this way that the prison of our prejudice is broken open; it is in this way that our eyes are slowly opened, and that we come to recognize what is truly human, since we have been touched by the very humanity of God himself. (Ratzinger, 1996a, p. 15)

The same recognition of faith as a necessary *preambula* to exegesis was also defended by another of the young Joseph Ratzinger's mentors, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1989), in the following terms:

Christ's divinity cannot be wholly comprehended through his humanity, and no more can the divine sense of Scripture ever be fully plumbed through the letter. It can only be grasped in the setting of faith, that is to say, in a mode of hearing that never issues in final vision, but in a profession without end, a progression ultimately dependent, in its scope, on the Holy Spirit. Faith, the foundation of all our understanding of revelation, expands our created minds by making them participate in the mind of God, disclosing the inward divine meaning of the words through a kind of co-working of God (I Cor 2.9-16). (p. 21)

For a synthesis of Ratzinger/Benedict's principles for discerning the truths of Scripture reference can be made to his Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini. On the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.* In §19 he declared:

The Synod Fathers also stressed the link between the theme of inspiration and that of the *truth of the Scriptures*. A deeper study of the process of inspiration will doubtless lead to a greater understanding of the truth contained in the sacred books. As the Council's teaching states in this regard, the inspired books teach the truth: "since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully and

without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures". (Benedict XVI, 2010b)

Later in §80 of the same document Pope Benedict linked the priestly study of the Sacred Scriptures with Christ's admonition to be "sanctified in the truth" (Jn 17:17-18).

Truth and Tolerance

In his 1999 address to the scholars of the Sorbonne to mark the arrival of the second millennium, Ratzinger (1999/2003) was critical of Leo Tolstoy's fable about a group of blind men grasping different parts of an elephant's body –some its ears, another its trunk and yet another its tail– all thinking that what they are feeling is the complete elephant, when they have only experienced the ears, or the trunk or the tail, a mere small component of the whole animal. Proponents of the elephant fable like to talk about religious dialogue as something akin to people coming to a meeting with their different bits of the elephant's anatomy and then pooling their pieces to build up a broader picture. Implicit in this understanding of dialogue is the principle that no one person or religion has the full picture. Ratzinger expressly rejected this mentality and held that Christianity is the only completely true faith. Other faith traditions may contain elements of truth but these are only fragments of a greater truth revealed to humanity when the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us.

In the Sorbonne address, the contents of which later appeared in the book *Truth and Tolerance*, Ratzinger (1999/2003) noted that since from the start Christianity saw itself as:

> embodying the victory of demythologization, the victory of knowledge, and with it the victory of truth, it necessarily regarded itself as universal and had to be carried to all peoples: not as a specific religion that overcomes and displaces others, not on the basis of some kind of religious imperialism, but the truth that renders mere appearance superfluous. (p. 170)

In summary Ratzinger (1999/2003) declared: "It is not one religion among others but represents the victory of perception and knowledge over the world of religions" (p. 170). As Robert Spaemann (1996) argued, Christianity can never be a mere booth in the fairground of post-modernity. It is not simply one option on the smorgasbord of world religions. It is the truth.

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Truth and Pragmatism

In 2014, the Pontificia Universita Urbaniana named its Aula Magna in honour of Pope Emeritus Benedict. The Pope Emeritus in turn honoured the University by attending the opening ceremony and delivering a short address.

The theme of the address was the continued relevance of missionary work and the intellectual presentation of the faith as something that is true, and not merely another option on the smorgasbord of religious myths. "Let us remember", he remarked, that the Church of Jesus Christ has never related to only one people or only one culture, but that from the beginning she was ordained to the whole of mankind. The truth of Christ's revelation was something to be communicated to the whole world and not simply the preferred religious tradition of a few tribes settled around the Danube, the Rhine and the Tiber.

The comments of the Pope Emeritus were targeted against the idea, popular among post-modern philosophers, that there is no such thing as a universal truth and that all claims to present such a truth will lead to violence.

In his Urbaniana Address Pope Benedict described such post-modern attitudes to inter-faith dialogue as nothing less than "lethal to the faith". Rhetorically he raised the question of whether dialogue (even at its best) can ever be a substitute for mission. He was highly critical of any mode of intellectual engagement that presupposes that the authentic truth about God is humanly unobtainable.

Pope Benedict also observed that the fundamental questions about the faith are all related to fundamental questions about the human person. Theological errors will lead to errors in anthropology. The reason for revelation was for humanity to be personally tutored by God about its own nature, its own capacities.

Pope Benedict told the students of the Urbaniana that Catholics proclaim Jesus Christ not to get as many members as possible for the Church, and last of all for the sake of power. Rather, "we speak of Him because we feel that we have to share that joy with others that has been given to us".

Therefore, for Ratzinger/Benedict, the purpose of all dialogue has to be conversion. Dialogue ought never to be a substitute for mission and evangelisation. Moreover the truth ought never to be sacrificed on the altar of pragmatism. It should never be diluted in an effort to get more people in the pews. Ratzinger rejected the idea of reducing the Church's missionary efforts to the provision of humanitarian aid without any reference to the Gospels.

In another post-resignation statement, a personal letter to the atheist mathematician Piergiorgio Odifreddi, Pope Benedict argued that Odifreddi's religion of mathematics could provide no account of freedom, of love and of evil and that anything that calls itself a religion is completely empty if it has nothing to say about these most basic elements of the drama of human life.

The message of both statements has been that *logos* always precedes *ethos*. The truth is always primary and infuses everything else. In *Principles of Catholic Theology,* Ratzinger (1987) wrote:

> If the word "orthopraxis" is pushed to its most radical meaning, it presumes that no truth exists that is antecedent to praxis but rather than truth can be established only on the basis of correct praxis, which has the task of creating meaning out of and in the face of meaninglessness. Theology becomes no more than a guide to action, which, by reflecting on praxis, continually develops new modes of praxis. If not only redemption but truth as well is regarded as *post hoc* then truth becomes the product of man. At the same time, man, who is no longer measured against truth but produces it, becomes himself a product. (p. 318)

Using an expression from the psychoanalyst Albert Görres, Ratzinger (2010) argued that the mentality that wants to give priority to *ethos* over *logos* represents the "Hinduisation" of the faith (p. 91).

Truth and Marxism

A specific example of a pragmatic philosophy that places praxis before all else is Marxism, aspects of which were derived from Hegel. Ratzinger locates the decisive turn to history (from ontology) in the philosophy of Hegel for whom being itself is now regarded as time and the *logos* becomes itself in history. Accordingly, "truth becomes a function of time; the true is not that which simply *is* true, for truth is not simply that which *is*, it is true for a time because it is part of the becoming of truth, which *is* by becoming" (Ratzinger, 1987, p. 16). From this Ratzinger (1987) concluded:

> This means that, of their very nature, the contours between true and untrue are less sharply defined: it means above all that man's basic attitude to yesterday's truth consists precisely in abandoning it, in assimilating it into today's truth; assimilation becomes the form of preser-

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vation. What was constitutive yesterday is constitutive today only as that which has been assimilated. In the realm of Marxist thought, on the other hand, this ideology of reconciliation (as it might be called) is converted into an ideology of revolution; assimilation becomes transformation. The concept of the continuity of being in the changeableness of time is now understood as an ideological superstructure conditioned by the interests of those who are favoured by things as they are. It is thus a response that runs counter to the logic of history, which demands progress and forbids lingering in the status quo. The notion of truth comes to be regarded as an expression of the vested interests of a particular historical moment; it gives place to the notion of progress: the "true" is whatever serves progress, that is, whatever serves the logic of history. (pp. 16-17)

Ratzinger's criticisms of liberation theology, expressed in the documents *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* (1984) and *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (1986) promulgated under his leadership of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, include such critiques of the Hegelian and Marxist pragmatic approaches to truth.

Truth and Conscience

Ratzinger's ideas on the role of conscience and its relationship to truth were influenced by the theology of St. John Henry Newman (1801-1890)[2]. Ratzinger observed that for Newman the middle term that establishes the connection between authority and subjectivity is truth. In the book *On Conscience,* Ratzinger (2006) wrote:

It is of course undisputed that one must follow a certain conscience or at least not act against it. But whether the judgment of conscience or what one takes to be such, is always right, indeed whether it is infallible, is another question. For if this were the case, it would mean that there is no truth –at least not in moral and religious matters, which is to say, in the areas which constitute the very pillars of our existence. For judgments

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[2] Newman's teaching on conscience was promoted in German-speaking circles by Theodor Haecker. See also: R. Guardini, *Das Gute, das Gewissen und die Sammlung* (Mainz: Matthias Grünwald-Verlag, 1933).

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of conscience can contradict each other. Thus there could be at best the subject's own truth, which would be reduced to the subject's sincerity. No door or window would lead from the subject into the broader world of being and human solidarity…There must be something deeper, if freedom and, therefore, human existence are to have meaning. (p. 12)

The "something deeper" here is the truth. In an address on the relationship between freedom and truth Ratzinger (1996c) remarked that "anyone who maintains that he is serving the truth by his life, speech and action must prepare himself to be classified as a dreamer or as a fanatic" (pp. 16-17). He further observed that the question "what is freedom?" is no less complicated than the question "what is truth"? The dilemma of the Enlightenment, he argued, demands a deeper understanding of the origins of the relationship between the two. This theme was central to Ratzinger's contribution to the discussion with Jürgen Habermas, published under the title *The Dialectics of Secularization. On Reason and Religion.*

Truth and Ideology

The phrase "a Dictatorship of Relativism" was coined by Joseph Ratzinger in his last public homily before his elevation to the papacy, otherwise known as his *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice* homily. The much cited passage from this homily is the following:

How many winds of doctrine have we known in recent decades, how many ideological currents, how many ways of thinking? The small boat of the thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves - flung from one extreme to another: from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism and so forth. Every day new sects spring up, and what St Paul says about human deception and the trickery that strives to entice people into error (cf. Eph 4: 14) comes true. (Ratzinger, 2005c)

This was his summary description of the current state of western culture where intellectual elites have gone to war against the idea of an intelligent order within creation and especially against the idea of a natural moral law or any other foundation for moral absolutes. When Christ's truth is challen-

ged, the human ego becomes its own god. There is no longer any transcendent truth, goodness or beauty, everything becomes subjective, everything depends on the experience of the ego. Without a belief in truth there arises a dictatorship of relativism and a cultural war of competing ideologies all clamoring to fill the void created by the rejection of truth.

These ideas were represented in a more academic form in Pope Benedict's Regensburg Lecture titled *Faith, Reason and the University*. This lecture was not primarily about Islam, but about the separation of faith and reason in intellectual life. The lecture was as much a criticism of the liberalism of Immanuel Kant as it was a criticism of Islam. The observation Pope Benedict made was that both liberalism and Islamism share a common "voluntarism". For liberals, the individual will, however irrational, is sovereign, while for the Islamists, the will of Allah is sovereign and it need not be in any sense rational. Both fall into error by eschewing the search for truth through an integration of faith and reason.

Truth and Democracy

Ratzinger (1997) emphasised that the truth can never be determined by a majority vote, that it would be "absurd if it [the majority opinion] were extended to questions of truth, of the good itself" (p. 271). This means that "democracy itself calls for supplementary realities that give the mechanisms their meaning and that then in turn are constructed in such a way that they live up to their own essential task" (Ratzinger, 1997, pp. 271-272). This is equally true of the governance of the Church and the State.

In relation to the powers of the State this was a central theme of Ratzinger's engagement with Habermas. It was also a central theme of his book titled *Values in a Time of Upheaval* where he argued that "the state must receive from outside itself the essential measure of knowledge and truth with regard to that which is good" (Ratzinger, 2014, p. 68).

In relation to the Church's own internal governance, it was a recurring theme in Ratzinger's ecclesiological publications that the Church is not a democracy. In the context of the powers of the Petrine Office, Ratzinger (2005b) argued that a pope is more like a constitutional than an absolute monarch since popes are themselves circumscribed by the truths contained in scripture and tradition and cannot simply make up the Church's teaching themselves. The Petrine Office is to safeguard the truths of the faith and to be a principal of unity.

This position has obvious implications for the current interest in synodality. An authentic exercise of synodality presupposes the existence of what Newman called the *sensus fidelium*. No doubt Ratzinger/Benedict agrees with Newman that such a thing exists, protected and fostered by the Holy Spirit who confers the gift of communion. However, for Ratzinger, Christ could not possibly teach one principle and the Holy Spirit its contrary. The ideas and attitudes of baptised but uncatechised laity could not be assumed to embody the *sensus fidelium*.

The paper in which Ratzinger addressed some of the issues surrounding the topic of synods is *Questions about the Structure and Duties of the Synod of Bishops*. In the paragraph signified as (b) Greek letter δ, Ratzinger (2008b) addressed the truth and democracy relationship in these words:

> In councils and synods –unlike in academic research– it is not a question of producing something new; rather, in freeing ourselves from what is merely personal, which separates us from one another, we are to discover the common answer of faith, which was already more or less evident in our baptismal faith, and thus we are to become capable of expressing the answer in contemporary terms. Therefore synod decisions acquire their importance, not so much from the large number of those who vote for them (which can and most often will be an indication yet is not decisive simply as a number), but rather from the emergence and verbalization of the truth that is already present in the conscience. (p.63)

Michael Hanby (2021) summarized much of the above in his statement that Ratzinger has made it clear that:

> it is the primary definition of the Church as sacrament, originating from the communion that is the Trinity and the anterior order that flows from creation in the *Logos*, that determines the meaning and indeed the being of the *populus Dei.* (p. 709)

The Church, in short, is not a People's Republic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the above list of "truth couplets" in the thought of Ratzinger/Benedict is not presented as an exhaustive list, there may well be many

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more such couplets to be found if one sifts through the *Collected Works* and records of papal homilies. This short list does however serve to highlight just how significant the concept of *Veritas* is in his thought. While his liturgical theology and his theology of culture is quintessentially Benedictine in the emphasis it gives to beauty as a transcendental property of being, the emphasis on the transcendental of truth nonetheless pervades his theology to an almost Dominican degree.

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