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DT 501 – Fundamental Theology and Protology

“Faith and Theology”
A Précis

On the occasion of his reception of an honorary doctorate in theology from the Theological Faculty of Wrocław/Breslau, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger delivered an address entitled “Faith and Theology” in which he sets out to situate the relationship between the notion of faith and the practice of theology in relation to one another.

Ratzinger begins by setting out to understand the word ‘faith’ or ‘believe.’ He notes that, in German, as is the case in many languages, the word takes on a dual meaning. The word can indicate either a vague notion or expectation as in the case in which one predicts the following days weather or it can indicate “a particular kind of certainty” as it does when applied to the Christian faith.

The question arises whether the use of the word faith does, in fact, include some element of doubt. Since faith can neither be empirically proved nor disproved in a truly conclusive manner, does it always end in “perhaps”? This seems not to be the case because, while it cannot be proved in a way admissible to a scientist, the Christian sense of faith carries a certainty in which it is lived with absolute confidence much as a married couple trusts in the love they have for each other without empirical prove that *love* exists.

The next question that must be addressed is whether faith and theology exclude each other. Since faith, in the Christian sense, admits no doubt, there can be no room for the questions that give rise to the science. Theology, since it argues to a conclusion already present, is not a true science, but only takes the appearance of one. Both of these, however, arise from a univocal understanding of ‘certainty’ that admits only a modern scientific understanding. Far from excluding it, a living Christian faith must give rise to theology.

To correct the misunderstanding of ‘certainty,’ it is necessary to return to better define ‘faith’ in the Christian context. Like scientific certainty, faith is an assent of the will involving thought. Unlike scientific certainty, however, faith in the Christian sense is not the result of blindly following data, but rather an act of the will to assent to a proposition for an ongoing question. This is possible without violating the very nature of any science by realizing that the notion of will, in this usage, extends to the innermost being. As Pascal notes, “the heart has its reasons... which reaches beyond ‘mere’ reason.” One is able to achieve that certainty of faith through a gift of God in moving his heart to do so. It is not a result merely of man’s intellectual faculty coming to an undeniable conclusion through evidence but rather “an act in which all the spiritual powers of man are at work together.”

Although the heart has assented to the truth of faith, the intellect must still reach an understanding of the truths of faith through the means proper to it. Faith, the assent of the heart, and theology, the intellect seeking understanding, seek to balance each other. Faith illumines theology; theology seeks to understand faith. It should be noted that there is a risk in this dynamic of the contrary movement of thought overtaking faith and, rather than developing better understanding, creating doubt. This is why the challenges that arise in theology must always be enlightened through the light of faith and the Word.

Ratzinger concludes his address with a brief anecdote describing various claims that active theological speculation had been successfully completed and had nothing more to say. On the contrary, in Ratzinger's estimation, the active pursuit of the science of theology must necessarily continue for as long as the pilgrim Church survives. Indeed, to claim otherwise would imply that the whole mystery of faith was fully understood by man. Therefore, the task of theologians is to guide the people in the Church ever deeper into understanding the faith that has been placed in their hearts and to which they have assented.