

The Truth, Theology, and God

Rev. Jerzy Szymik¹

University of Silesia in Katowice
jerszym@gmail.com

As Georges Bernanos wrote, “One does not gamble one’s own fate away with the dice of a hypothesis.”² Doubts (cautious hypotheses, uncertain convictions, etc.) are, naturally, very human. They are often very painfully related to the human condition and to human fate (the game for life and death is fought precisely over this fate), but “nothing certain” can be built on it. Above all, one cannot build the house of life on them, because they are only sand, not rocks; skepticism is not a fundament of life. And it cannot be. Life can be rooted only in truth; meaning can only be grounded in truth.

Thus, Christian hope ultimately and simply comes down to the fact that it tells the truth. This is the essence of the matter.

If there is one person I am much indebted to in this text, it is Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI). The concept of truth is found in his own episcopal motto, and since 1977 has co-created the motto of his life and pastoral service: “Collaborator of the truth,” an expression found in the Third Letter of St. John (3 John 8).

I also understand the mission of the Church and its theology in this way: to be a “collaborator of the truth.” This is not a question of “our” truth against “their” truth. No; this is a question of the one truth, the one that is uncomfortable “to them” and “to us,” as well as to me. It is uncomfortable because it requires conversion. And that is always a battle.

What, then, is the “Christian aspiration to truth”? Is it a usurping superiority? A lack of respect and humility towards other? Arrogance mixed with ignorance (dilettantism, a lack of basic knowledge about irremovable

1 Rev. Prof. Dr. Hab. Jerzy Szymik: Full Professor at the Chair in Dogmatic Theology and Spirituality at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Silesia; member of the International Theological Commission in 2004–2014.

2 J. Ratzinger, *Obrazy nadziei. Wędrowki przez rok kościelny*, przekł. K. Wójtowicz, Poznań 1998, p. 33.

complications and difficulties in attaining the truth, if it exists at all; the difficulties that make “the road to truth” practically impossible, or in any case impossible to prove)? A backwards, primitive assault on tolerance and pluralism? Is truth accessible to the person? Is it worth pursuing? Is not the pursuit of truth and knowing of it as the only master of humanity our only salvation? Or is the opposite true: is bidding farewell to questions about the truth the true liberation of the person getting over speculative fantasies and finally taking things in his or her hands?

How is it in reality? What are things really like? And are we incapable of answering only a few of these questions? Are we also (perhaps) condemned to silence? What is our purpose as the Church, as theologians: the certainty of truth, or the uncertainty of hypotheses? And, a related question, whom does this serve?

The dominant attitude of modern philosophy (not the entirety of it, but certainly its most recognizable and influential currents) can be most politely described as skepticism with regards to the existence and possibility of knowing truth. This has been the case at least starting with nominalism, through Cartesianism, Kant’s philosophy, many mainstream Enlightenment philosophies, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and up through the leading post-modernists. The current situation could be described as such: in the fields of science and ethics (public morality) the concept of truth (and thus freedom) of the eighteenth century Enlightenment continues to be a basis for the dominant philosophical and political cultures of the West; the question about the truth, which once founded universities, has been marginalized or even removed from them as “unscientific,” while claims of having known and expressed the truth as common and thus of binding significance appears anachronistic, and as a tendency conducive to all types of fundamentalism, as a “abstrusive ‘medieval’ arrogance.”³

The fierceness and tenacity with which this view is proclaimed, and especially defended by fighting one’s opponent (which occurs both in academia and in the media) and the missionary zeal, similar to that of a neophyte, with which it is propagated and considered to be beyond discussion give pause. Ratzinger believed that this is happening probably because of “deeper spiritual layers,” namely: “The suspicion that perhaps there might really be a truth which can be known and which thus represents a claim on me has the force

3 J. Ratzinger, *Prawda w teologii*, tł. M. Mijalska, Kraków 2001, p. 88–89.

of a personal offense, indeed of a dangerous attack on the lifestyle in which I have comfortably installed myself; such an attack must be resisted with all the passion which is aroused when one feels oneself struck in the deepest core of one's existence."⁴

It was in Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* in which I encountered the words that express this frankly and with even Lenin-like simplicity: "the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth."⁵

Voilà: enlightened absolutism once again. This is the fundament. This is an outline of the old despotism cloaked as the new total(itarian)ism: the dictatorship of relativism.

*

However, we need the presence of Truth in the world built by us. A world without truth at its center turns into an authority of relativism, unpredictable (because sooner or later it will be based on falsehoods that will occupy the vacuum left by the truth) and cruel in its self-interested panegoism (the more insidious, the more it is camouflaged), in which the boundaries between good and evil will be established by the opinion of an accidental majority.⁶ Even Christian love without truth becomes merely a warehouse of good intentions and feelings that are useful and marginal, not transcending what is merely sentimental and emotional.⁷

Thus, we all need the return to what we will provocatively call "Christian naïveté" consisting of the fact that for it the problem of truth remains relevant and that knowledge pertains to truth. This also encompasses information and opinions in the media as referring to the truth. We need the old Christian conviction that the truth can be known, not created, usurped, expropriated, or used against other; instead, it must be known with full humility and a feeling of defectiveness. However, with faith in the Creator and pride resulting from being human, the truth can be known. The truth is attainable.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 89.

5 U. Eco, *Der Name der Rose. Roman*, aus dem Italienischen von B. Kroeber, München 1982, p. 624; U. Eco, *Imię róży*, przeł. A. Szymanowski, Warszawa 1980.

6 *Światłość świata. Papież, Kościół i znaki czasu. Benedykt XVI w rozmowie z Peterem Seewaldem*, przekł. P. Napiwodzki, Kraków 2011, p. 61.

7 Benedykt XVI, encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, 2–3.

The greatest error and falsehood of relativism is that it considers humanity's blindness towards the truth to be something incapable of being conquered. Thus, the dictatorship of relativism is in essence the violence of a (supposedly) irremovable blindness.

To quote Ratzinger: "Today it has become an irresistibly forceful prejudice to dismiss as simplistic and at the same time arrogant those who are reputed to believe that they 'have' the truth. Such people are supposedly incapable of dialogue and ultimately cannot be taken seriously. For nobody 'has' the truth. All of us, the argument goes, can only be searching for it. But – we must reply with another question – what kind of a search is this that can never reach a conclusion? [...] It seems to me that we should turn this question of presumption the other way around: Is it not presumption to say that God cannot give us the truth as a gift? That He cannot open our eyes? Does it not show contempt for God to say that, once we have been born blind, truth is not our concern? Is it not a degradation of man and of his longing for God to claim that we human beings are merely groping in the dark forever? Hand in hand with this, furthermore, goes the real presumption, namely, that we and we alone would like to take God's place and determine who we are and what we want to do and what we want to make of ourselves and the world. Besides, knowing and searching are not mutually exclusive."⁸

To repeat: what kind of a search is this that can never reach a conclusion? And who decides that that is so and must be that way?!

The last sentence in the above quote contains the culmination of the synthesis of the Catholic view on this matter: knowing and searching are not mutually exclusive. This so-called Catholic "and" once again expresses and guards the balance of wisdom.

*

How can we thus express the truth? Who or what is the truth? The truth is who or what? Once again, we will repeat the most famous of these types of questions that anyone has ever asked of anyone else: "What is truth?" (John 18 : 38).

Not having received an answer from Jesus and after more verbal confrontations with the Jews, after the beating and crowning the convicted one with thorns, Pilate brings out the "King of the Jews" in a purple robe and says:

8 J. Ratzinger, *W drodze do Jezusa Chrystusa*, przeł. J. Merecki, Kraków 2004, p. 74–75.

Ἰδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος – “Behold, the man!” I believe that (apart from one’s own consciousness), by expressing the prophecy and at the same time summarizing the Good News, the inconceivable logic of the Paschal events that reached the very truth of God joined together Pilate’s question and answer in the reflection of revelation: “What is truth?” “Behold, the man!” This bloody pulp of a man is the truth about which you ask with a combination of pride, resignation, and cynicism, without much faith in the existence of an answer... He is the truth about God and about you; about life and death; about everything that is. That the buckle joining together these two sentences by Pilate is not only the creative fantasy of the Christian reader’s fantasy can be attested, for example, by the fact that the answer is compatible with the definition given to Thomas by Jesus, the most famous such definition ever, in St. John’s Gospel just five chapters later: “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14 : 6).

This sentence is not only everything that Christianity has to say on the topic of truth, but it is also the cornerstone of the Christian faith. It is not a beautiful, but dull outline hidden behind the shroud of myth, nor is it a warehouse of good feelings, uncertain of itself and improving an imperfect world, a positive ideal “like all others” or an “explanation of nothingness” (while maintaining the appearances of a good game: everything is lousy, but in reality we can do something; nothingness can somehow be illuminated)... No, the Christian faith really does have a basis; its hope-giving power comes from truth. Because it is He, the Incarnate Divine Logos (each of these three words here is important), the basis for the logic of the Christian faith, and the truth. This is the fundament of everything that is Christian and of everything in general. This is one and the same fundament. The first Christian communities felt this, and with the passage of time this feeling, deepened by experience and knowledge, transformed into conviction and certainty that “their faith was not part of a particular cultural tradition, differing from one people to another, but belonged instead to the realm of truth, which concerns everyone equally.”⁹

This is exactly how the Christian faith is different from all types of (both ancient and contemporary) gnosis: it has access to the deepest ultimate reality, to the truth about how things really are. Thus, it has access to the answer to the question about how things really are with me, with us, and with the world. Because it is not silence, as many gnostics believe, but the Word (Logos) that is the “last thing” given to us by God.

9 Benedykt XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 92.

To quote the fourth Gospel: “From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace,” (John 1 : 17), Who “tell[s us] the truth,” (John 16 : 7), because in His essence He is the truth (John 14 : 6). This is also the meaning of His Incarnation and Resurrection: “For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (John 18 : 37). This will also be the cause of His death: “But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God” (John 8 : 40). This is the cause of His death: Jesus dies because an attack on truth was suspected; His obedience is persisting by the truth against the conspiracy of lies. No lie will ever tolerate any truth: one must either convert or drone out the voice of truth, even if this means killing the messenger... But here is also born the redeeming and, at the same time, liberating purpose of faith, the purpose of the Church’s existence: “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8 : 31–32).

*

Only the truth sets one free... These words by the Lord regarding the relationship between truth and freedom can be heard, seen, and understood today after the mass violence of the twentieth century, with its precipitous challenge and all its greatness. Only the freedom of truth is true freedom. This is an important lesson for our contemporary world, which desires freedom but treats the truth as a pretense and the opposite of freedom. Meanwhile, truth and freedom cannot be separated from each other; doing so threatens the loss of both.

Jesus replied: “For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate said to Him: “‘What is truth?’ When he had said this, he again went out to the Jews and said to them, ‘I find no guilt in him.’” Thus, he interrupted the conversation. However, the question turned out to be rhetorical; he did not expect any answer. It meant, among other things: “Stop theorizing. It’s best to get down to specifics, because you will die in a moment.” This is because the question about truth was for the educated Pilate in itself an intentionally badly formulated question that exposed the naïveté (at best) of the very problem. The very formulation of such a question was equal to rejecting it (today, this is a commonplace attitude). Ultimately, Pilate said to both truth and to Jesus, Who also is the truth: “Take Him away, take Him away!” (John 19 : 15). If not

literally, then in the essence of what he did: he accepted the Jews' cry and made a decision conducive to what they wanted: "Then he handed him over to them to be crucified" (John 19 : 16).

However, saying "Take Him away" to the Truth always ends badly for those who say that. Nothing can replace it. So, then, let's get down to the specifics. Carl Friedrich von Weitzsäcker said: "I maintain that in the long run only a truth-oriented society, not a happiness-oriented society, can succeed."¹⁰

Sooner or later, cursed freedom without truth becomes the quasi-freedom of slaves. And it lands in pigsties, feeding off rats' tails designated for pigs, jealous because pigs are not subject to the curse of freedom. In the most forward-looking places of contemporary development, this level has already been long achieved, as attested by the ecological protest against the person, seen as the destroyer of being.

However, let's emphasize something very consoling. Because Jesus Christ is the truth, however difficult it may be to deal with it, carry it, and faithfully and patiently search for it, we have to know that in the most essential meaning that gives unflinching hope, the truth carries us more than we carry it, because it is not something impersonal, but rather encounters us in Him Who took upon Himself our entire burden. And He Who is the liberating Truth is at the same time the Love that protects us.

*

"Why does becoming true mean becoming good? Why is the truth good in itself? Why is it by itself binding, without the necessity of expressing any aim?"¹¹ Why does the mere question about the truth, free of any skepticism, create such resistance, such anger, and, on the other hand, such devotion on the part of its defenders? Why were the most Godless and inhuman empires in world history invariably based on one big lie? What is it in truth that it attracts human hearts and minds so much? Who is in the truth?

I'm certain that the truth to this simple sentence can be found in one of Ratzinger's Bavarian lectures: "By deepening our understanding of the essence of truth, we reach the concept of God."¹²

10 J. Ratzinger, *Prawda w teologii*, op. cit., p. 42; J. Ratzinger, *Wykłady bawarskie z lat 1963–2004*, przeł. A. Czarnocki, Warszawa 2009, p. 204.

11 J. Ratzinger, *Wykłady bawarskie...*, op. cit., p. 205.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 206.

He is in it.

And thus – to repeat – in the long run, only people and societies focused not on happiness but on truth can grow.

The Church and its theology serve exactly this end.

Abstract

The Truth, Theology, God

Having been distorted since modern times, the notions of truth and freedom have been radically juxtaposed in post-modern worldviews, consequently resulting in the loss of key values: the truth is questioned, while freedom is determined and limited by worldly purposes. J. Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) shows that the terms are *de facto*, theologically important (Theological Hermeneutics); i.e., they can be fully and properly understood from the heart of Christian faith God is the right guarantor of the truth (involving the existence of the objective and judicious reality) and the Embodiment of God's Son, Logos, is the ultimate argument for its attainability and cognizability. When Jesus said: "I am the truth" (John 14 : 6) He convinced that the truth is universal and belongs to God. Thereby, it remains universally binding; it is the appropriate basis of ethos. The truth constitutes the key to interpreting reality and is a superior (independent) criterion for its arrangement (also in the social and political sense). Thus, the task of Christianity and theology is to restore the proper, Christological understanding of truth and freedom for the world, as well as their inseparable, redemptive relationship: "the truth will set you free" (John 8 : 32).

Keywords: God; Logos; Christianity; theology; philosophy; Christology; truth; freedom; sense; salvation; hope; modern times; post-modernity; relativism; forgiveness; consensus; tolerance

References

- Benedict XVI. (2009, June 29). *Caritas in veritate*.
- Benedict XVI. (2010, September 30). *Verbum Domini*.
- Eco, U. (1982). *Der Name der Rose: Roman*. (B. Kroeber, Trans.) (26. Aufl). München: Carl Hanser Verlag.
- Ratzinger, J. (1998). *Obrazy nadziei. Wędrowki przez rok kościelny*. (K. Wójtowicz, Trans.). Poznań: Księgarnia św. Wojciecha.
- Ratzinger, J. (2001). *Prawda w teologii*. (M. Mijalska, Trans.). Kraków: Wydawnictwo M.
- Ratzinger, J. (2004). *W drodze do Jezusa Chrystusa*. (J. Merecki, Trans.). Kraków: Wydawnictwo Salwator.
- Ratzinger, J. (2009). *Wykłady bawarskie z lat 1963–2004*. (A. Czarnocki, Trans.). Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax.
- Seewald, P., & Benedict XVI. (2011). *Światłość świata. Papież, Kościół i znaki czasu*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak.