

Benedict's Thinking – II

July 16, 2011

If one divides into four parts Bishop Tissier's study of the thinking of Benedict XVI, then the second part presents its philosophical and theological roots. By analyzing the philosophy first, the Bishop is following Pius X's great Encyclical "Pascendi." If a wine bottle is dirty inside, the very best of wine poured into it will be spoiled. If a man's mind is disconnected from reality, as it is by modern philosophy, then even the Catholic Faith filtered through it will be disoriented, because it will no longer be oriented by reality. Here is Benedict's problem.

Like Pius X before him, the Bishop attributes the prime responsibility for this disaster of modern minds to the German Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel KANT (1724–1804), who finalized the system of anti-thought, prevailing now everywhere, which excludes God from rational discourse. For if, as Kant claimed, the mind can know nothing of the object except what appears to the senses, then the mind is free to reconstruct the reality behind the sense appearances however it may like, objective reality is dismissed as unknowable, and the subject reigns supreme. If the subject needs God and postulates his existence, well and good. Otherwise, so to speak, God is out of luck!

Bishop Tissier then presents five modern philosophers, all grappling with the consequences of Kant's subjective folly of putting idea over reality and subject over object. The two most important of them for this Pope's thinking might be Heidegger (1889–1976), a father of existentialism, and Buber (1878–1965), a leading exponent of personalism. If essences are unknowable (Kant), then there remains only existence. Now the most important existent is the person, constituted for Buber by intersubjectivity, or the "I-You" relationship between subjective persons, which for Buber opens the way to

God. Therefore knowledge of the objective God is going to depend on the subjective involvement of the human person. What an insecure foundation for that knowledge!

Yet involvement of the human subject will be the key to Benedict's theological thinking, influenced firstly, writes the Bishop, by the renowned School of Tuebingen. Founded by J.S. von Drey (1777–1853), this School held that history is moved by the spirit of the age in constant movement, and this spirit is the Spirit of Christ. Therefore God's Revelation is no longer the Deposit of Faith closed at the death of the last Apostle, and merely made more explicit as time goes on. Instead, it has a constantly evolving content to which the receiving subject contributes. So the Church of each age plays an active and not just passive part in Revelation, and it gives to past Tradition its present meaning. Is this beginning to sound familiar? Like the hermeneutic of Dilthey? See EC 208.

Thus for Benedict XVI God is not an object apart nor merely objective, he is personal, an "I" exchanging with each human "You." Scripture or Tradition do come objectively from the divine "I," but on the other hand the living and moving "You" must constantly re-read that Scripture, and since Scripture is the basis of Tradition, then Tradition too must become dynamic by the subject's involvement, and not just static, like Archbishop Lefebvre's "fixated" Tradition. Similarly theology must be subjectivized, Faith must be a personal "experiencing" of God, and even the Magisterium must stop being merely static.

"Accursed is the man that puts his trust in man" says Jeremiah (XVII, 5).

Kyrie eleison.