

THE IDEA OF A PRIEST IN THE LIGHT OF JOSEPH RATZINGER'S INTERPRETATION OF JOHN 7:37-39¹

Michaela C. Hastetter*

Abstract: The title makes allusion to John Henry Newman's *Idea of a University*. In this book Newman had in mind a perfect concept of academic formation. Taking its cue from Newman's talks to the Catholics in Dublin, the question of priestly formation will be focused on, as well as the theological foundations of priestly openness. We will begin with Pope Benedict XVI's letter to Ireland (2010), where he expressed the needs of the time, both with respect to the contemporary challenges of secularism and also regarding a deficit in making greater reference to the Gospel in priests' ways of thinking. A new approach to the understanding of J. Ratzinger's theology of priesthood, in its openness, will be undertaken in the light of the biblical-patristic interpretation of John 7:37-39, as a hitherto unnoticed key to his vision of a priest. In this regard, the Alexandrian reading and the Antiochian understanding of Jesus' prophecy during the Feast of Tabernacles, which Ratzinger already touched on in his trilogy *Jesus of Nazareth*, will be unfolded after a short exegetical note regarding these verses from exemplary representatives of the two schools. The result will be connected with Ratzinger's theology of openness concerning the priestly ministry, in which he developed a Christocentric and a "Pneumatocentric" line. From there, an actualization will be offered by returning to the papal letter to Ireland with some proposals for a future pastoral of priesthood in its phase of formation, keeping in mind the reference to Christ and the Spirit, which will have been treated, as well as Ratzinger's own thoughts towards priestly formation.

Keywords: Priesthood. Priest-formation. Patristic exegesis. Heart of Jesus-spirituality. Pneumatology. John Henry Newman.

1. Introduction to the Topic

In 1852 John Henry Newman held his nine, now famous, lectures on *The Idea of a University* (Gerl-Falkowitz, 2004, XV & for the following pp. XVII-XIX). The background for this vision was the founding of a Catholic University in Dublin by the Irish bishops, whose founding rector was to be Newman himself. This would work towards the strengthening of the Catholic faith in Ireland. Newman's lectures were therefore intended to overcome resistance to such an initiative. His 'Idea of a University' is based on the foundation of an integrated concept of education, which brings together intellectual and moral

* Doctorate (Munich, Germany) and Habilitation (Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany) in catholic theology. Post-Doctorate in orthodox theology (Thessaloniki, Greece). Professor for pastoral theology and religious education at the Catholic University ITI, Austria. E-mail: m.c.hastetter@iti.ac.at

¹ Lecture given at the Sixth Ratzinger Symposium at St Saviour's Dominican Priory in Dublin on 13-14 April 2023.

formation, along with judgment in matters of faith, creating a synthesis. The programmatic title of Newman's Dublin lectures stands as a patron for the topic at hand: "The Idea of a Priest in Light of Joseph Ratzinger's Interpretation of John 7:37-39".

In 2010, then as Pope Benedict XVI, Ratzinger wrote an impassioned letter to Irish Catholics regarding the accumulation of clerical abuse cases² (Benedict XVI, 2010, No. 4). In addition to a detailed diagnosis of the times, ranging from the secularizing tendencies in a catholically-formed society to the flattening-out of the spiritual life, Pope Benedict points to ways out of the crisis. Among the triggering factors for the crisis in the figure of a priest, Pope Benedict also mentions an "insufficient human, moral, intellectual and spiritual formation in seminaries and novitiates" (No. 4). Thus, in Pope Benedict's idea for the renewal of the priesthood there appears to be a similar integral education concept as that found in Newman's *Idea of a University*. In his practical suggestion for overcoming abuse, and the consequent crisis, Pope Benedict XVI recommends an intense study of source texts, thereby (and here he is speaking directly to the priests) gaining "a deeper understanding for your respective calling, in order to discover the roots of your faith in Jesus Christ, and to drink from the font of living water, which he offers you in his Church" (No. 14). Behind this small impulse, there stands a bond with the Bible that had not yet been noticed. Benedict XVI appeals, with the reference to drinking from the font of living water, to the word of Jesus in St. John's Gospel at the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:37-39), from which a deepening of his idea of the priesthood will be offered, filling a lacuna in the academic literature. In fact, this relation regarding John 7:37-30 is missing from Ratzinger's larger treatment of the priesthood (Ratzinger J., 1990a; 1990b; and others in: *JRGS* 12). The

² In Benedict's words: "In recent decades, however, the Church in your country has had to confront new and serious challenges to the faith arising from the rapid transformation and secularization of Irish society. Fast-paced social change has occurred, often adversely affecting people's traditional adherence to Catholic teaching and values. All too often, the sacramental and devotional practices that sustain faith and enable it to grow, such as frequent confession, daily prayer and annual retreats, were neglected. Significant too was the tendency during this period, also on the part of priests and religious, to adopt ways of thinking and assessing secular realities without sufficient reference to the Gospel. The program of renewal proposed by the Second Vatican Council was sometimes misinterpreted and indeed, in the light of the profound social changes that were taking place, it was far from easy to know how best to implement it. In particular, there was a well-intentioned but misguided tendency to avoid penal approaches to canonically irregular situations. It is in this overall context that we must try to understand the disturbing problem of child sexual abuse, which has contributed in no small measure to the weakening of faith and the loss of respect for the Church and her teachings."

fact that this biblical relation influences the thinking of Ratzinger about the priesthood (in addition to his pastoral letter to the Catholics in Ireland) also proceeds from his short preliminary comment made in meditations on spiritual exercise in the Vatican *Journey towards Easter*. He says, almost in passing, in his “Meditation on the Priesthood” appealing to the font of living water:

In the last twenty years there has been a good deal of thinking on the priesthood; but there has also been much adverse debate. [...] The overcoming of prejudice [...] makes possible a deeper understanding of the biblical data in their intrinsic unity of Old and New Testaments, Bible and Church, so that we are no longer constrained to draw water from cisterns, only for it to leak rapidly through cracks of hypothesis and suddenly collect again in little scattered patches, but can now find access to the *living fountain* of the Church’s faith throughout the ages. (Ratzinger, 1987, p. 143)

In what follows, we will attempt to follow this clue from John 7:37-39 in his thoughts on priesthood, and from that standpoint turn to its practical implications for priestly formation.

2. A Brief Look into the Exegetical Findings Regarding John 7:37-39

The biblical word that Ratzinger desires to lead the priests towards in his Pastoral Letter to the Catholics in Ireland is taken from the sayings of Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem as found in the seventh chapter of St. John’s Gospel. Schnackenburg (1971, pp. 190-224) supposes that Jesus found himself, at that moment, in front of the altar of the Temple at the time of the ablutions, and with the “voice of the Prophet” (p. 211) called out this promise loud and clear. In the words of St. John himself:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. (John 7:37-39)

One of the main problems with the translation of this verse is present in the exegetical debate, that of the interpunctuation, which Ratzinger himself

would later take up.³ Nestle recommends, as in the here presented version of the text, to place a period after “let him drink” (*pinéto*) and to place a comma after “in me” (*eís emé*). Thus the meaning would be the following: “The streams of living waters flow out of the body of the believer, this is what the ‘Scriptures’ are referring to” (Barret, 1990, p. 333). The version stemming from Bultmann, however, places a comma after “to me” (*prós me*) and a period after “in me” (*eís emé*). From that would follow the following sharpening of the meaning through *parallelismus membrorum*: “If one is thirsty, let him come to me / if one believes, let him drink” (p. 333). The reference to the Scripture would be, in this case then, either to Christ or to the believer. The problem for the exegetes, and the reason that the matter is cannot definitively be decided, lies in the fact that both variants would make sense (pp. 333f.). This unclarity in the transmission of the text has led, finally, to two main currents of interpretation for this passage, which Joseph Ratzinger has taken up in the first volume of his ‘Jesus of Nazareth Trilogy’ regarding the imagery of water.

3. The Interpretation of John 7:37-39 in the Jesus of Nazareth Trilogy

Under the symbol of water, as one of the greatest Johannine motifs, Ratzinger (2007/2014c) also took up the call of revelation of Jesus at the feast of Tabernacles, that was bound up with a priestly ritual, a sort of procession in which the priests would carry the jars of water around the altar, which they had previously filled from the Pool of Shiloach (Siloam) “in order to present a water offering for the seven days of the feast in the Temple” (p. 328). He is also aware of the unclarity in the grammatical relation of the passage in question, that particularly raise the burning question out of whose body does the water now flow, from Jesus or from the believer? (cf. John 7:38). In regard to the two interpretive traditions that have developed (Rahner, 1964, pp. 177-235), Ratzinger (2007/2014c) writes the following:

The Alexandrine Tradition, founded by Origen († 254), and to which the great Latin Fathers, Jerome and Augustine also belong, reads: “Whosoever believes [...] from his

³ Cf. the summary of Barret, 1990, p. 333 and also Schnackenburg, 1971, pp. 211-214 with the different textual readings and including the patristic exegesis.

body there will [...]”. The one who believes, himself becomes a font, an oasis, from which the fresh un-poisoned waters, the life-giving power of the Creator-Spirit springs. Next to this, however, and clearly less commonly held, is the tradition from Asia Minor, which from its origins stands closer to St. John, and is attested to by Justin († 165), Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Cyprian, and Ephrem. (p. 329)

This tradition places the punctuation differently:

Whoever has thirst, let him come to me, and let him drink, whoever believes in me. As the Scriptures say: from his body will flow streams; “his body” would in this case refer to Christ, as source, as living rock, from which new water flows. (Ratzinger, 2000/2019b, p. 329)

Ratzinger has somewhat more sympathy for the Christo-centric tradition stemming from Asia Minor. He reads that the ‘water’ from John 7:37-39, with reference to the Johannine Passion account (cf. John 19:34), as being related to Ezekiel’s Temple vision with the living font (cf. Ez. 47:1-12) and sees in the resurrected Christ the new Temple:

Indeed there is this new Temple. He is the promised stream of living water, who detoxifies the salted earth, and allows the riches of life to ripen and to bear fruit. He is the one who in “love even unto death” has gone through the cross and now lives a life that death can no longer threaten. He is the living Christ. Thus, the word spoken at the Feast of Tabernacles does not point to the New Jerusalem, in which God himself lives and is the font of life, it points rather directly to the body of the crucified, from which blood and water flows (John 19:34). (Ratzinger, 2000/2019b, pp. 330-331)⁴

Nonetheless, Ratzinger does not dismiss the Alexandrine interpretation, where the one receiving drink, himself becomes the bearer of living spiritual water. In reference to Schnackenburg, he underlines specifically that both interpretations of John 7:38 cannot be made into mutually opposing contraries (p. 330). Without here going deeper into the question of the punctuation and the history of these traditions, we would now like to turn directly to the practical conclusions of both interpretive variants, which, next to the thus far treated development of the verses in his *Jesus of Nazareth*, are primarily found in Ratzinger’s preaching, stimulated by the hidden reference in his letter to the Catholics in Ireland. We shall now look at how all of this relates to the priesthood.

⁴ Further Old Testament parallel passages for the font of living waters are for Ratzinger Num 20:1-3; Zech. 13:1, and from the New Testament Rev. 22:1.

4. Conclusions Regarding the Idea of a Priest according to Ratzinger in reference to John 7:37-39

Only a few homilies does Ratzinger make reference to John 7:37-39. This occurs explicitly in a Pentecost homily and a Votive mass to the Holy Spirit (Ratzinger, 1996/2019a, 2000/2019b). It appears, that in practical application that the Alexandrine interpretation comes into effect. Yet there are also to be found practical applications taken from the Antiochene interpretation. Here we would like to systematize both somewhat, while also including the practical developments from his work *Jesus of Nazareth*.

4.1. *Christ-centering of the Priest in Gazing at the Pierced One — the Antiochene Line*

The Antiochene tradition, that interprets John 7:37-39 as referring to the pierced heart of Jesus, is what Ratzinger (2000/2019b), in the so-called Votive Mass to the Holy Spirit, takes up first the Alexandrine interpretation. On the basis of the literal sense in the context of the Feast:

John here (in John 7:37-39) first plays upon the last scene of the Passion of Jesus: the crucified has his heart pierced, and blood and water flowed therefrom. Out from the open heart of Jesus come forth the sacraments of the Church – Baptism and the Eucharist. In the Passion he (Christ) has become the font, whose waters and renew the world, which heals and changes us men. (p. 1755)

Here Ratzinger indicates the meaning of priestly existence and the implementation of sacraments entirely in keeping with the Antiochene interpretation of the pierced heart of Jesus. Precisely as dispensers of the Sacraments, priests take their entire reference point from the open heart of the one who was pierced (Jesus). They are likewise co-workers with the one pierced, who out of *his* heart and not out of their own, dispense the Sacraments. The relevance of such priestly actions can be seen in Ratzinger's Antiochene line of interpretation:

Whoever looks on history with open eyes, can see this stream, which flows out from Golgotha, from the crucified and risen Jesus, through all of time. He can see, how there, wherever this stream flows, the earth is healed, how fruit-bearing trees grow, how life, real life, flows from this font of love that has given and continues to give. (p. 1755)

Priestly action is here qualified as purifying action. A priest's abusive actions pervert this order, which should move towards healing the world, and instead poison it. Joseph Ratzinger has in his work *Gazing at the Pierced One* drawn the line from John 7:37-39, in connection with John 19:34, to the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus:

Both verses have to do with opened side of Jesus, from which both blood and water flow. Both texts are an expression of the Pascal mystery. From the pierced heart of the Lord the life-font of the sacraments springs forth: the seed of wheat has become the ripe grain – it carries through time the fruits of the living Church. (Ratzinger, 1984/2014a, p. 673; cf. also pp. 686-689)

According to Ratzinger, the uniqueness of the heart of Jesus is, finally, that which stands open and does not close itself off: “It saves the world in that it opens itself. The conquest of the opened heart is the content of the Easter mystery” (p. 690). From this point, another dimension of priestly reality comes into view: the priest as a man of openness, as an opened and opening reality, received from the opened heart of the crucified (Hastetter, 2023). Ratzinger develops this thought in his work *Introduction to Christianity* (1968) with reference to John 19:34 and Gen 2:21. This idea permits Ratzinger to make an application in reference to the intended idea of the priest:

to be a man for others, one who is open, and therewith one who opens up a new beginning, that means, the man in offering, to be the sacrificed man. The future of man hangs on the cross, the redemption of man is the cross. And in no other way can he arrive at himself, except in that he allows the walls of his reality to be broken, who looks on the pierced one (John 19:37), who follows him, the one who as the one pierced and opened, opens the way into the future. (pp. 223-224)

Clearly, a priest can only be such a man of openness when he gazes on the pierced one, and then, in imitation of Christ, follows after Christ. The priest is one who allows himself to be open, to become like one opened through the power of the opened heart of Jesus. He then can open his heart to the whole world. Therewith a purely secular openness to the world will be defeated – a danger that exists even among the faithful, as Benedict XVI warned in his letter to the Irish Catholics.⁵

⁵ “A young person’s experience of the Church should always bear fruit in a personal and life-giving encounter with Jesus Christ within a loving, nourishing community. In this environment, young people should be encouraged to grow to their full human and spiritual stature, to aspire to high ideals of holiness, charity and truth, and to draw

4.2. *The Priest as Carrier of Spiritual Water – the Alexandrine Line*

The second line of interpretation from the passage in question (John 7:37-39) is that of the Alexandrine school. Together with the Antiochene interpretation, this also resonates in the continuation of Pope Benedict's homily at the Votive Mass for the Holy Spirit, when, in direct connection with the order of priests, he said: "this Christological mystery has now been applied to all of the baptized" (Ratzinger, 2000/2019b, p. 1755). Thus, all believers, in connection with the Alexandrine tradition, are brought into the task of passing on to others the living spiritual water. In the thinking of Ratzinger, the Alexandrine interpretation, originating with Origen of Alexandria, is not exclusively limited to the priests. However, this line of interpretation still lies close to the priestly reality, similar to how, in its sacramental dimension, Ratzinger applied the Antiochene line of thought to all believers. In our source text from *Jesus of Nazareth* Ratzinger/Benedict XVI had already hinted at such a practical development. Let us recall once again what he said: "Whoever believes [...] from his body there will [flow streams of living waters]. The person, who believes [in Jesus], will himself become a font, an oasis, from which fresh, un-poisoned water, the life-giving power of the Creator-Spirit springs forth" (Ratzinger, 2007/2014c, p. 329). The precondition for this pneumatological interpretation is for the believer, and thus even more so for the priest, to have faith. In other words, he must have a deep relationship with Jesus. Here the Alexandrine and Antiochene lines of interpretation somewhat intertwine. In his work *On the Essence of Priesthood* Ratzinger had placed a particular value on this aspect:

that which is essential and foundational for the priestly service is properly a deep, personal connection with Christ. Everything depends on this, and the core of all preparation for the priesthood must lead toward this goal. A priest must be a man who knows Jesus from within, who has encountered him, and who has learned to love him. Therefore, a priest must, most importantly, be a man of prayer, a truly "spiritual" man. Without this strong spiritual sustenance, he will not last very long in his service. (Ratzinger, 1990/2010f, p. 48)

inspiration from the riches of a great religious and cultural tradition. In our increasingly secularized society, where even we Christians often find it difficult to speak of the transcendent dimension of our existence, we need to find new ways to pass on to young people the beauty and richness of friendship with Jesus Christ in the communion of his Church. In confronting the present crisis, measures to deal justly with individual crimes are essential, yet on their own they are not enough: a new vision is needed, to inspire present and future generations to treasure the gift of our common faith. By treading the path marked out by the Gospel, by observing the commandments and by conforming your lives ever more closely to the figure of Jesus Christ, you will surely experience the profound renewal that is so urgently needed at this time. I invite you all to persevere along this path." (No. 12).

Behind this saying of Ratzinger stands the famous formulation ‘the spiritual religious (German: geistlich Geistliche)’ stemming from Johann Michael Sailer, Bishop of Regensburg, and one of the foundational figures in the area of Pastoral Theology, whose phrase Ratzinger took as his leitmotif for the priests in the Chrism Mass of 1979. On that occasion he says:

Whoever takes the “I” of Jesus Christ into his mouth, that one must first of all believe. The priest, in the first place, must be a believing man. This is the center of all his action, and when this is not the case, then no true work can be done. (Ratzinger, 1979/2010d, p. 541)⁶

As a believer, the priest stands under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, which “is given to him, and flows out from him”; thus he should be “most of all ‘a *spiritual* man’, a spiritual religious (geistlich Geistliche[r])” (p. 545). In this regard, Sailer had already appealed to the Alexandrine interpretive tradition of John 7:37-39:

A religious, without a new heart, without a new sense for things, is an open well without water. From this font the whole community ought to drink, but the font is empty, without water. He who believes in me, from his body there will flow streams of living water. Woe to the land, where the streams of living waters should be, but have dried up or become poisonous swamps. (Sailer, 1981, p. 77, Nr. 105, with sources in p. 171)

This is a further piece of evidence that Ratzinger is thinking along the same line as Sailer regarding the spiritual dimension of the religious in reference to John 7:37-39. The spiritual essence of the priest depends on his faith in Christ. Only through faith in Christ, can the priest also be (as every believer) “one with Christ and take part in his fruitfulness”. As one consequence of Ratzinger’s development of the Alexandrine interpretation of John 7:37-39 in his *Jesus of Nazareth*, he then continues further:

the believer and one who loves with Christ, will become a font that gives life. This one can see in history in a wonderful way: how the saints are oases, around whom life springs forth, around whom a small bit of the lost paradise returns. Finally, it remains that Christ himself is the font, who shares prolifically of himself. (Ratzinger, 2007/2014b, p. 331)

⁶ “The Spiritual-Religious and those who, through and through from the spirit of truth, the life of the spirit, that they have within, and reveal from themselves, and in others beget and educate who possess sufficient wisdom, love and manliness”, cited after Sailer (1981, p. 73, No. 96, source see p. 171).

In his Pastoral Letter (2010), Benedict XVI had commended the Church in Ireland to precisely this sort of holy priestly essence, in reference to the holy pastor of Ars (St. Jean-Marie Vianney).⁷ For indeed he was likewise a prototype of the man filled with the Holy Spirit, to whom applies what Ratzinger also drew out in his Pentecost homily on John 7:37-39 (1996/2019a) in the interpretive line of Alexandria, bringing it into the present: “The man who is filled with the Holy Spirit is then likewise himself a font, an oasis, from which living water flows forth, so that life grows up around it” (p. 620). Ratzinger also spoke about the contrary of this image: men – and this might include priests – “who are a swamp, from whom issue the foul odors of the swamp; men, in whom there is no true life“ (p. 620) – or in the words of the Pastoral Letter (2010) – “Priests, who have injured the holiness of the sacrament of priestly consecration, in which Christ himself in us and in our actions becomes present” (No. 7). With this he ends his Pentecost homily with a prayer request for receiving the Holy Spirit and a self-critical examination of conscience:

We desire to ask the Lord, that he give us the living, fresh, flowing water of the Holy Spirit, in the deserts of this time, in all its threats and dangers. We desire from him, that we not carry deathly swamp water within us, with our bad habits and our sins. We desire to ask him, that we would become men of living water, that we would be filled with his spirit and likewise become a font of goodness in this world. (Ratzinger, 1996/2019a, p. 620)

Ratzinger does not, however, remain with a purely moral impetus in his pneumatologically accentuated Alexandrine contemporizing of John 7:37-39. For him, the original inspiration of the words of Jesus also has something to “say to theology and the theologians. This also pertains to the priestly essence. In his homily for the Votive Mass, after an interpretation regarding the saints towards the end, one finds the short

⁷ “In this Year for Priests, I commend to you most particularly the figure of Saint John Mary Vianney, who had such a rich understanding of the mystery of the priesthood. ‘The priest’, he wrote, ‘holds the key to the treasures of heaven: it is he who opens the door: he is the steward of the good Lord; the administrator of his goods.’ The Curé d’Ars understood well how greatly blessed a community is when served by a good and holy priest: ‘A good shepherd, a pastor after God’s heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy.’ Through the intercession of Saint John Mary Vianney, may the priesthood in Ireland be revitalized, and may the whole Church in Ireland grow in appreciation for the great gift of the priestly ministry“ (Benedict XVI, 2010, No. 14).

comment, which makes the prophetic call of Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles fruitful for theology proper.⁸

In order that theology be good, we must ourselves, in the first place, drink with great thirst from the font, from Christ, from his word and from his sacraments. We must drink in order that the Holy Spirit fills us and in order that all our theological knowing also itself becomes a stream of living water, from which the thirsty drink the faith, which the Holy Spirit can create. (Ratzinger, 2000/2019b, p. 1755)

With this courageous formulation, to drink faith from the faithful, Ratzinger desires to encourage the theologians to become thirsty for the Spirit, in order that they themselves might become a font for others, not as those offering swamp water, but rather the always fresh and living waters of the Holy Spirit. Yet how does the priest-theologian become a bearer of this living water? Ratzinger's idea of the priest calls for the fulfillment of his essence entirely in line with John Henry Newman a "sufficiently human, moral, intellectual and spiritual formation in seminaries and novitiates", just as Benedict XVI wrote in his Pastoral letter (2010). Thus remains the final question: how did Joseph Ratzinger envision this priestly formation? Is this in connection with the ideas inspired from John 7:37-39; do both lines of interpretation allow themselves to be concretized in the practical application?

5. Practical Consequences for Priestly Formation

There are a series of texts in the Collected Works of Joseph Ratzinger (*JRGS*) vol. 12, that deal with the question of priestly formation.⁹ Not all of them are directly connected to the water ritual of John 7:37-39. Nevertheless,

⁸ "Die großen Gestalten der Heiligen aller Jahrhunderte zeigen es uns, wie von ihnen Ströme lebendigen Wassers ausgehen, die die Erde befruchten: Denken wir an Augustinus, an Bonaventura, an Thomas von Aquin oder auch an die Kirchenlehrer der Neuzeit, von Teresa von Avila bis herauf zur Theresia von Lisieux und schließlich an Edith Stein, die hier in Breslau geboren ist und durch die Tiefe ihres Glaubens und Opfers eine Quelle lebendigen Wassers für unsere Zeit wurde" (translation: The great figures of the saints of all the centuries demonstrate to us, how from them the streams of living water issue forth, which make the earth fruitful: let us think about Augustine, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Theresa of Avila up to Therese of Lisieux, and finally Edith Stein, who was born here in Breslau, and through the depth of her faith and her sacrifice becomes a font of living water for our times). (Ratzinger, 2000, p. 1755)

⁹ Cf. here and in what follows Ratzinger 1983/2010a, pp. 422-431; 1990/2010b, pp. 433-450; 1993/2010c, pp. 451-457; 1979/2010e, pp. 458-460.

some of the passages, which aim at the practical side of priestly formation, can to be connected to it.

5.1. *Seminary as Place for Purification through the Word– the Antiochen Line*

1 Peter 2:5 addresses those to be built up into a spiritual dwelling (along with parallel texts from the Old Testament). The former Archbishop of Munich-Freising offers an interpretation of this verse for the occasion of the dedication of the Munich Seminary in the year 1983, though first other biblical reference points are presented. Nevertheless, Ratzinger comes back to the theme of purification with water, to the related motif from John 7:37-39. In his introduction to the major Johannine imagery of water, Ratzinger, at the beginning, presents the symbolism of the font with its “water springing forth from the earth [...] in its yet un-murky and unspoiled purity” (Ratzinger, 2000, p. 324). In the Antiochene interpretation of John 7:37-39, this led from the opened heart of the crucified to the sacrament of baptism. With the image of the font, from which pure water flows, the purifying movement of water is implied, whereby one is led to connect this thought with the purification as related to priestly formation. Ratzinger sees the process of purification as directly connected with the “coming into being of the Church”:

No family can come into being without it, nor any seminary; on the contrary – precisely the years here are of such a purification and ripening, that make one capable for all, capable of bearing fruit. [...] without the “pathos” of purification, seminary would be a barren time, turning into a mere physical presence of student rooms, whose inhabitants remain static in themselves and remain alone. But I desire to add this point: only the pain of purification can heal. The humor and joy of such a house depends upon this. (p. 427¹⁰)

The priestly seminary becomes such a purified place by leaning on the temple as house of God (there is a possible direct point of contact with the setting in life – *Sitz im Leben* - from John 7:37-39 via Ez. 47:1-12) – for Ratzinger then from the “place of the encounter of God with his people“, to the place, “from which the word of God proceeds”, which at the same time is “the place of God’s glory”, which “in the inviolable purity of his word

¹⁰ Here he develops purification as related to 1 Peter 2:5 with another image, proper stone-cutting that will be placed in the building.

[appears]” (p. 427). All of these are components of a priestly seminary for Ratzinger: a place of encounter for men with each other and with God, a place of holy devotion and liturgical services, but primarily a place where the word of God will be studied, with exegetical expertise, in silent meditation, in mutual sharing of reflections about the word of God (p. 428). This path with the wholly pure word can, and here Ratzinger is realistic enough, lead to boredom and weariness among the candidates for priesthood, which ‘illnesses’ then are medicated with media dissipation. This danger, that Ratzinger already spoke to in 1983, has been multiplied in our day - with the omnipresence of online-media. Not in vain did Pope Francis (2023) recently warn young priests, at a priest conference in Rome on 26.10.2022, about the pornographic content on their computers and mobile devices, and he sternly admonished them to delete such data: “The pure heart, that receives Jesus each day, cannot also receive in it such pornographic content”. Ratzinger, in his homily (1983), moved in the same direction, which in the retrospect of thirty years, appears to be all the more prophetic in its outlook:

The boredom and weariness of the world and of life, that appear to be almost the signature of modern existence, in its refinement of the drive for pleasure – this, according to my conviction, lies in the end on the lack of splendor. The capers of the entertainment industry between extravagance and self-degradation can basically be explained in that despairing man searches, in some unimagined excitement, for something that can replace his loss. (p. 429)

Thus, his warnings from that time lead directly to the Pastoral Letter to the Catholics in Ireland, in which he, as Pope, recommended to the priests and religious: “Most of all, however, I ask you, to become ever more men and women of prayer, who follow the path of conversion, purification and reconciliation” (Ratzinger, 2010, No. 10). Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI thought of the exercise in the process of purification, and the directly related virtue of purity, was the basis for of priestly formation, in order to prevent contamination of the environment of the Church. To that end the priestly seminary must clearly be a place of community and relationship, with God, with one another, and in particular with God’s word in its “inviolable purity” (Ratzinger, 1983/2010a, p. 427).

This, however, is not all. For the occasion of the 400-year anniversary of the Würzburg priestly seminary, Joseph Ratzinger held a lecture (1990b/2010b), in which this thought was further developed. The Old Testament Temple and its New Testament fulfillment in the body of Christ is

firstly the location for the word of God. Priesthood that stands in service to the word of God incarnate, must therefore make present the word of God in its unadulterated purity and in its perpetual actuality. For the priest of the New Covenant it is essential that he not present some sort of private philosophy of life, that he conjured up for himself or read about. (p. 441)

The priest receives the word, and must unify himself to it. For this it is required that (for Ratzinger)

this proclamation be more than the reception of a telegram message, that passes along faithfully the word of another, without going into it oneself. I must all the more make this word of another in the first person, and very personally pass on what you dedicate to me, that it becomes my own word. For this message demands not a telegram, but rather a witness. [...] In this process of getting to know, of understanding, and entering into, of putting oneself into the word, in this arises the very being of every priestly formation. (p. 441)

Ratzinger hovers on this point with a synthesis of scientific-exegetical precision, including language and methodological competence (cf. also p. 445), paired with the “education for truth and truthfulness” (p. 443), that must mark out the witnesses to the word. Ratzinger’s foundational conviction states to this point: “a piety that desires to skip over this, will become fanaticism. Building up without truth is a form of spiritual self-satisfaction, which we may not permit for ourselves” (p. 443; cf. also p. 443f.).

5.2. Priestly Seminary as Place for Exercise in the Spiritual Community Capability – The Alexandrine Line

The Alexandrine interpretation of John 7:37-39 lived out a distinctive pneumatology, as we have seen: the one having drunk from the Spirit-water becomes a dispenser of the Spirit-water, which then led to a pastoral-theological dictum through Johann Michael Sailer, namely the “the spiritual religious” (*geistlich Geistlicher*). In the already mentioned lecture at the priestly seminary of Würzburg, Ratzinger (1990/2010b) emphatically goes into this spiritual dimension of such a house.

The word “spiritual” is derived from the Holy Spirit, thus from the creative power, without which nothing would truly exist. [...] The belonging together, which comes to us from the Holy Spirit, reaches deeper, is stronger and more

alive than mere blood-relations. Men, who through the common stirring of the Holy Spirit are lead together, stand closer to one another than any other relatedness could bring about. [...] a “Spiritual House” we will be, [...] a familial community with Christ. This provides that inner consonance, that new stamp, and that new background of life that is stronger than every naturally occurring difference and allows the true inner relatedness to grow. (p. 434)

The priestly seminary is, for Ratzinger, in this regard, thus so meaningful for the formation of the spiritual community, since the candidate for priesthood must also, directly after his consecration, in multiple aspects, be capable of community. This relates to that certain “Being-together in the family of the Presbyters, and local and whole Church” (p. 436). Indeed, for Ratzinger, the sense of community that will be required of the one who will later be a priest stretches far beyond this. Then, Ratzinger sets up a catalogue of virtues for the parish priest who has been watered with the Spirit-water, which we would now like to lay out. For Ratzinger, the priestly task exists beyond this in that

men, who according to their origins, education, temperament, and life-situations are foreign to one another, and here, in the community of faith, are led together and are held together. He must lead men to the capacity for reconciliation, for forgiveness, forgetting, bearing with others, and in magnanimity. He must help them to bear the other in his otherness, to have patience with one another, to bring trust and wisdom, discretion and openness in their proper measure and much more as well. [...] How could he do this, if he himself had not learned it first? The ability to take on suffering and to carry on is a foundational requirement for the success of being human; where this is not at all learned, failure of existence is unavoidable. Indignation against everyone and everything infests the ground of the soul and turns it into a deadland. (p. 436)

As mentioned before, in the Alexandrine line of interpretation of John 7:37-39, Ratzinger sees, next to the passing along of the fresh and fruitful Spirit-water that establishes the Christ-community, an anti-image of stale and poisoned liquid, which causes the ground to become desolate and finally dried out. Priestly formation, in its spiritual dimension stands entirely congruent to the pneumatocentric bearings of John 7:37-39.

6. Summary

We began our exposition with a secluded Bible passage in the Pastoral Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland, in which he pointed towards a new orientation of priestly being. In the exegetical analysis of John 7:37-39 we were confronted with the known difficulty of interpretation that led to the two early-Church interpretive traditions of Jesus' prophetic call at the Feast of Tabernacles: one being the Antiochene, which points to the water of the opened heart of Jesus, and the other, the Alexandrine, in which the one who has drunk from the Spirit-water is to become a font for others to drink from. With our passage through the various levels of meaning in the work of Joseph Ratzinger, the Antiochene and Alexandrine lines of interpretation could first be deepened towards Ratzinger's idea of a priest in biblical-patristic perspective. The priest becomes a dispenser of the sacrament bound to outflowing water of the heart of Jesus, and at the same time becomes a bearer of the Spirit-water, which he passes on, and whereby spiritual thirst is quelled. Both lines of interpretation led to the practical consequences for the formation of priests in seminary. From these findings, John 7:37-39 comes to the fore. A yet undiscovered key piece in Ratzinger's idea of a priest, which is similar to Newman's educational concept for priestly formation, binds a high level of scientific demand with human and spiritual education. Hanna Barbara Gerl-Falkowitz (2004) has attested to Newman's *Idea of a University* as a modern concept of education. What she remarked regarding the Dublin lectures of Newman would also, according to the lines of reception of John 7:37-39, apply to Ratzinger's idea of a priest,

in the buildup of tension from encompassing knowledge, formation of character, and judgement through faith, the human spirit will be thus educated, and intellectually as well as morally be made capable; in addition to this, direction will be given through the act of faith, which can be made only through a choice of the all-around educated person and by which the individual, carefully, in fear and in love, must be led. (p. XVIII)

References

- Barrett, C. K. (1990). *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (H. Bald, Trans.). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Benedict XVI. (2010). *Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland* (19.03.2010). https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland.html
- Francis. (2023). *Ansprache Priestertagung* (10.03.2023). <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/41701-papst-franziskus-warnt-junge-priester-vor-pornografie>.
- Gerl-Falkovitz, H.-B. (2004). Introduction. In H.-B. Gerl-Falkovitz (Ed., Intr., & Notes), *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe 21. Übersetzungen 1: J. H. Newman, Die Idee der Universität* (pp. XI-XIX). Herder.
- Hastetter, M. C. Der Amtsträger als Mann der Öffnung. Zum Verständnis von Öffnung und Offensein in der Theologie des Amtes bei Joseph Ratzinger mit Seitenblicken auf aktuelle Diskussionen. In M. C. Hastetter, & E. G. Lomidze (Eds.), *Das kirchliche Amt im Licht der Gottesfrage. Orient und Okzident im Dialog* (TO&OS vol. 5) (pp. 115-136). EOS.
- Rahner, H. (1964). *Symbole der Kirche. Die Ekklesiologie der Väter*. Otto Müller.
- Ratzinger, J. (1987). *Journey towards Easter. Retreat given in the Vatican in the presence of Pope John Paul II* (M. Grove, Trans.). Crossroad Pub Co.
- Ratzinger, J. (2010a). “Aufbauen zu einem geistigen Haus”. Eine Betrachtung zu 1 Petr 2,5. In *JRGS* 12 (pp. 422-431). Herder. (Original work published 1983)
- Ratzinger, J. (2010b). Bereitung zum priesterlichen Dienst. In *JRGS* 12 (pp. 433-450). Herder. (Original work published 1990)
- Ratzinger, J. (2010c). Fragen zur Priesterausbildung in Deutschland. In *JRGS* 12 (pp. 451-457). Herder. (Original work published 1993)
- Ratzinger, J. (2010d). Im Atemraum seines Geistes “geistlich Geistliche” (Johann Michael Sailer) werden. In *JRGS* 12 (pp. 540-545). Herder. (Original work published 1979)
- Ratzinger, J. (2010e). Vorwort. In W. Friedberger, & F. Schnider (Eds.), *Theologie, Gemeinde, Seelsorger*, Kösel. In *JRGS* 12 (pp. 458-460). Herder. (Original work published 1979)
- Ratzinger, J. (2010f). Vom Wesen des Priestertums. In *JRGS* 12 (pp. 33-50). Herder. (Original work published 1990)
- Ratzinger, J. (2014a). Das Ostergeheimnis – tiefster Gehalt und Grund der Herz-Jesu-Verehrung. In *JRGS* 6/2 (pp. 672-690). Herder. (Original work published 1984)

- Ratzinger, J. (2014b). Einführung in das Christentum. In *JRGS* 4 (pp. 54-322). Herder. (Original work published 1968).
- Ratzinger, J. (2014c). Jesus von Nazareth. Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verklärung. In *JRGS* 6/1 (pp. 129-635). Herder. (Original work published 2007)
- Ratzinger, J. (2019a). Geist und Freiheit – Freiheit und Bindung. In *JRGS* 14/1 (pp. 616-620). Herder. (Original work published 1996)
- Ratzinger, J. (2019b). Wenn Gott nicht selber führt. Messe um den Heiligen Geist, Breslau. In *JRGS* 14/3 (pp. 1752-1755). Herder. (Original work published 2000)
- Sailer, J. M. (1981). *Geistliche Texte*. K. Baumgartner (Ed.). Schnell & Steiner.
- Schnackenburg, R. (1971). *Das Johannesevangelium. II. Teil. Kommentar zu Kap. 5-12* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 4). Herder.