

“ARTISTS OF SANCTITY”.
SAINTS AND THEOLOGY IN THE THOUGHT
OF JOSEPH RATZINGER/BENEDICT XVI*

CARDINAL KURT KOCH

SUMMARY: I. *The saints as representatives of the Church*. II. *The saints as foremost theologians*: 1. Authentic interpreters of the Word of God. 2. Credible witnesses of faith. 3. Existential verification of the truth of faith. III. *Mutual enrichment of theology and spirituality*.

THE renowned Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar reflected that it was a neglected fact that “since the great period of Scholasticism there have been few theologians who were saints”,¹ affirming that, on the contrary, it was a consideration deserving of greater attention. Von Balthasar attributed this development to the dualism that later came to divide dogmatics and spirituality, or to disintegrate the link between theology and sanctity. He encapsulated this dualism in the formulation that has become as well-known as it is unheeded: “Theology was, when pursued by men of sanctity, a theology at prayer”; and yet “as time went on, theology at prayer was superseded by theology at the desk”.² The title of the article in which von Balthasar closely analysed this historical development, namely *Theology and Sanctity*, is not only appropriate within the ambit of this present address, but also leads us directly to the heart of the theological thought of Pope Benedict XVI.³ In order to understand the fundamental significance of the link between theology and sanctity in his theological work, we could ask as a first step how Joseph Ratzinger sees the saints and their place in the life and thought of the Church.

* Lecture given at the International Conference *San Josemaria e il pensiero teologico* at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome on 16 November 2013.

¹ H. U. VON BALTHASAR, *Theology and Sanctity*, in IDEM, *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1989, 181. ² *Ibidem*, 208.

³ The link between theology and sanctity is fundamental in the work of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI; yet, at the level of reception, it was not attributed its due value. This emerges clearly, for example, from the fact that in the detailed and worthy study on the theological work of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI entitled in German *Das Werk. Veröffentlichungen bis zur Papstwahl*, edited by Schülerkreis, the glossary’s index (419-432) does not list the terms “saint” or “sanctity”.

I. THE SAINTS AS REPRESENTATIVES OF THE CHURCH

“Sanctity is not something unusual, but an everyday and normal reality for all the baptised”.¹ With this pivotal affirmation, taken from the homily of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger on the occasion of the beatification of Josemaria Escriva held in Rome in 1992, the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith recalled the particular charisma of the newly beatified figure. Cardinal Ratzinger recognized in Escriva the great charisma of having shaken off the “spiritual apathy” that had led during the course of the Church’s history to the dangerous narrowing of the meaning of the word “saint”, which has come to be attributed only to saints who, by virtue of their miracles and heroic virtues, are depicted on altars and regarded as the chosen few among whom we could never be counted and to whom we leave sanctity, whilst remaining ourselves quite unchanged. On the contrary, Josemaria Escriva’s concern was that all the baptised would become aware of their call to sanctity and would live this call without abandoning this world, through the sanctification of their everyday life and, above all, of their work, with the aim of overcoming the division within the Christian experience between the working life on the one hand, and the spiritual life on the other, which Josemaria described as a “double life”.²

Christian sanctity, therefore – at least in ordinary cases – does not consist of some inimitable act of heroism, but of living everyday life with God and with one’s gaze turned towards God, and of shaping this life with the spirit of faith. What Cardinal Ratzinger considered to be exemplary in Josemaria Escriva is precisely something characteristic of the Christian idea of sanctity, which is “not a luxury, not a privilege for the few, an impossible goal for an ordinary person”, but actually “the common destiny of all men called to be children of God, the universal vocation of all the baptized”.³ Pope Benedict XVI thus articulated what had been rediscovered by the Second Vatican Council, which had dedicated the entire fifth chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church *Lumen gentium* to the “Universal call to holiness in the Church”, affirming as a guiding principle: “Thus it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society”.⁴

¹ J. RATZINGER, *Wollen was Gott will. Der selige Josemaria Escriva*, in K.M. BECKER, J. EBERLE (Hrsg.), *Die Welt – eine Leidenschaft. Charme und Charisma des Seligen Josemaria Escriva*, EOS-Verlag, St Ottilien 1993, 13.

² Cfr. K. KOCH, *Kontemplativ mitten in der Welt. Die Wiederentdeckung des Taufpriestertums beim seligen Josemaria Escrivá*, in C. ORTIZ (Hrsg.), *Josemaria Escriva. Profile einer Gründergestalt*, Adamas, Köln 2002, 311-327.

³ BENEDICT XVI, *Catechesis during the General Audience*, 20 August 2008. English quotes from the documents of the Magisterium of the Church are taken from the official web site of the Holy See, www.vatican.va.

⁴ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Lumen gentium*, n. 40.

In this light, the Christian vocation to sanctity in this very fundamental sense is not in any way elitist but rather absolutely egalitarian; it can be fulfilled in thousands of forms and can be experienced in every state and condition, and in every type of profession. In order to evoke the beauty of this plurality of the forms of sanctity, Pope Benedict XVI used the image of a botanical “garden”, in which one remains in awe of the variety of plants and flowers and is drawn to contemplate spontaneously the immeasurable imagination of the Creator. Pope Benedict compared this to our feelings when we contemplate the communion of the saints, and the world appears to us as a botanical garden, “where the Spirit of God has given life with admirable imagination to a multitude of men and women saints, of every age and social condition, of every language, people and culture”.¹

Pope Benedict also evoked the image of light, comparing the saints to the many colours of the spectrum, reflecting the light of God’s own sanctity in various tones and shades. The saints are the “new Christian constellations”, in which “the richness of God’s goodness is reflected”.² This beautiful image reminds us that the light of the saints is not a primary source of light, but that this light coming from God enables us to gain insight into “the interior richness of God’s light”, which we on our own “cannot comprehend in the refulgence of its glory”.³ We are thus reminded that sanctity is not so much the fruit of human efforts and work, as much as it is the gift of the Holy Spirit, insofar as it is the Holy Spirit who sanctifies. Sanctity understood as the fullness of Christian life does not consist of undertaking extraordinary feats, but of being one with Christ. It thus traces its origin to baptismal grace; that is, to “being grafted on to the Paschal Mystery of Christ”.⁴ The light of the Risen Christ is reflected in the saints, through whom it radiates throughout the world. Christians are therefore called to live as saints, daring even “to be glowing saints, in whose eyes and hearts the love of Christ beams and who thus bring light to the world”.⁵

The saints embody the luminous trace of God throughout the course of history. They are like stars in the sky of history, guiding our path, showing us what it means to live a life in the spirit and as followers of Christ, and enabling us to understand what or, rather, who the Church is: “only when we rediscover the saints will we also find the Church again”.⁶ Indeed, it is the saints “in whom the true face of the Church becomes recognizable in every age”;⁷ and this is precisely because the Church is not primarily constructed on principles or made of structures, but lives in people, as Pope Benedict XVI recalled in so many of his general audiences with his catechesis on the Church Fathers, on

¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Angelus on the Solemnity of All Saints*, 1 November 2008.

² J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2000, 111.

³ *Ibidem*. ⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Catechesis during the General Audience*, 13 April 2011.

⁵ IDEM, *Vigil with Young People in Freiburg*, 24 September 2011.

⁶ J. RATZINGER, *Christocentrism in Preaching*, in IDEM, *Dogma and Preaching*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2011, 55.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 45.

the great theologians and on other saints, male and female. Since the saints witness above all to the presence of Jesus Christ and to the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church and, in so doing, represent the truth of God which is not a theory but a person, they are in the eyes of Joseph Ratzinger the true apologists of the Christian faith and the church community. It is no coincidence that for Joseph Ratzinger the “only really effective apologia for Christianity” can be concentrated in the beauty of the art that developed in the bosom of the Church, and above all in the saints generated by the Church: “Better witness is borne to the Lord by the splendor of holiness and art which have arisen in the community of believers than by clever excuses which apologetics has come up with to justify the dark sides which, sadly, are so frequent in the Church’s human history”.¹

In drawing an apologetic parallel between sanctity and artistic beauty, Joseph Ratzinger presents the saints as witnesses and embodiments of the truth and beauty of the Christian faith. In this perspective, one understands why it is the saints enlightened by God’s light and truth who are to be considered the true reformers of the Church and of the life of society. Indeed, in this mission they may even be more important than a Council that understood itself as being reformatory, as Joseph Ratzinger observed in casting his eye to history: “The Council of Trent was important, but could be effective as a Catholic reform only because there were saints like Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Ignatius of Loyola, Charles Borromeo, and many others who were simply struck inwardly by the faith, who lived it with originality in their own way, created forms of it, which then made possible necessary, healing reforms”.² The fact that the saints are the true reformers of the Church, which thanks to them has become less complex and at the same time more luminous, can be seen most clearly by the most radical reformer in the entire history of the Church, that is, the “poverello” of Assisi. History tells us that it was not the powerful Pope Innocent III who prevented the Church from falling apart or who reformed it, but the small and insignificant Brother Francis who renewed the Church, not without or against the Pope, but in communion with him, above all daring to live the Gospel “sine glossa” in an evangelical form of life, that is, in full and total conformity to its words.

An historical perspective reminds us that in times of crisis, Christianity has always been mindful that in its life and mission, the Word of God must have the primacy, and that it has been above all the saints who have renewed the Church in the light of the Gospel. In his book on Jesus of Nazareth, Pope Benedict XVI presents Saint Francis of Assisi as that figure in whose life Jesus’ first beatitude shines most clearly. By translating this beatitude into human existence and by

¹ J. RATZINGER, *The Ratzinger Report. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1985, 129.

² IDEM, *Salt of the Earth. An Interview with Peter Seewald*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1997, 216.

embracing the Gospel’s promise in its extreme radicality,¹ Francis is a model for many saints, who are the foremost exegetes of the Gospel: “The saints are the best interpreters of the Bible. As they incarnate the word of God in their own lives, they make it more captivating than ever, so that it really speaks to us”.²

II. THE SAINTS AS FOREMOST THEOLOGIAN

The saints are the credible apologists of the Christian faith, the true reformers of the Church and the leading exegetes of Sacred Scripture: in this triple sense, they are the authentic representatives of the Church and of its most profound mysteries. Keeping in mind the wider background of the spiritual physiognomy of the saints, we can take a second step into inquiring into the meaning of their witness for theology and of their place within the theological endeavour. Thus, we need also to take into account the way in which Joseph Ratzinger understands the nature and mission of theology in the community of faith in the Church.³ In order to approach his perspective as closely as possible, we would do well to reflect on the three-fold precedence that, in his view, constitutes Christian theology: namely, the precedence of God’s word over one’s own thought, the precedence of faith over theology, and the precedence of life experience over theological theory. It is only in this way that one can demonstrate in a credible way that the link between theology and sanctity is not a “sentimental or pietistic matter”, but one that derives from the very “logic of theology”.⁴

1. Authentic interpreters of the Word of God

The Christian faith stands or falls with the conviction that God is not a God who is distant from the world, but a God who communicates with humanity, who showed his true face in his son Jesus of Nazareth and who revealed himself in his word. Christian theology which reflects on this God in thought is therefore the understanding aimed at comprehending the revealed Word of God and is, essentially, a theology of revelation.⁵ If Christian theology understands and realises itself as a reflection on God’s revelation, then it presupposes an anterior knowledge that is prior to it and to its work of theological reflection, and

¹ Cfr. J. RATZINGER-BENEDICT XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth. From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, Doubleday, London - New York 2007, 78-79.

² BENEDICT XVI, *Catechesis during the General Audience*, 27 January 2010.

³ Cfr. K. KOCH, “Was ist Wahrheit?” *Dogma des Relativismus oder Frage auf Leben und Tod? Versuche einer Replik*, in CH. RAEDLE (Hrsg.), *Mitarbeiter der Wahrheit. Christuszeugnis und Relativismuskritik bei Joseph Ratzinger/ Benedikt XVI. aus evangelischer Sicht*, Ruprecht, Göttingen 2013, 221-237.

⁴ Cfr. J. RATZINGER, *Vom geistlichen Grund und vom christlichen Ort der Theologie*, in IDEM, *Wesen und Auftrag der Theologie. Versuche einer Ortsbestimmung im Disput der Gegenwart*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1993, 50.

⁵ Cfr. K. KOCH, *Die Offenbarung der Liebe Gottes und das Leben der Liebe in der Graubensgemeinschaft der Kirche*, in M. CHASTETTER, H. HOPING (Hrsg.), *Ein hörendes Herz. Hinführung zur Theologie und Spiritualität von Joseph Ratzinger/Papst Benedikt XVI (Ratzinger Studien, vol. 5)*, Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg 2012, 21-51.

that theology itself can never attain let alone ever surpass, while nonetheless probing into it ever more deeply. As the disciplined reflection on what God has thought and said before us, Christian theology takes as its starting-point an answer that theology has neither discovered nor invented, but that is much greater than its own questioning and its own thinking, and that must always be taken as its yardstick, as Pope Benedict XVI observed in an incomparable way in a speech on the spiritual and intellectual legacy of the great Catholic theologian Romano Guardini: “The principle that establishes the yardstick is not our own thought but God who surpasses our units of measurement and cannot be reduced to any entity that we may create. God reveals himself as the truth, not an abstract truth but rather one to be found in the living and the concrete, ultimately in the form of Jesus Christ”.¹

Theology can do justice to this living and concrete truth only if the revealed Word is not considered and treated only as a Word of the past, but also and above all as a Word that continues to speak to us today. Of course, the revealed Word of God does come to us from the past, but it should not be pigeonholed in the past, as would be the case in a merely historiographical exegesis. As the biblical God has revealed himself in history, it is clear that in order to pursue a theological understanding of God’s revelation, academic theology and in particular the historical-critical exegetical method are indispensable aspects of theological work. However, given that such exegesis deals only with the past and relegates the Word of God also to the past, in the final analysis it cannot be enough and must be complemented by a theological exegesis in which dialogue with the revealed Word facilitates a personal dialogue and through which God continues to speak even today through Sacred Scripture, as Pope Benedict XVI incisively emphasized in a catechesis on Saint Jerome: “We must not read Sacred Scripture as a word of the past but as the Word of God that is also addressed to us, and we must try to understand what it is that the Lord wants to tell us”.²

The primary task of theology is therefore to speak about God because God himself has spoken to us first or, rather, recalling the words of Pope Benedict, its task is to make “the Word present in words”.³ One understands clearly then why the saints are the foremost theologians and the authentic exegetes of Sacred Scripture: “The meaning of a given passage of the Bible becomes most intelligible in those human beings who have been totally transfixed by it and have lived it out. Interpretation of Scripture can never be a purely academic affair, and it cannot be relegated to the purely historical. Scripture is full of potential for the future, a potential that can only be opened up when someone ‘lives

¹ BENEDICT XVI, Speech during the conference of the Romano Guardini Foundation of Berlin on the theme *The Spiritual and Intellectual Legacy of Romano Guardini*, 29 October 2010.

² IDEM, *Catechesis during the General Audience*, 7 November 2007.

³ IDEM, *Homily during the Eucharistic Concelebration with the members of the International Theological Commission*, 6 October 2006.

through’ and ‘suffers through’ the sacred text”.¹ It is above all the saints who guarantee the future potential of God’s Word, by making this Word relevant today, and who invite and encourage us to enter evermore deeply into it, and – more than anything else – who enable us to gain direct contact with Jesus Christ and with his living Word.

2. Credible witnesses of faith

The saints show us that the precedence of God’s Word over our own thought has as its basis another precedence, that is, that of faith over theology. Indeed, the first response to God’s Word that speaks to us today is not theology, but faith; theology only truly understands itself if it sees itself in the service of faith. The consequence deriving from this was affirmed by Pope Francis in his first encyclical *Lumen fidei*, the first version of which had been drafted by Pope Benedict XVI: “Clearly, theology is impossible without faith; it is part of the very process of faith, which seeks an ever deeper understanding of God’s self-disclosure culminating in Christ”.²

The inner relationship between faith and theology was delineated in classical terms principally by Anselm of Canterbury, who expressed it with the formula according to which the Christian faith understands and fulfils itself as “fides quaerens intellectum”, that is, faith seeking its own reason. Two dimensions emanate from this, both of which are of fundamental importance for a correct understanding of the relationship between faith and theology. On the one hand, the essence of theology derives from the essence of faith, as Christian faith seeks to be and needs to be open to the possibilities of the human thought. Since faith seeks to know the truth, which is ultimately God, the aspiration to understand and the rational reflection on the truth of God are constitutive elements of faith. And since it is faith by its very nature that engenders theology, theology is a “specifically Christian phenomenon which follows from the structure of faith”.³ On the other hand, the essence of theology can only be perceived thanks to the essence of faith, which is prior to it and without which it would not exist. Indeed, the truth that Christian theology seeks to recognize is accessible first of all in faith, so that faith itself is the gift of “a new beginning of thought”, which “cannot be created or substituted” by us alone.⁴

If one reflects on the interrelationship between faith and theology in the light of faith itself, two important consequences emerge with regard to the relationship between theology and sanctity. Firstly, it is clear that theology cannot be the yardstick and criterion of faith and its proclamation, but rather that it is faith in human experience and thought that must be the yardstick and criterion

¹ J. RATZINGER-BENEDICT XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 78.

² POPE FRANCIS, *Lumen fidei*, n. 36.

³ J. RATZINGER, *Zur ‘Instruktion über die kirchliche Berufung des Theologen’* in IDEM, *Wesen und Auftrag der theologie*, 91.

⁴ RATZINGER, *Vom geistlichen Grund*, 48.

of theology. As theologian, bishop and pope, Joseph Ratzinger drew from this primacy of faith over theology his defence of the faith of simple people, in the conviction that there is “a ‘type’ of lowly person who is also learned”,¹ and that the *sensus fidei* is preserved precisely by such people, for which reason the right order would be: “It is not intellectuals who measure up the simple people, but the simple people who measure up the intellectuals. Scholarly explanations are not the measure of the confession of the baptismal faith, it is the confession of the baptismal faith, in its naive literality, that is the measure of all theology”.² Since also and precisely the saints appear to us as those ‘lowly’ who, thanks to their capacity to penetrate the mystery of faith, are the truly learned, they prove also to be the true witnesses of the faith who remind theologians of their prime task of reflecting on and explaining the faith.

Closely related to this is the second idea that the faith which is the object of theological reflection is always lived within the community of faith of the Church, and therefore is at a foundational level an ecclesial faith. Thus, the Church cannot be a reality outside of theology; rather, it is the living space provided for theology, and if theology were not to take this into account it would disavow its very nature: “It is only within the Ecclesial Community, in communion with the legitimate Pastors of the Church, that theological work has meaning”.³ Scientific rationality and thinking in communion with the Church are not mutually exclusive, but are intimately related if we understand the Church to be the living space of theology, in which are preserved the experiences of faith of the people both in the past and in the present. A glance at the history of faith shows us that future-oriented breakthroughs and innovative fruitful advances in theology have never been the consequence of a disconnection with the ecclesial community, but have developed out of a new attention towards the Church.

In this, too, the saints help us, for they have lived and witnessed their ecclesial faith in an exemplary way and continue to remind the Church that the collective ecclesial ‘we’ is the real subject of faith and of its theological reflection. Thus we can understand the fundamental importance that Joseph Ratzinger attributes, in the life of the Church and in theological reflection, to the “*communio sanctorum*”, to which he assigned a central role also and precisely in his homily during the Mass to mark the beginning of his ministry, affirming his conviction of faith that he wanted to begin his pontificate entrusting it to the communion of saints, who constantly accompany God when he comes to us human beings.

¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily during the Holy Mass with the members of the International Theological Commission*, 1 December 2009.

² J. RATZINGER, *Was ist Freiheit des Glaubens? Silvesterpredigt 1979*, in IDEM, *Zeitfragen und christlicher Glaube*, Echter Verlag, Würzburg 1982, 21.

³ BENEDICT XVI, *Speech to the members of the International Theological Commission*, 1 December 2005.

3. *Existential verification of the truth of faith*

Calling to mind the saints' experiences of faith leads us to the third precedence to be reflected upon; that is, the precedence of existential experience over theological theory. If it is true from a strictly anthropological point of view that the necessary condition for any knowledge is experience and that such experience also involves the senses, then it must also be true that Christian theology cannot be a merely academic treatise but is based on the experience of faith and therefore on personal contact with God. This shows us why the saints are so important in theology; the saints stand before us as “the living models of a faith that has been tried and found steadfast, of transcendence that has been experienced and confirmed” and as “living spaces into which one can turn, in which faith as experience is simultaneously stored up, anthropologically conditioned, and approximated to our life”.¹

For Joseph Ratzinger as theologian it is clear that, on the one hand, academic theology is important and necessary in the Church but that, on the other, it is not enough and must be complemented by a “theology of the saints”, which is a “theology from experience”. Indeed, “all real progress in theological understanding has its origin in the eye of love, and in its faculty of beholding”.² The theology of the saints reminds us above all of the inextricable link between knowledge and love, which is true also in the anthropological perspective: “One who loves, seeks to know. One never tires of knowing more about the beloved. Thus, mindful knowledge is an essential requirement of love”.³ In the same way that human love seeks to know better its beloved, Christian theology entails the “same attempt as every other love: to become better acquainted with the beloved”.⁴ The love of God is therefore the profoundest reason for the origin of theology. And faith, as Saint Bonaventure expressed eloquently, moves towards theology out of the love of Him, to whom it has given its consent: “propter amorem eius cui assentit”.⁵ As Pope Benedict XVI underlined at the end of the spiritual exercises in the Roman Curia in 2011, which were dedicated to Pope John Paul II's theology of the saints,⁶ it is the theology of the saints that shows most clearly that the “scientia fidei” and the “scientia amoris” belong together and complement each other, since “great

¹ J. RATZINGER, *Glaube und Erfahrung*, in IDEM, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre. Bausteine zur Fundamentalthologie*, Sankt Ulrich Verlag, München 1982, 369.

² IDEM, *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1986, 27.

³ IDEM, *Perspektiven der Priesterbildung*, in J. RATZINGER, P.-W. SCHEELE u. A. (Hrsg.), *Unser Auftrag. Besinnung auf den priesterlichen Dienst*, Echter Verlag, Würzburg 1990, 27.

⁴ IDEM, *Die Dimensionen des Problems*, in INTERNATIONALE THEOLOGENKOMMISSION, *Die Einheit des Glaubens und der theologische Pluralismus*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1973, 30.

⁵ BONAVENTURE, *Sent 1*, Prooemium q. 2.

⁶ F.-M. LETHEL, *La Luce di Cristo nel cuore della Chiesa. Giovanni Paolo II e la teologia dei Santi. Esercizi spirituali con Benedetto XVI*, Lev, Città del Vaticano 2011.

reason and great love belong together, and great love sees more than reason alone".¹

Love is not satisfied in knowing the truth, but seeks also to verify this truth in life. The crucial contribution of the saints to theology can be traced to this interplay of the truth discerned in love, and the verification of this truth in life.² In fact, the mere knowledge of the truth of the Christian faith is insufficient; what is necessary is the verification of the truth of faith in the life of Christians. This insight is for Joseph Ratzinger most perceptible when looking at the history of Christianity, and particularly in the fact that the turn of the ancient world to the Christian faith was not the result of planned missionary activity but the "fruit of the proof of the faith as it became visible in the life of Christians and in the community of the Church" or, in other words: the missionary strength of the early Church was a real "invitation from experience to experience": "The Church's community of life invited people to share in this life in which was revealed the truth from which this kind of life arose".³

Underlying this historical observation there is in Joseph Ratzinger a conviction of fundamental theology; that is, that the word that God directs to us as people reaches us only through people "for whom God has become an actual experience and who as it were know him at first hand",⁴ and that it is precisely these people, with all their weaknesses and difficulties, who can become for others "windows for the light of the living God".⁵ If it is true that people perceive God in the encounter with other people who have been touched by God, then it is also true that in order to transmit the faith in the context of the new evangelization that has become such priority today, theological reflection on the truth of faith cannot of itself be enough. What is necessary is the existential verification in the life of this truth, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger emphasized in his last public address before his election as pope, when in referring to Saint Benedict he said: "We need men whose intellects are enlightened by the light of God, and whose hearts God opens, so that their intellects can speak to the intellects of others, and so that their hearts are able to open up to the hearts of others. Only through men who have been touched by God, can God come near to men".⁶

The windows through which we see the presence of the living God in our world are primarily the saints, although Joseph Ratzinger does not refer only to canonized saints but to all the ordinary and humble people who remain un-

¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Address at the conclusion of the annual Lenten retreat held for the Roman Curia*, 19 March 2011.

² Cfr. ST. O. HORN, *Die Bedeutung des Glaubens in der Fundamentaltheologie von Joseph Ratzinger*, in M. HEIM, J.C. PECH (Hrsg.), *Zur Mitte der Theologie im Werk von Joseph Ratzinger / Benedikt XVI (Ratzinger Studien*, vol. 6), Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg 2013, 58-62.

³ J. RATZINGER, *The Yes of Jesus Christ*, Crossroad, New York 1991, 34.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 27.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 34.

⁶ J. RATZINGER, *Europa in der Krise der Kulturen*, in M. PERA, J. RATZINGER, *Ohne Wurzeln. Der Relativismus und die Krise der europäischen Kultur*, Sankt Ulrich Verlag, München 2005, 83.

known to most of us but who witness with their life that God is with us and that He touches us. In the face of this direct witness of faith, theologians should have the humility to understand that their work is subordinate or, more precisely, is “relative to the real experience of saints”. Joseph Ratzinger is therefore profoundly convinced that without this point of reference, without its anchoring in the experience of saints, theology would lose its “character of reality”: “Theology becomes an empty intellectual game and loses its scientific character without the realism of the saints, without their contact with the reality it is all about”.¹

III. MUTUAL ENRICHMENT OF THEOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

Reflecting on the importance of the saints for theology leads us to the very heart of Joseph Ratzinger’s conception of theology itself, namely, that the primary responsibility of the theologian is to reflect on God and to speak about God, which can only occur because God has first spoken to us and with us. Joseph Ratzinger has commented on the use in ancient Greek of the word “theologia”, which at the time did not refer to a human science but to the speaking of God Himself, and therefore the term ‘theologians’ referred only to those who were perceived to be the voice of divinity itself. For example, in the fifth century Dionysius the Areopagite defined as ‘theologians’, in the strict sense of the word, the redactors of biblical scriptures, insofar as these men did not speak on their own behalf, but had been so open to God that through their word, God was able to speak to others.² Similarly, and for even greater reason, baptised today merit the honorary title of ‘theologians’ if God’s word can echo through their own human words. This means that before anything else the theologian must be someone who listens, who believes and who prays, who allows God to speak and who listens so that from the depths of silence may become someone talks credibly about God. Indeed, God is not primarily the object but rather the subject of theology, and theological discourse can only have a meaning if it enables the speaking of God to be understood in our world: “The real work of the theologian is to enter into the Word of God, to seek to understand it for what is possible, and to make it understood to our world, and thus to find the responses to our important questions”.³

This means that the theologian’s very existence and work imply a change of subject, insofar as theology is to be understood as a service and an instrument of the true subject of theology, which can only be God. This change of subject in theology leads us straight to the heart of the theological spirituality of Pope Benedict XVI. Like many other leading figures in Christian history who have

¹ RATZINGER, *The Yes of Jesus Christ*, 31-32.

² Cfr. J. RATZINGER, *Was ist Theologie*, in IDEM, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre*, esp. 336-337.

³ BENEDICT XVI, *Speech to the members of the International Theological Commission*, 5 December 2008.

been touched by a particular word in Sacred Scripture, adopting it as the spiritual leitmotif of their entire lives and work, a biblical word permeating Joseph Ratzinger's theological existence offers a key to an understanding of his spiritual life and theological pursuit.¹ This key can be traced without a doubt to the word of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:19b-20).

It is not a mere coincidence that Joseph Ratzinger has meditated on this crucial word not only in spiritual exercises² and in a catechesis on the centrality of the Christological dimension in Paul's life and work,³ but also in a detailed interpretation within the context of a deep theological reflection on the meaning and task of theology.⁴ The three fundamental dimensions of Joseph Ratzinger's theological spirituality can be discerned in this biblical word. The affirmation "It is no longer I who live" implies a determining self-emptying and a change of subject, insofar as the "I" ceases to be an autonomous and self-sufficient entity, for it is "snatched away from itself and fitted into a new subject".⁵ This leads us to the second dimension, "Christ who lives in me". This mutual coalescence of Christ and the Christian is the deepest point of the Christian's new being. Thirdly, in union with Christ, the Christian is so wholly and profoundly transformed that, by letting go of the autonomous self, he or she perceives himself or herself in a new way.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop a detailed analysis of Joseph Ratzinger's theological spirituality.⁶ Such an analysis would also need to take into account his theology of the liturgy and his theology of the sacraments, insofar as he believes that the change of subject mentioned above takes place in the sacraments, particularly in baptism and the Eucharist. These brief reflections seek merely to bring into focus how in his thought theology and spirituality, as the school of sanctity, are inextricably interwoven, how they reciprocally depend on and sustain each other. This close bond can be traced throughout the history of the Church, which shows us that decisive theological projects and outcomes have always been accompanied by new spiritual beginnings. For example, Saint Augustine's great theological work cannot be understood without the passion of his pursuit of a radical Christianity, in the dual sense of existential suffering and impassioned search for the truth. Saint Bonaventure's theology can only be understood in view of the compelling new perception of Jesus

¹ Cfr. ST. O. HORN, *Zur Spiritualität von Joseph Ratzinger / Benedikt XVI*, in CHASTETTER, HOPING (Hrsg.), *Ein hörendes Herz*, 90-104.

² Cfr. J. RATZINGER, *The Yes of Jesus Christ*, Crossroad, New York 1991.

³ BENEDICT XVI, *Catechesis during the General Audience*, 8 November 2006.

⁴ Cf. RATZINGER, *Vom geistlichen Grund*, esp. 43-48.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 44.

⁶ Cfr. on this G. CERVELLERA, *Cristianesimo, scuola di felicità. La gioia nel pensiero di papa Ratzinger*, Gruppo Editoriale Viatore, Milano 2013; J. MURPHY, *Christ Our Joy. The Theological Vision of Pope Benedict XVI*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2008.

Christ embodied in the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi. The *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas is only understandable in the light of the innovative approach to the Gospel of Saint Dominic and, consequently, of the spirituality of the Order of Preachers.

It is not sheer chance that all these great theologians were also saints. Their theological existence makes clear that in the same way that there cannot be theology without faith, there cannot be theology without existential conversion, and also that theology becomes more creative and attains contemporary relevance when faith is translated into experience in theological existence. Herein lies the most significant reason why the saints remain perennially relevant, despite the limitations linked to their particular historical contexts. Indeed, it is only by starting anew with the saints that we can understand the true and profound sense of what has been defined since the Second Vatican Council as the “aggiornamento” of Christianity. For Joseph Ratzinger it is clear that the existential source of the concept of “aggiornamento” can be traced to Pope John XXIII, to his “endeavour to seek the true model of holiness”, and that the fulfilment of this “aggiornamento” can only come about through what Pope Roncalli considered to be the capacity to become an “artist of holiness”.¹ Joseph Ratzinger thus sees the saints as the yardsticks and living representations of the meaning of “aggiornamento”: “They are so because they have carried the burden of today, they have taken it upon themselves, they have not shunned it, but have lived and suffered it as believers. In this way, they have transformed the Gospel into today, and today into the Gospel”.²

In an exemplary way, the saints undertake the mission that is also theology’s original task, that is, to offer an account for the Christian faith in the contemporary situation. Indeed, theology is in its element only when it transmits not only intellectual ideas, but an intelligent faith “so that faith becomes intelligence and intelligence faith”.³ Theology will succeed in this in the measure that it is able to understand itself as a school of sanctity, including the sanctity of intelligence. The inestimable importance of the saints for theology is thus to be found, according to Joseph Ratzinger, in the fact that theology and sanctity do not belong to two different worlds, but are mutual presuppositions, therein disclosing how theologians may increasingly be able to become “artists of holiness”.

¹ J. RATZINGER, *Rezeption zu: FRANZ MICHEL WILLAM, Vom jungen Angelo Roncalli (1903-1907) zum Papst Johannes XXIII. (1958-1963)*, Rauch, Innsbruck 1967, in IDEM, *Zur Lehre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils (Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 7/2)*, Herder Verlag, Freiburg i. Br. 2012, 1145.

² J. RATZINGER, *Aggiornamento*, in IDEM, *Zur Lehre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, 1080.

³ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Bishops of Switzerland*, 7 November 2006.

ABSTRACT

This article presents Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's thought on the relationship between theology and sanctity. After showing his idea of what saints are and of their place in the Church's life and thought, it examines the role of saints within each one of the three precedences that, according to Ratzinger, define the essence of Christian theology: the precedence of the Word of God over one's own thought, the precedence of faith over theology and the precedence of life experience over theological theory. Only in this way will it be possible to prove in a credible manner that the link between theology and sanctity is not some sentimental and pietistic discourse, but one that derives from theology's very own logic. For in the end, a theological discourse about God is only possible because God has first talked to us and with us.