Wrestling with the Unspeakable

The Exegete's Subjective Experience as a Source for Theology

Daniela Feichtinger

Independent Researcher, Graz, Austria

daniela.feichtinger@outlook.com

Abstract

The reader's subjective experience cannot be easily integrated into an interpretation that claims a certain objectivity and adequacy to the text. For the exegesis of sacred texts, this means that something *unspeakable* remains, the encounter of which is traditionally described with the theological categories *revelation* and *salvation*. This raises the suspicion that by methodically excluding subjectiveness, at least part of the theological character of a text gets *lost in interpretation*. In order to exemplify the challenge subjectivity poses to scientific interpretation, especially within the framework of a religious community, this paper analyzes documents of the Catholic Church on the interpretation of the bible since 1965. In a next step, the categories of *revelation* and *salvation* are traced in Roland Barthes' essay *Camera Lucida* (1980). His concepts shed light on the shortcomings of the documents and provide fresh impulses for a transformed understanding and appreciation of the reader's experience.

Keywords

Dei Verbum – photography – revelation theology – Roland Barthes – subjectivity

1 Introduction

I have always wanted to remonstrate with my moods; not to justify them; still less to fill the scene of the text with my individuality; but on the contrary, to offer, to extend this individuality to a science of the subject,

a science whose name is of little importance to me, provided it attains (as has not yet occurred) to a generality which neither reduces nor crushes me.¹

In his last work published during his lifetime, *Camera Lucida*, (post)structuralist scholar Roland Barthes is moved by the death of his mother and a photograph of her at five years old. He works on a “science of the subject” – a way of encircling the essence of photography that “neither reduces nor crushes” him. His phenomenological approach came as a surprise to those accustomed to his structuralist texts. However, seen through the eyes of a theologian, especially the exegete who works with sacred texts, Barthes is dealing with a crucial and familiar problem: The integration of the existential relevance of the text – the way it changes lives and speaks to the core of a human being – into scientific analysis. How can the fact that I, as the interpreter of the text, am not outside of its sphere of influence be implemented into research?

Methodically, exegesis does not leave much space for the integration of personal experience: A surplus remains that cannot be voiced.² For theology, however, the detection of something unspeakable raises questions: Is the blind spot of language a negligible by-product of research, or is it where part of the theological essence lies? The central theological categories for the encounter of the unspeakable and its subjective effectiveness are *revelation* and *salvation*; does this mean that the exegete’s subjective experience – his or her experience with the text as a reader – can be understood as a revelatory event with salvific qualities?³

In order to exemplify and concretize this challenge, the focus of this paper will first be on official documents of the Catholic Church since 1965 and the relevance they attribute to the role of subjective experience for the interpretation of the bible. Although this might seem like an exclusively Catholic problem, it is in fact problematic for every religion dealing with normative texts under today’s transformative processes. Next, we will look at the aforementioned

1 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 18.

2 On the other hand, there are other methods that focus specifically on the personal and psychological sides of interpretation. In a bibliolog, for example, participants can speak from the perspective of biblical characters. They do this under the guidance of someone who has special training in this field that is in many ways close to a psychotherapeutic setting. See Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, as well as Aigner, *Bibliodrama und Bibliolog*. This approach to interpretation does not claim objectiveness and is therefore difficult to connect with the academic reading of biblical texts.

3 Similar hermeneutical questions have been asked especially throughout the 20th century. For an overview of hermeneutical positions see Zwiep, *Bible Hermeneutics*, p. 933–1008.

Camera Lucida by Roland Barthes. Some shortcomings of the official documents as well as some starting points for a transformed understanding of the subject's role will become evident.

2 Underrating the Reader – the Human Side of Revelation

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was a milestone for the Catholic Church in many aspects. One was the constitution *Dei Verbum* (1965) – the first time in roughly two thousand years that an ecumenical council dedicated a text to revelation and its tradition.⁴ Together with three other constitutions,⁵ it is one of the bearing pillars of the council.

Dei Verbum (DV) distinguishes between the revelatory encounter between God and humans and the testimony to this encounter, the bible. Unlike earlier documents on the topic, it emphasizes the dialogical, friendly features of revelation over the monological, God-centered understanding of earlier documents. After a decades-long controversy, the constitution finally made the examination of biblical texts in their historical, cultural and literary context the exegetical standard.

Before we analyze the human role and involvement in the process of revelation in *Dei Verbum*, we must record the fact that it was not the intention of the council to write about its anthropological aspects.⁶ Nevertheless, various statements hint at how it is perceived and experienced by human subjects. Because these hints are not elaborated on in the constitution, we will also consider how later official documents flesh out some of them. The focus is on a document by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993), as well as the post-synodal apostolic exhortation “*Verbum Domini*” (2010). Both documents take into account the developments and trends in exegetical research following the Council.

As noted, *Dei Verbum* differentiates between revelation as such and the testimony to the revelatory encounter. The following chapter is therefore split into three parts. The first one deals with the human side of revelation. The second one focuses on the bible, especially its human authors, interpreters and readers. Part three will be a conclusion.

4 For the historical context of the council and its theological relevance see Hoping, *Theologischer Kommentar*, p. 703–711.

5 *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on liturgy, *Lumen Gentium* on the church and *Gaudium et Spes* on the church in the modern world.

6 See Rahner/Vorgrimler, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 361 et seq.

2.1 *Obedience, Friendship and Dialogue – the Human Side of Revelation*

What is revelation? – In short, God reveals Himself out of love through words and deeds, especially through the Son, so that man can have fellowship with Him. The relationship itself is likened to a friendship (DV 2). Man's corresponding reaction is the obedience of faith (DV 5). The relationship depicted here is not one of equals but one of creator and creature: Without God's initiative, nothing happens. He is the one revealing Himself, and He is also the one preparing man for His revelation. Man's ideal reaction, however, is to obey. The one surprising word in this context is "friends". What kind of a friendship can such an unequal encounter yield? Are love and friendship reserved for the superior part while the inferior one is bound to obey?

"Obedience of faith" is a highly charged term in Christian theology, coined by Paul in his epistle to the Romans, where he calls bringing it about the goal of his ministry (Romans 1:5, cf. 16:26). It designates a new way of life characterized by "the necessity of initial faith, persevering faith, and the faith which justifies in the last judgement."⁷ It is about more than mere consent.⁸ But can one obey someone and be his friend at the same time?

Kevin Lenehan⁹ describes the council's discussions behind the use of the term friendship. The constitution *Dei Verbum* developed in several stages. The first schema was rejected by some council fathers because they considered the role of God's love as too limited. They favored a more sacramental¹⁰ and personalistic approach as opposed to the cognitive focus of the draft, which had been a product of neoscholastic thought. Eventually, the corrected text, which is almost identical to the final document, further accentuated the personalistic and dialogical aspects.¹¹

7 Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 79 et seq. For other grammatical options see Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 66, who prefers "the faith which consists in obedience".

8 Ratzinger emphasizes that the council primarily uses the idea of obedience and only later speaks of trust. This accentuates the direction of faith and its connection to the word. See Ratzinger, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 571–581, p. 514. For an English translation see Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Constitution*, p. 167–180.

9 See Lenehan, *Unfolding in Friendship*, p. 179–181.

10 The sacramentality of the word is closely related to the topic of this paper but cannot be discussed further within its framework. Therefore, see Lorzio, *Die Sakramentalität des Wortes*, p. 110–139.

11 It is a testimony to both core principles of the council: *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, "scooping from tradition" as well as "bringing up to date". The concept of "friendship" was used to describe the relationship between God and humans as early as the bible (e.g. Exodus 33:11; John 15:14–15) and later, among others, by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) – the epitome of scholastic thought. Furthermore, it also expresses the council's strong dialogical emphasis in contrast to the rather monological approach of earlier documents like

So far, we could have supposed that the term *friend* used in *Dei Verbum* designates a different concept of friendship than our contemporary idea of two people who are both equally involved. This is refuted already by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who writes: “For the true sign of friendship is that a friend reveals the secrets of his heart to his friend. Since friends have one mind and heart, it does not seem that what one friend reveals to another is placed outside his own heart.”¹² The extent of involvement is mutual. In the case of God and humans, of course, the initiative lies with God: “He is saying in effect: Whoever has been called to this sublime friendship should not attribute the cause of this friendship to himself, but to me, who chose him or her as a friend.”¹³ The paradoxical human situation – free will on one side, dependence on God on the other – is also present in the *obedience of faith*: It is a free act of will made possible by God. This is something to keep in mind when reading DV 2. What is on the one hand difference between creator and creature, is on the other hand essentially openness and *revelation* on both sides: “God cannot realize this event alone.”¹⁴ Man reveals himself as well, though this aspect is not elaborated on in the constitution.

Although the concept of revelation outlined by the Council is in fact *dialogical*, the term *dialogue* itself is absent from *Dei Verbum*¹⁵ and all but one of the documents mentioned at the outset of this paper. Only in *Verbum Domini* 6 (2010) we read: “The novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the *dialogue* which he desires to have with us.”¹⁶

So far, we have seen that the subject is existentially involved in the event of revelation. But what does the dialogical structure look like once another layer

Dei Filius (1870), the dogmatic constitution of the First Vatican Council. See Hoping, *Dei Verbum*, esp. 706 et seq.

12 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary of the Gospel of St John*, 15, 1.3, n. 2019.

13 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary of the Gospel of St John*, 15, 1.3, n. 2019. See Lenehan, *Unfolding*, p. 189.

14 Bieringer, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 7.

15 On the topic of “dialogue” in the council documents see Nolan, *A Privileged Moment*, esp. p. 221–223. She shows that this category is exclusively used for communication between humans.

16 Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*. Emphasis added. The choice of words is linked to DV 2 and the aforementioned concept of friendship. The author of *Verbum Domini* is Benedict XVI., and the aspect of dialogue unmistakably bears Joseph Ratzinger’s trademark. In his commentary on *Dei Verbum* in 1969, he already uses the term to describe the relationship between God and humans (see Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Constitution*). About this text and its context see Lenehan, *Unfolding*, p. 181–183. The dialogical structure of revelation is so essential to him that it even shapes *Verbum Domini*: The first section of part one is called “The God Who Speaks”, the second one “Our Response to the God Who Speaks”.

is introduced between God and the subject: The biblical text? What is the relationship between God, the text and the reader?

2.2 *Inspiration, Literal Meaning, and Reader – Scripture and the Human Side of Revelation*

Let us move on to DV 11–12 with the above in mind.¹⁷ DV 11 outlines the topic of revelation regarding the written testimony to the revelatory encounter discussed before: The Bible. God is its author, but the people who write the texts are true authors as well. They are inspired by the Holy Spirit to write down what God wants. They do this at a certain point in time and as part of a certain culture, making use of contemporary literary conventions. According to the constitution, the latter can be and should be analyzed in order to get to the core of what God “wanted to share with us” (cf. DV 12). Once again, a theological shift from the First to the Second Vatican Council is discernible: the emphasis on the inspiration of the human authors is preferred over the concept of a strictly verbal inspiration.¹⁸

According to DV 11–12, God “shares” with us (*nobiscum communicare*)¹⁹ the “truth which [He] wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation (*nostrae salutis causa*).” The recipient’s role in the process is not elaborated on. What does it mean to be saved and have fellowship with God? Am I as a recipient informed about a past encounter, or am I encountering God through the bible? Am I confronted with a divine monologue delivered by humans? Or am I – because of the dialogical nature of God’s revelation – truly expected to answer? Can I only do this if I make the bible’s words my own?²⁰

The exegete’s task is to investigate “what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.” (DV 12) Both intentions, God’s and the human author’s, are interwoven in the biblical text. The unfortunate use of *and* makes the constitution’s phrase unnecessarily vague and prone to misunderstanding, as if the author’s and God’s intention

17 For the council history behind the chapters about the interpretation of scripture see Durand, *Relire Dei Verbum*, p. 39–47.

18 For the understanding of inspiration before the Second Vatican Council see Hoping, *Dei Verbum*, p. 707 et seq.

19 I translate *quid Ipse nobiscum communicare voluerit* as “what God wanted to share with us” and not as “communicate”. So does Bieringer, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 17 et seq., who highlights that earlier versions of the text read *nobis*. The change to *nobiscum* slightly altered the meaning of *communicare* from the rather monological “communicate” to the dialogical “share”.

20 *Verbum Domini*, no. 24 mentions biblical texts like the psalms that are all prayers in one way or another. Making these words one’s own is understood as the human answer to God.

could differ fundamentally.²¹ This is probably why later documents do not focus on the intention of the authors but on their common product – the texts: What God wanted to express can be found in their *literal meaning*.

Literal meaning is a crucial term that is not yet present in *Dei Verbum*. It is further explored in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993),²² where the *literal sense*,²³ the *spiritual sense*²⁴ and the *fuller sense*²⁵ are distinguished. All three types of senses are explicitly distanced from fundamentalism, “subjective interpretations stemming from the imagination or intellectual speculation” (11.B.2) and the danger of interpretation without control “by an explicit biblical text or by an authentic doctrinal tradition” (11.B.3). When the human aspect of revelation is mentioned, it is always distanced from the subjectivity of an isolated reading: isolated from other biblical texts, from doctrinal tradition and the church.²⁶

Back to *Dei Verbum* 12 and a player whose role has so far only been considered briefly: The exegete. By common consent, DV 12 contains two rules or “commandments” for exegetical work. The names of the two rules and the resulting competences are, however, disputed. Otto Schwankl suggests calling them “methodic” and “hermeneutic” rule, or “technical-worldly (profane)” and “spiritual-ecclesial” rule.²⁷ The first one concerns the use of the historical-critical method, which is not mentioned by name. The second one is defined as follows: “Since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written,” (1) “no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture.” (2) “The living tradition of

21 About this aspect see Bieringer, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 25.

22 For the English translation of the document see Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*.

23 The *literal sense* is “the fruit of inspiration” (11.B.1) and therefore what God intended to say. It is distinguished from the “literalist” sense of a fundamentalist reading. Depending on the genre, the literary conventions, the context etc., the literal meaning of a text can also be symbolic. The document gives the example of Luke 12:35, “Let your loins be girt”, which is meant metaphorically in this context (“be ready for action”) and not in a “literalist” sense (“wear a girth around your loins”).

24 The *spiritual sense* applies mostly to Old Testament texts in so far as some of them have taken on a new meaning in the context of the “paschal event” (11.B.2).

25 The *fuller sense*, however, “is defined as a deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author” (11.B.3). This sense can surface through a canonical approach or when one text is read in the light of others. The discussion about the *sensus plenior*, a means to preserve at least parts of allegorical exegesis in modern times, was already ongoing at the time of the council. See Lohfink, *Der weiße Fleck*, p. 24.

26 See also *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* 11.A.2; 11.B.1–2 as well as *Verbum Domini*, no. 44, which refers to the first document.

27 Cf. Schwankl, *Fundamentum et Animae*, p. 167.

the whole Church must be taken into account, along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith.” These “commandments” have been put into practice since Vatican II. Number 1, for example, the demand to look at the totality of Scripture, encouraged “canonical exegesis”,²⁸ and number 2, the comment on tradition, seems to live on especially in the study of reception history.²⁹ But what about the introductory sentence: If the bible must be read and interpreted in the spirit in which it was written, should the exegete be *inspired*? What does this mean for the question of subjectivity?

Dei Verbum does not address subjectivity anywhere, and we have seen that other documents mentioned it in the context of warnings. There is, however, one positive assessment in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*: “[A]ll exegesis of the accounts of these [sc. biblical] events necessarily involves the exegete’s own subjectivity. Access to a proper understanding of biblical texts is only granted to the person who has an affinity with what the text is saying on the basis of life experience.” (II.A.2)³⁰ It seems like this positive understanding of subjectivity is tacitly presupposed and regarded as a matter of course in all the discussed documents, even in *Dei Verbum*. Although it may be silently acknowledged on the level of hermeneutics, it often gets lost in translation once it comes to concrete exegetical work: Where does “the exegete’s own subjectivity” fit in on the quest for the literary meaning of a text or its canonical relations? Or should it be part of someone else’s work, e.g. the systematic theologian’s?³¹

2.3 Conclusion

By revealing Himself, God seeks to be in a relationship with humans. It is an engaging experience – one that makes the council fathers begin *Dei Verbum* by citing 1 John 1:3, “What *we have seen and heard* we announce to you, so that you may have fellowship with us and our common fellowship be with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.”³²

28 See *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* I.C.1 and Artus, *L'exhortation post-synodale*, p. 10–14.

29 *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* I.C.3.

30 These considerations are part of the evaluation and acknowledgement of philosophical hermeneutics in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.

31 In his comment on DV 12, Grillmeier thinks indeed that the two exegetical commands of *Dei Verbum* are supposed to be carried out by two different disciplines who should collaborate: exegesis and dogmatic (“Fachexeget und Theologe”). See Grillmeier, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 555.

32 My emphasis. This *kerygmatic announcement* marks a contrast to the *two orders of knowledge* (knowledge of God through reason and through revelation) presented by *Dei Filius* (1870). See Lenehan, *Unfolding*, p. 176.

The human aspects of God's revelation are described with several terms. On the one hand, *obedience of faith* and *inspiration* highlight the difference between creator and creature. On the other hand, *friendship* and *dialogue* underline the mutual involvement of both parties and their connection. When we look at the Bible as testimony to this encounter, another player shifts into focus: the text, and subsequently its literal sense, a term that is not yet present in *Dei Verbum* but developed later. What God wanted to express for the sake of our salvation can be found in the literal meaning of a biblical text, which should be examined by the exegete.

The "conflict between Catholic theology and the concept of the subject",³³ which was extensively analyzed by Klaus Müller, is palpable in the official documents examined above: While subjectivity is on the one hand presupposed without explicitly reflecting (or accrediting) its relevance, it is on the other hand regarded as a dangerous source of arbitrariness. It is still reckoned with on the level of revelation (in the past), but not on the level of the recipients of the testimony to it (in the present). In the end, the reader's involvement in the process of interpretation is underrated: meaning is presented as an objective fact preserved in the literal sense of a text. Salvation, however, does not primarily consist in the acceptance of true sentences (as was emphasized by the First Vatican Council) but in a friendship with God (as is emphasized by the Second Vatican Council); yet this seems to be without much consequence for exegetical work. The exegete as reader and inspired subject is not a distinct category.³⁴

The documents emphasize the importance of the literary meaning. What is the relation between the literary meaning of a text and the dialogical and salvific character of scripture? – Both questions will be addressed in the final chapter. First, we will discuss Barthes' approach to *revelation* and *salvation*.

3 Being a Reader – the Impact of Revelation

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) is – at least among exegetes – best known for his essay "The Death of the Author".³⁵ Anyone familiar with his rich work would

33 "Zwiespalt zwischen katholischer Theologie und dem Subjektgedanken", Müller, *Wenn ich "ich" sage*, p. 18.

34 The reading subject is only discussed extensively in the context of narratological analysis (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* 1.B.2), but not with regard to the exegete's own role as a reader.

35 Barthes, *Death of the Author*, published one year later in French (1968). For an extensive theological discussion see Luz, *Theologische Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments*, p. 166–177.

probably expect this part of the paper to be about the aforementioned essay, his various other texts about texts³⁶ or his own exegetical experiments.³⁷ I will, however, base my thoughts on the last book published during his life-time: *La chambre claire* (1980; English: *Camera Lucida*).³⁸

“What does my body know of Photography?”,³⁹ Barthes asks in his book-long phenomenological essay on the essence of this art form. Like other texts written in the five years before his death, it is strongly autobiographical. After he has treated photography in analogy to texts in his earlier examinations of the subject,⁴⁰ Barthes is now grieving the death of his mother and particularly contemplating one photo of her. It leads him to the *noeme*⁴¹ of the genre: the “that-has-been”. This goes along, as Barthes himself notes, with a certain irony: Throughout *Camera Lucida*, he speaks “of the nothing to say”,⁴² as it is essentially speechlessness his observations point to. In photographs, Barthes finds something he never found in texts. In Jay Prosser’s words: “Above all photography is not language and as such lends itself to the ineffable that has been the object of mystics in every world religion.”⁴³ Traces of theological language are thus prevalent in *Camera Lucida*. Christian as well as Buddhist terms and concepts are used to get to the core of photography.⁴⁴ In the following chapter, the focus will not be on photography itself, but on how Barthes structures his thoughts. He writes his text as a spectator/reader,⁴⁵ and as a very emotionally involved one at that. It will present some essential aspects of his phenomenology.

Intense emotions mark the beginning of Barthes’ urge to write *Camera Lucida*: On the one hand, there is amazement when he sees a photo of Napoleon’s youngest brother and realizes that “I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor.”⁴⁶ On the other hand, his mother has died, and he is

36 For example, Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*.

37 See Barthes, *Analyse structurale*.

38 Barthes, *La chambre claire*.

39 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 9.

40 His earlier texts on photography have been collected in German by Geimer/Stiegler, *Auge in Auge*.

41 *Noeme* is a central term of Husserl’s phenomenology. It designates the way consciousness relates to an object: the content of a thought as opposed to the process of thinking.

42 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 93.

43 Prosser, *Buddha Barthes*, p. 213.

44 For a discussion of the terms stemming from Christian theology see Sentilles, *The Photograph*, and for a critical theological reception: Carreño, *Religious experience*.

45 I called the chapter “Being a Reader” with respect to the bible. Reader/spectator are interchangeable in the context of this chapter.

46 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 3.

grief-stricken and mesmerized by a picture of her at five years old, the so-called *Winter Garden Photograph*. When turning to literature about photography, however,

I realized with irritation that none discussed precisely the photographs which interest me, which give me pleasure or emotion. What did I care about the rules of composition of the photographic landscape, or, at the other end, about the Photograph as family rite? Each time I would read something about Photography, I would think of some photograph I loved, and this made me furious. Myself, I saw only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body; but an importunate voice (the voice of knowledge, of *scientia*) then adjured me, in a severe tone: "Get back to Photography. What you are seeing here and what makes you suffer belongs to the category 'Amateur Photographs,' dealt with by a team of sociologists; nothing but the trace of a social protocol of integration, intended to reassert the Family, etc." Yet I persisted; another, louder voice urged me to dismiss such sociological commentary; looking at certain photographs, I wanted to be a primitive, without culture. [...] [I]n short, I found myself at an impasse and, so to speak, "scientifically" alone and disarmed.⁴⁷

Texts about photographs he loves do not do his emotions justice but rather bore and distract him with explanations and categories. The effect is an increase of emotion: He gets furious and is willing to rid himself of culture if it can only be upheld at the price of his love and suffering. The science of the beloved photographs misses their point, and this is hurtful for the lover. In order to find "a generality which neither reduces nor crushes me",⁴⁸ Barthes therefore chooses some photographs he feels strongly about as his phenomenological starting point.⁴⁹ He wants to explore photography "not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice I observe, and I think."⁵⁰ He asks what makes the selected pictures special compared to the majority he is only modestly interested in and arrives at the following distinction:

(a) Photos he has "*polite interest*"⁵¹ in have *studium*: "which doesn't mean, at least not immediately, 'study,' but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special

47 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 7.

48 See the quotation at the beginning of this paper.

49 "For of this attraction, at least, I was certain." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 18.

50 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 21.

51 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 27.

acuity. It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, [...] for it is culturally (this connotation is present in *studium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions.”⁵² Most of the time, news photographs, for example, belong to this category. They are *unary*, because they are missing what characterizes the second category.

(b) Photos he is attracted to or *loves* have *punctum*. It breaks, punctuates and disturbs the *studium*. “This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. [...] A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”⁵³ Most of the time, the *punctum* is a detail, but it can also fill the whole picture.⁵⁴ To name it is to give oneself up: What wounds the spectator is personal.⁵⁵ Sometimes, the *punctum* reveals itself in hindsight, when the photograph is revisited in memory.⁵⁶ It cannot be found by analysis.⁵⁷ Moreover, it cannot be named.⁵⁸

The unnameability of the *punctum* is not absolute, though. Throughout his essay, Barthes identifies it in various pictures, sometimes revising his first assessment after a few pages. In the first part of his text, the *punctum* is a detail (e.g. part of the shoes of a depicted person). In the second part, Barthes names another *punctum*: the emphasis of the *noeme* of photography (“*that-has-been*”⁵⁹). Unlike anything else, a photograph proves to him that its referent really existed.⁶⁰ Barthes apparently ascribes a high amount of evidentiality to photography – “the proof-according-to-St.-Thomas-seeking-to-touch-the-resurrected-Christ.”⁶¹ Although he does not elaborate on this, the unnameability does not seem to concern the entry point of the *punctum* (e.g. some detail or the evidentiality of a photograph) as much as its provenience and the

52 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 26.

53 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 26 et seq.

54 Cf. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 43–45.

55 See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 43.

56 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 53.

57 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 42 et seq.

58 “The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.” Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 51.

59 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.

60 Cf. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 113.

61 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 80: “The Photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant”. His theory of emanation works only with regard to analogue photography and the corresponding chemical process. It does apparently not take into account the many ways in which an analogue photograph can be manipulated.

wound it inflicts on the spectator. It can be said *where* the disturbance and the punctuation are happening, but not *how* they happen.

While analysis is not the way to discover the *punctum*, because it takes one by surprise and borders on the unspeakable, the culturally coded *studium* can be studied:

To recognize the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for culture (from which the *studium* derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers. The *studium* is a kind of education (knowledge and civility, "politeness") which allows me to discover the *Operator*, to experience the intentions which establish and animate his practices, but to experience them "in reverse," according to my will as a *Spectator*. It is rather as if I had to read the Photographer's myths in the Photograph, fraternizing with them but not quite believing in them.⁶²

The educational and cultural side of a photograph is closely linked to the creator's intentions, his myths, which the spectators can reconstruct and acknowledge without necessarily making them their own. The *studium* is the polite and civil side of interest – the *punctum* is connected to madness and ecstasy.⁶³

But where does the *punctum* come from – how does it enter the picture? It is not a product of the photographer's intention. If something like a contrast is consciously arranged, it does not prick the spectator.⁶⁴ In a way, it is a paradox: "it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*."⁶⁵ The role of the spectator is so essential that Barthes does not show the reader the ominous photograph of his mother:

I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the "ordinary"; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photography; but in it, for you, no wound.⁶⁶

62 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 27 et seq.

63 Cf. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 119.

64 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 47.

65 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 55.

66 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 73.

In a sense, the Winter Garden Photograph is meaningless for anyone but Barthes. If we saw and studied it, we would not be wounded. Because we cannot see it, we are left with the description of his way of looking. The essay orients us towards the photograph that has *punctum* for him. Understanding and empathy begin because of this orientation: Not because we see what Barthes sees (we could not see it there for ourselves), but because we are immersed in Barthes' way of seeing.

Throughout his essay, Barthes shows the reader numerous pictures – photographs by professionals. They were all public before, and whether we find a *punctum* there or not does not matter to Barthes. It is not as embarrassing, not as intimate, compared to the photograph of his mother. When confronted with a picture, "The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusion, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality."⁶⁷ Mad or tame – it lies in the eye of the beholder. The madness of the Winter Garden Photograph, however, is reserved to Barthes alone.

4 Conclusion – from Wrestling to Dancing?

Barthes' distinction between *studium* and *punctum* can easily be applied to literature: There are texts I am politely interested in, and texts I love. While I can also study the cultural code of the latter ones, it ultimately leaves me dissatisfied: they have *punctum*, and because it borders on the unspeakable, contemplating it means getting in touch with the essence of these texts and my own: the *wound*.

If we apply the concept of *studium* and *punctum* to what was said about exegesis in the first chapter, we see that it is largely concerned with the *studium* of a text: its historical context and literary form, the author's intentions etc. The *wakening of intractable reality* cannot be confronted, the text's madness is tamed. The madness is present and reckoned with on the level of the initial revelatory encounter, but not on the level of written testimony.

Exegesis in the 21st century must not lapse back into the anti-modernist, a-historical mindset the Second Vatican Council has overcome. It is key to see the *studium* and learn more about it, because no text – and no photograph! – is pure *punctum*. It always manifests at a certain time and in a certain form. However, theology must also be attentive to the *punctum*, something that is not elaborated on in the official documents discussed in the first chapter. With regard to them, seven aspects seem to be of importance.

⁶⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 119.

(1) *The punctum – a kind of invocation.* Every text can be studied, and theoretically, every text can be loved – but not by everyone. If nothing shows itself to the exegete, the *punctum* cannot be sought aggressively. To some degree, a text is either revealing to me or it is not revealing at all: if there is no *punctum* for me, I can only study the text with *polite interest* and acknowledge the fact that a revelatory quality is attributed to it. However, there is supposedly some *punctum* in a text for anyone who chooses to dedicate countless working-hours to its study, be it that it reveals itself initially, along the way or in hindsight. In any case, it serves as a kind of invocation that provokes the spectator/reader into reacting or responding.

(2) *The bible – between art and family portrait.* The bible as a sacred text is similar to both the professional photographs Barthes reproduces as well as the Winter Garden Photograph he keeps to himself. On the one hand, biblical texts are public and available to many people. Most of them are works of art and *professional* to some degree. On the other hand, they are products of certain religious communities, and if the spectator belongs to one of them, reading the texts is also like leafing through a family album. The level of intimacy depends on the reader's own role and position.

(3) *Exhibitionism and discretion.* Subjectivity cannot be expressed within the scientific framework easily: It quickly becomes exhibitionistic and feeds doubts about the quality of the conducted research. Barthes' essay circumnavigates these cliffs by choosing a phenomenological approach, which is necessarily subjective, and by not showing us the Winter Garden Photograph. By keeping it to himself, he allows the reader to sympathize with his way of looking without making us invade his privacy. Contemplating the *punctum* does not mean that exegetes should force themselves on their readers or write about the *studium* in an especially pious way. With Barthes, it can be a contemplation that orientates the readers in a certain way and holds space for the invisible – a way of writing that meditates and circumscribes (literally: *writes around*) the unspeakable without trying to conquer it.

(4) *The awareness of the wound as the seed of salvation.* Circumscribing the unspeakable – what wounds, disturbs and punctuates me as a reader – can be one aspect of the analysis of biblical texts: their essence does not lie in their literal meaning alone, but also in their dialogical, salvific character. Not only what the text says but what the reader experiences is constitutive for their meaning. Salvation can thus be understood as awareness of one's wound in the face of the text.

(5) *The contemplation of the punctum as an integral part of theological methodology.* The border between the different theological disciplines should not separate *punctum* and *studium*. The awareness for both aspects is either

anchored in the methodology of every theological discipline or it comes too late.⁶⁸ Note, however, that the *punctum* is not beyond words because some methodology excludes it: It is essentially unspeakable. This is what the methodology needs to consider.

(6) *Exegetical works can have punctum themselves.* Barthes does not write much about the relationship between *punctum* and *studium*, but in his essay, it becomes clear that they cannot always be clearly distinguished. When he writes about the photograph of Lewis Payne (1865), for example, a man who is awaiting his execution, the fact that he is going to die is Barthes' *punctum*.⁶⁹ How does he know this? The death sentence is not evident in the picture or its title. This information is, strictly speaking, a matter of *studium*. – If we accept that texts can also have *studium* and *punctum*, we must take into account that exegesis does not only analyze biblical texts, but it also studies other literature (specialist books) and produces literature itself (notes, drafts, and papers). A *punctum* might also pop up there. Well-written commentaries, for example, can have *punctum* for their readers. This would probably prevent the frustration described by Barthes at the beginning of his essay.

(7) *Photography – an heir to the sacred text?* It can be speculated if photographs in general have absorbed qualities that were previously associated with texts, especially sacred texts.⁷⁰ On the one hand, photography can be thought of as an heir to the sacred text regarding its *credibility*. The credibility Barthes ascribes to it seems extremely high and yet unwarranted if we consider the possibility of manipulation and how much it increased since the advent of

68 The consequences of Barthes' approach for the treatment of the bible in systematic theology are the same as for exegesis: study the *studium*, contemplate the *punctum*. Exegesis is by definition specialized in analyzing the *studium* and has the corresponding resources to do so. Therefore, it is more likely to be carried out by exegetes. But systematic theology works better with exegetical texts that are written with regard to both *studium* and *punctum*, and when it doesn't misunderstand its own task as supplementing (the contemplation of) the *punctum*.

69 Cf. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.

70 Prosser's assessment could at least be a starting point for such an investigation: "[F]or both Barthes and Benjamin loss of faith in the aura or essence has meant the renunciation of the mystical in photography." Prosser, *Buddha Barthes*, p. 220. He refers to Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 219. Barthes considers the credibility of a photograph higher than that of a text: "In 1850, August Salzmann photographed, near Jerusalem, the road to Beith-Lehem (as it was spelled at the time): nothing but stony ground, olive trees, but three tenses dizzy in my consciousness: my present, the time of Jesus, and that of the photographer, all this under the instance of 'reality' – and no longer through the elaboration of the text, whether fictional or poetic, which itself is never credible *down to the root*." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 97. See also how he links the simultaneous invention of history and photography in Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 93.

digital photography and post-production. However, sacred texts and perhaps texts in general no longer meet people's desire to know for certain what is true (in the sense of *real*) as much as photographs do.⁷¹ On the other hand, photography seems – at least if we consider *Camera Lucida* – to be an heir to the *sanctity* of sacred texts. *Sanctity* in this context means the ability to mediate a quality which goes beyond reality in the sense of facticity – something that touches and concerns or even overwhelms the spectator.⁷² As Jay Prosser pointed out,⁷³ the wordlessness of the medium facilitates the contact with this touching, somewhat otherworldly quality for Barthes, who is mostly known for his texts about *texts*. His essay on photography insinuates a shift of credibility and sanctity from text to image. This shift and its implications can unfortunately only be touched upon briefly here at the end of this paper. Further investigation of the matter would certainly be worthwhile.

The emphasis on the friendly and dialogical nature of revelation was a milestone of Catholic theology. However, it has yet to be integrated more consequentially into exegesis and its treatment of the texts. At the outset of this paper, the integration of the exegete's subjective experience therefore seemed like a wrestling fight with the unspeakable. Seen against the backdrop of Roland Barthes' essay, the win-or-lose metaphor becomes obsolete. The exegete is not so much a wrestler as a dancer: The scientific interpretation of a text requires training, but also the openness to an encounter, the ability to feel the rhythm and adapt to the dancing partner – and put the experience into words.

Biography

From 2015–2018, Daniela Feichtinger worked at the Institute for Old Testament Studies in Graz, Austria, where she also wrote her dissertation on Genesis 39, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (LIT 2019). She has taught at the universities of Erlangen (Germany) and Pretoria (South-Africa).

71 Their high credibility is nonetheless the product of a social practice and not a fact or the essence of the art form as Barthes proposes. Photographs do not necessarily attest to the reality of the depicted but to the reality of the *depiction*: the photograph happened; it came into being. This is also true, though, about texts: Their existence proves that they were written or generated.

72 Rudolf Otto's definition of the *numinous* as mysterious, terrifying and fascinating comes to mind. See Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

73 See the beginning of chapter 2 of this paper.

Bibliography

- Aigner, Maria Elisabeth: *Bibliodrama und Bibliolog als pastorale Lernorte*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2015.
- Artus, Olivier: "L'exhortation post-synodale Verbum Domini et la pratique de l'exégèse biblique", in: *Transversalités* 145 (2/2018), p. 7–21.
- Barthes, Roland: "The Death of the Author", in: *Aspen* 2 (5–6/1967).
- Barthes, Roland: *Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique. Essais d'interprétation*. Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1971.
- Barthes, Roland: *Exégèse et herméneutique*. Paris: Seuil, 1971.
- Barthes, Roland: *Le plaisir du texte*. Paris: Éds. du Seuil, 1973.
- Barthes, Roland: *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980.
- Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2010.
- Benedict XVI: *Verbum Domini. Post-synodal apostolic exhortation*, 2010, http://bit.ly/verbum_domini (date of last access: 25.07.2019).
- Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. London: Fontana, 1992.
- Bieringer, Reimund: "Biblical Revelation and Exegetical Interpretation According to Dei Verbum 12", in: *SNTUA* 27 (2002), p. 5–40.
- Bultmann, Rudolf: "The Problem of Hermeneutics", in: *Essays. Philosophical and Theological*, London: SCM Press, 1955, p. 234–261.
- Carreño, Javier E. "Religious experience and Photography. The Phenomenology of Photography as Revelatory of the Religious Play of Imagination", in: *Open Theology* 3 (2017), p. 224–234.
- Cranfield, Charles E.B.: *The Epistle to the Romans 1*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975.
- Durand, Emmanuel: "Relire Dei Verbum 11–13 dans son histoire ... pour surmonter une fausse division entre exégèse scientifique et théologie", in: *Transversalités* 145 (2/2018), p. 39–63.
- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. (ed.): *The Biblical Commission's Document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church". Text and Commentary*. Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1995.
- Gabel, Helmut: "Engführungen und Neuaufbrüche. Die Inspirationstheologie in Geschichte und Gegenwart", in: Ralf Rothenbusch/Karlheinz Ruhstorfer (ed.): *Eingegeben von Gott. Zur Inspiration der Bibel und ihrer Geltung heute*. Freiburg i. Br. et al.: Herder, 2019, p. 136–184.
- Geimer, Peter/Stiegler, Bernd (ed.): *Auge in Auge. Kleine Schriften zur Photographie*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015.
- Grillmeier, Aloys: "Dogmatische Konstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung. Kommentar Kapitel 3", in: *LThK. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Dokumente und Kommentare*, Vol. 2, Freiburg i. Br. et al.: Herder, 1967, p. 528–558.

- Hoping, Helmut: "Theologischer Kommentar zur Dogmatischen Konstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung Dei Verbum", in: Peter Hünemann (ed.): *Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil* 3, Freiburg i. Br. et al.: Herder, 2005, p. 695–819.
- Lenahan, Kevin: "Unfolding in Friendship. Revelation and the Analogy of Friendship in *Dei verbum*", in: *Pacifica* 29 (2/2016), p. 175–191.
- Lohfink, Norbert, "Der weiße Fleck in 'Dei Verbum' Artikel 12", in: *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 101 (1/1992), p. 20–35.
- Longenecker, Richard N.: *The Epistle to the Romans. A commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016.
- Lorizio, Giuseppe: "Die Sakramentalität des Wortes von 'Dei Verbum' zu 'Verbum Domini'", in: Eilert Herms/Lubomir Žak (ed.): *Sakrament und Wort im Grund und Gegenstand des Glaubens. Theologische Studien zur römisch-katholischen und evangelisch-lutherischen Lehre*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011, p. 110–139.
- Luz, Ulrich: *Theologische Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2014.
- Müller, Klaus: *Wenn ich "ich" sage. Studien zur fundamentaltheologischen Relevanz selbstbewußter Subjektivität*. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1994.
- Nolan, Anne Michele: *A Privileged Moment. Dialogue in the Language of the Second Vatican Council 1962–1965*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2006.
- Otto, Rudolf: *The Idea of the Holy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1923.
- Pohl-Patalong, Uta: *Bibliolog. A Creative Access to the Bible*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2015.
- Prosser, Jay: "Buddha Barthes. What Barthes Saw in Photography (That He Didn't In Literature)", in: *LitTh* 18 (2/2004), p. 211–222.
- Rahner, Karl/Vorgrimler, Herbert: *XI. Die dogmatische Konstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung 'Dei Verbum'. Einleitung*, in: Karl Rahner/Herbert Vorgrimler (ed.): *Kleines Konzilskompendium. Sämtliche Texte des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*. Freiburg i. Br. et al.: Herder, ³⁵2008, p. 361–366.
- Ratzinger, Joseph: *Dogmatische Konstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung. Einleitung und Kommentar Kapitel 1–2 und 6*, in: *LThK. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Dokumente und Kommentare*, Vol. 2, Freiburg i. Br. et al.: Herder, 1967, p. 498–528; p. 571–581.
- Ratzinger, Joseph: "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Origin and Background", in: Herbert Vorgrimler (ed.): *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 3. London: Burns & Oats, 1969, p. 167–180.
- Rothenbusch, Ralf: "Inspiration und theologische Schrifthermeneutik. Überlegungen im Anschluss an das Dokument der Bibelkommission zur 'Inspiration und Wahrheit der Heiligen Schrift' (2014)", in: Ralf Rothenbusch/Karlheinz Ruhstorfer (ed.):

- Eingegeben von Gott. Zur Inspiration der Bibel und ihrer Geltung heute.* Freiburg i. Br. et al.: Herder, 2019, p. 100–135.
- Schwankl, Otto: “Fundamentum et Animae Theologiae. Zur Lage der biblischen Exegese 50 Jahre nach Dei Verbum”, in: *BZ* 60 (2/2016), p. 161–181.
- Sentilles, Sarah: “The Photograph as Mystery. Theological Language and Ethical Looking in Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida”, in: *JR* 90 (4/2010), p. 507–529.
- Thomas Aquinas: *Commentary of the Gospel of St John*, 15, 13, n. 2019, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/John15.htm> (date of last access: 04.05.2020).
- Zwiep, Arie W.: “Bible Hermeneutics from 1950 to the Present. Trends and Developments”, in: Oda Wischmeyer (ed.): *Handbuch der Bibelhermeneutiken. Von Origines bis zur Gegenwart.* Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016, p. 933–1008.