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**Review of the Doctoral Dissertation
of Rev. Kyeyune Vianney, MA
„The Credibility of the Catholic Church as a Communion in the World according to
Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI”
Warsaw 2022, 315 pp. (comp. print)**

Fr. Kyeyune Vianney's doctoral dissertation: *Credibility of the Catholic Church as a Communion in the World according to Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI*, written under the supervision of Rev. Prof. UKSW Dr. Waldemar Cisło at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, addresses one of the important issues of ecclesiology. Much has been written about the credibility of the Church, both in the world literature and in Poland. However, the author's treatment of the issue of the credibility of the Church from the perspective of communion in the world is innovative. Although the author limited his research to the theology of Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI, it must be admitted that he is one of the most outstanding theologians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. An in-depth study of this important issue has not yet appeared on the theological market. By undertaking research on these issues, Fr. Kyeyune Vianney has filled a gap in theological research on fundamental ecclesiology.

It should be emphasized that Ratzinger himself did not leave a work on the credibility of the Church. Fr. Kyeyune Vianney therefore reconstructs his theology and unifies Benedict XVI's theological thought in an area that was not uniformly worked through by the pope himself.

Subject, problem and the aim

The research problem stated in the title of the paper can be read as follows: How, according to Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, the credibility of the Catholic Church in the modern world is revealed through the concept of the Church as communion? This main research question is developed by the author of the dissertation in the questions constituting the research problematics: “Does Ratzinger’s / Benedict XVI’s *Communio Ecclesiology* make the Catholic Church more credible in the world today? How does the communion of the Church highlight her profundity in the world today? Can Ratzinger’s /Benedict XVI’s *Communio Ecclesiology* be a source of perfect unity in the Church and the world today?” (p. 5).

Also the objectives of the dissertation have been clearly and correctly expressed in the *Introduction*: “First, to expound the profundity of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI’s Fundamental ecclesiology, showing how his Communion-theme brings out the exceptional credibility of the Church in the world. Secondly, to show the indispensable role of the Church in the world, since according to the teaching of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, it is only through the Church that humanity can come into communion with Trinitarian God, who reveals himself in the person of Jesus Christ. And thirdly, is to indicate how the universal communion of the Church can address the urgent need of true communion and lasting unity of the entire humanity in the world today (p. 5). From the methodological point of view the thesis is very well thought out.

Method and sources

Good preparation of research instruments is a prerequisite for success as well as proper selection of sources. The methods also belong to the *instrumentum laboris*. The author himself defined the methods of his work: “the researcher has employed the descriptive and analytical research design. In so doing the researcher has studied and critically analyzed Ratzinger’s communion-ecclesiology, exploring his writings before, during and after his pontificate. By making reference to his earlier works the researcher has highlighted the continuity of his fundamental ecclesiology. Secondly, the author has critically and descriptively analyzed Ratzinger’s teaching on the world, and how his fundamental ecclesiology can be beacon of hope for the highly secular and divided world” (p. 5). The selection and description of methods is correct and well explained, but in addition to

descriptive and analytical methods, in the dissertation the historical and evaluative methods were also in use, even if the Author does not evoke them.

The sources for the work are of course the writings and speeches of theologian Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict. However, the author admits to treating the Holy Scriptures as a source (although he does not conduct any biblical-exegetical considerations), as well as Church documents.

Structure of the dissertation

The structure of the reviewed dissertation is logically designed and adapted to the requirements of the studied topic. The author has arranged his dissertation into five chapters. Each of them contains successive paragraphs, further divided into points. The dissertation contains 7 pages in Roman numbering and 307 in Arabic numbering. The main body (pp. 20-290) is preceded by a title page (p. i), declaration (p. ii), acknowledgements (p. iii), table of contents (pp. iv-vi), list of abbreviations (p. vii), introduction (pp. 1-19), and bounded by a general conclusion (pp. 281-290) and bibliography (pp. 291-307) concluding the work.

From the formal and substantive point of view, the dissertation is well-written and devoid of significant shortcomings. The author has demonstrated a high degree of independence and autonomy in conducting the research, formulating the narrative and drawing conclusions.

The first chapter: *The Concept of Communio* (pp. 20-58) provides an explanation of the concept of communion as understood by Joseph Ratzinger: “The concept of communion being one of the notions defining the really essence of the Church, Ratzinger labors to explain it from its profane and semantic meaning as “*koinonia*” to the Church self-understanding as the Eucharist and Congregation (community).” The second chapter: *The Communitarian Origin of the Church* (pp. 59-115) aims to present “how Christ established the Church as visible community. In expounding the communitarian origin of the Church, the author explains the historical fact that Jesus Christ when on earth, he himself proclaimed and founded the Church in a direct and deliberate manner as the true fellowship of the world, lasting until the end of time.” In the third chapter: *The Structure and Church Offices* (pp. 116-175) the Author “has expounded the communal structure of the ecclesiastical offices. In so doing the researcher has analytically explained the nature, position and role of different ecclesial offices, bringing out Ratzinger’s prior and ontological primacy of the universal Church.” In the fourth chapter: *The Church and the World* (pp. 176-223), the Author “has

critically analyzed the situation and conditions under which the Church is operating in the contemporary world. He observed how the social-political world and secular systems in the world are affecting the communion between God and man and between man and fellow man.” Finally, the fifth chapter: *Indispensable Role of the Church in the World* (pp. 224-280) offers an explanation of the “indispensable role of the Church in the world, showing how the Church has the capacity to restore everlasting peace, unity and tranquility which God intended for man from the beginning of the world. This can be done starting with Christian solidarity which will eventually lead humanity to the desired communion with God and with each other” (all quotations from page 6). All these chapters are further divided into paragraphs and points.

Formal elements

The skills of the Author in using the scholar tools should also be recognized. The ability of synthetic presentation of a given topic is a strong side of evaluated dissertation. Fr. Kyeyune Vianney avoids writing about everything he knows. Instead of this the reading of his work leaves impression that Author knows well what is he writing about. The analyses conducted in his work give proof of the erudition and scholar maturity of Fr. Vianney. The construction of references is in general correct, however there can be detected some minor errors. The composition of bibliography is in general clear and correct. The reviewer however is not entirely convinced by the division used in the bibliography. From the title of the dissertation it seems that the primary sources of the work should be the writings and other statements of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI and not Church documents, which in this work are an important but supplementary source. In contrast, studies on Ratzinger's theology should not be considered sources, even secondary sources, but simply referred to as "studies" or "literature." The author makes extensive use of netography. There are a few places in footnotes where the access date to the web content is missing, which is important because content hosted on servers is inherently less durable and stable than printed content. Fortunately, there is only one reference to the *Wikipedia*, but even this should be omitted and replaced by more reliable source.

As well in the *Introduction* as in the *General Conclusions* one can find all necessary elements, expected in such kind of theological dissertations. The *Introduction* well informs about the problematics, objectives, methods and the contents of the work. The research problem or main research question had to be reconstructed by the reviewer, as it it's a little

bit hidden, not explicitly exposed. The *General Conclusion* gives correctly formulated conclusions from the analyses carried out in the five chapters of the dissertation. A well-composed synthesis crowns the whole work. The conclusions included after each chapter are very valuable. They organize the flow of the narrative, bringing together the results of the research conducted in the chapter. From the editorial point of view the whole dissertation is well prepared and well set up visually, and nearly free from typewriting errors. One should also appreciate the fluent and fresh English in which the work described is written, although there are some minor grammatical errors that can be eliminated in the pre-publication proofreading, as beyond any doubt this dissertation should be published.

The layout of the content is divided into chapters, paragraphs and points. It happens, however, that a paragraph is divided only into... one point (paragraph 2.6 has only point 2.6.1; paragraph 3.1 is divided only into point 3.1.1, and 3.2 only into point 3.2.1. Similarly, paragraph 3.6 has only point 3.6.1.). When something is divided, the division must result in at least two parts, even if unequal. The reviewer cannot help but notice this error, which seems minor, but nevertheless methodological correctness is important for scientific texts.

The quality of argument and scholarly contribution

The credibility of the Church is one of the central concerns of fundamental theology. An assessment of this credibility determines whether the Church, as she really is, is able to fulfil the mission for which she was established: to communicate salvation effectively to every human being. Is the Church trustworthy enough for people to trust her and entrust their life's journey to her, and finally find in her the way of salvation? The Author of the dissertation under review, Fr. Vianney, had to confront these questions by reconstructing Joseph Ratzinger's view of the credibility of the Catholic Church from many scattered statements. The doctoral candidate took the key of presence in the midst of the world of the Church as communion as the key to reading this area of the rich teaching of the professor, cardinal and finally Pope Benedict.

The author's conception, which starts with establishing the content of the notion of *communio* and then moves on to discuss the communitarian origin and character of the community of the Church, should be considered accurate and fully justified by the classical structure of the concept of the credibility of the Church in fundamental theology. Also in the same classical key is a discussion of the structure of the Church with its ministries, the

hierarchy in the Church and the Petrine office, and the place of the laity and communities of the faithful in the Church. The discussion of the hierarchical system of the Church, however, takes up far more space in chapter three. Could it be that Joseph Ratzinger shows such a clear inclination towards preconciliar theology and does not appreciate the achievements of Vatican II? In his fascinating book *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, Rod Dreher points out that Pope Benedict saw in the development of communities of the faithful, these *Ecclesiola in Ecclesia*, a chance for Christianity to survive.

Undoubtedly, the concept adopted by the Author to first define in chapter four the relation of the Church to the modern world is correct. He does this by starting with a discussion of the – somewhat idealistic today – concept contained in the conciliar constitution *Gaudium et spes*, before going on to discuss in more detail the threats to communion in the world posed by dictatorship and relativism, Marxist socialism, communism, individualism, divorce and contraception. But what were the criteria for selecting this group of threats? After all, Pope Benedict spoke quite a bit about other important problems, such as increasing secularization, changes in the perception of human sexuality, or the threat to nature caused by ecological sin.

The author points out the indispensability of the Church in the world in the fifth and final chapter of his dissertation. Here we find a discussion of the unifying role of the Church in the world, the issue of the Church's mission to the world and ecumenism as a source of unity in the world. It is, however, a methodological error in this chapter to include a discussion of religious dialogue in paragraph 5.3, which deals with ecumenism. The view expressed by the Author on p. 261 is methodologically incorrect: “The word ecumenism can be used in a more general sense to mean efforts toward unity among religions or within the world.”. Interreligious dialogue does not fit into ecumenism; they are disconnected realities, especially if we consider the purpose of one and the other phenomenon. As far as I know the work of Cardinal Ratzinger/Pope Benedict, he did not mix one with the other.

This good and bibliographically rich work neatly discusses the views of Ratzinger / Benedict XVI. However, there is no assessment of Ratzinger's views on the part of the candidate for the doctorate. It is not easy to evaluate the theology of such a great figure, and one can guess the shyness in this regard on the part of Fr. Vainney. Nevertheless, the role of the researcher is to subject the discussed item to a critical assessment.

Any comments or criticisms made in this review do not diminish the value of the work presented. Since only God can perform perfect acts, human work is always imperfect.

Questions for discussion

A good evaluation of a methodologically correct work and the absence of fatal errors does not mean the absence of questions. Many of them arose during the reading of the work, I will mention three that the doctoral student will be able to answer during the defence of the dissertation.

1./ According to Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, what is the purpose of ecumenical dialogue and what is the purpose of interreligious dialogue? What are the points of contact between the two realities, and what are the clear differences?

2./ How and to what extent have the sexual abuse scandals, which Ratzinger as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and later as Pope issued a decisive fight against, in his opinion affected the credibility of the Catholic Church in the world? In his opinion, what measures are necessary to regain this damaged credibility?

3./ Does the Author of the dissertation have any criticisms of Ratzinger's concept of the credibility of the Catholic Church, which he has reconstructed from his writings?

Conclusion

Taking into account the above arguments, I conclude that the doctoral dissertation of Rev. Kyeyune Vianney meets the requirements for a doctoral dissertation under Polish law and therefore can be the basis for conferring on him the academic degree of Doctor of Theology. Therefore, I recommend to the Council of the Faculty of Theology of Cardinal Wyszynski University in Warsaw to continue the next stages of the doctoral proceedings.



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