

RETRIEVAL & RENEWAL

**Ressourcement**

IN CATHOLIC THOUGHT

# ‘In the Beginning...’

A CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE STORY OF  
CREATION AND THE FALL



Pope Benedict XVI

Joseph Ratzinger

IN FOUR SUPERB HOMILIES AND A CONCLUDING ESSAY, Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, provides a clear and inspiring exploration of the Genesis creation narratives.

While the stories of the world's creation and the fall of humankind have often been subjected to reductionism of one sort or another — literalists treat the Bible as a science textbook whereas rationalists divorce God from creation — Ratzinger presents a rich, balanced Catholic understanding of these early biblical writings and attests to their enduring vitality.

Beginning each homily with a text selected from the first three chapters of Genesis, Ratzinger discusses, in turn, God the creator, the meaning of the biblical creation accounts, the creation of human beings, and sin and salvation; in the appendix he unpacks the consequences of a renewed faith in creation.

Expertly translated from German, these reflections set out a reasonable biblical approach to creation. *'In the Beginning . . .'* also serves as an excellent homiletic resource for priests and pastors.

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*"The readable but challenging meditations attempt a balance between extremes of fundamentalism and rationalism and emphasize a unity between the Old and New Testaments."*

— Library Journal

*"With penetrating insight, Ratzinger here treats the profoundly important and far-reaching doctrine of Genesis."*

— New Oxford Review

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JOSEPH RATZINGER, now Pope Benedict XVI, has been Dean of the College of Cardinals, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and President of the International Theological Commission. The Holy Father has also enjoyed a distinguished teaching career at such universities as Tübingen and Regensburg in Germany, his country of origin.

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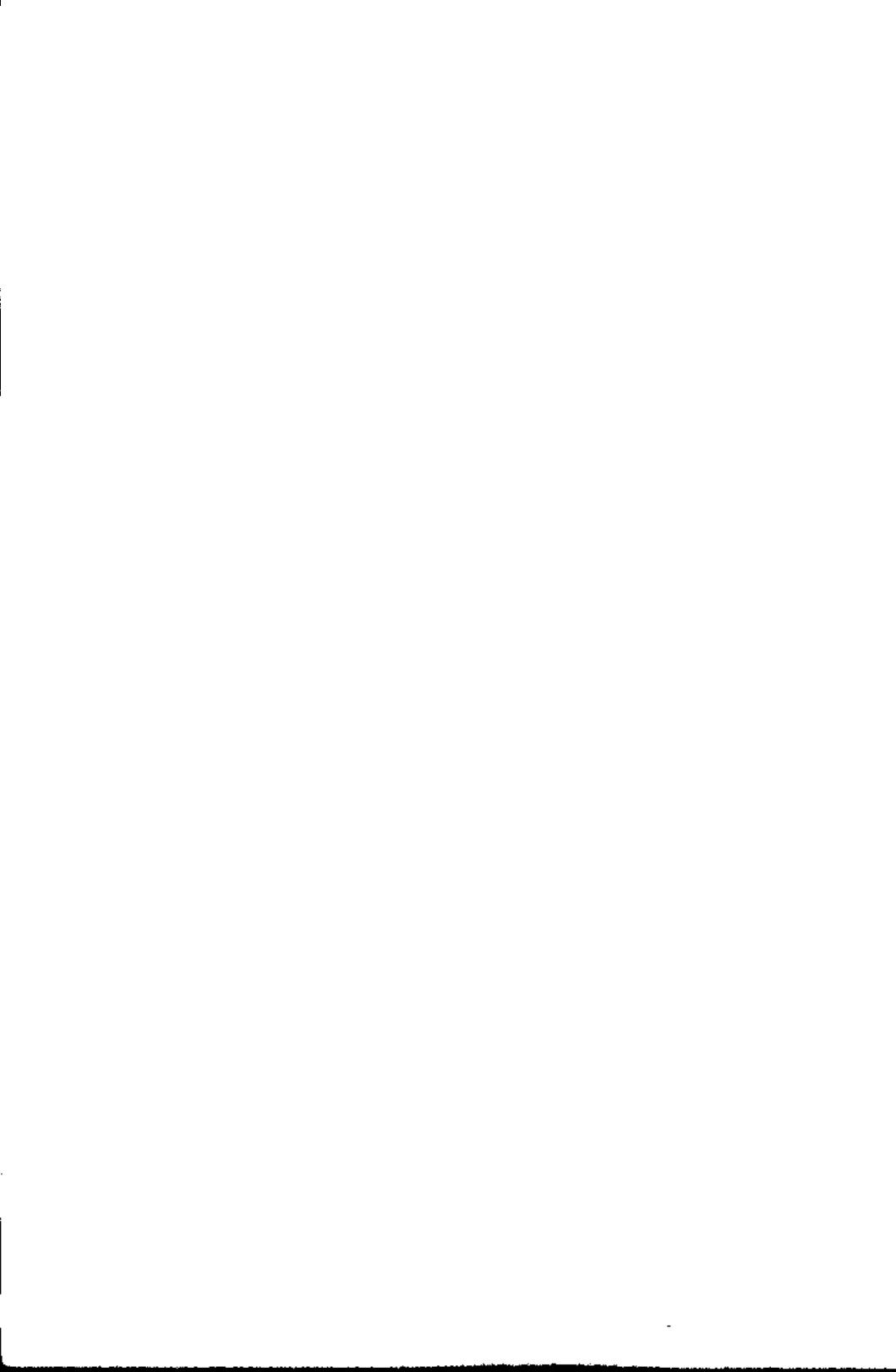


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The middle years of this century marked a particularly intense time of crisis and change in European society. During this period (1930-1950), a broad intellectual and spiritual movement arose within the European Catholic community, largely in response to the secularism that lay at the core of the crisis. The movement drew inspiration from earlier theologians and philosophers such as Möhler, Newman, Gardeil, Rousselot, and Blondel, as well as from men of letters like Charles Péguy and Paul Claudel.

The group of academic theologians included in the movement extended into Belgium and Germany, in the work of men like Emile Mersch, Dom Odo Casel, Romano Guardini, and Karl Adam. But above all the theological activity during this period centered in France. Led principally by the Jesuits at Fourvière and the Dominicans at Le Saulchoir, the French revival included many of the greatest names in twentieth-century Catholic thought: Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Louis Bouyer, and, in association, Hans Urs von Balthasar.

It is not true — as subsequent folklore has it — that those theologians represented any sort of self-conscious “school”: indeed, the differences among them, for example, between Fourvière and Saulchoir, were important. At the same time, most of them were united in the double conviction that theology had to speak to the present situation, and that the condition for doing so faithfully lay in a recovery of the Church’s past. In other words, they saw clearly that the first step in what later came to be known as *aggiornamento* had to be *ressourcement* — a rediscovery of the riches of the whole of the Church’s two-thousand-year tradition. According to de Lubac, for example, all of his own works as well as the entire *Sources chrétiennes* collection are based on the presupposition that “the renewal of Christian vitality is linked at least partially to a renewed exploration of the periods and of the works where the Christian tradition is expressed with particular intensity.”

In sum, for the *ressourcement* theologians theology involved a “return to the sources” of Christian faith, for the purpose of drawing out the

meaning and significance of these sources for the critical questions of our time. What these theologians sought was a spiritual and intellectual communion with Christianity in its most vital moments as transmitted to us in its classic texts, a communion which would nourish, invigorate, and rejuvenate twentieth-century Catholicism.

The *ressourcement* movement bore great fruit in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and has deeply influenced the work of Pope John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger, formerly Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, now Pope Benedict XVI.

The present series is rooted in this twentieth-century renewal of theology, above all as the renewal is carried in the spirit of de Lubac and von Balthasar. In keeping with that spirit, the series understands *ressourcement* as revitalization: a return to the sources, for the purpose of developing a theology that will truly meet the challenges of our time. Some of the features of the series, then, will be:

- a return to classical (patristic-mediaeval) sources;
- a renewed interpretation of St. Thomas;
- a dialogue with the major movements and thinkers of the twentieth century, with particular attention to problems associated with the Enlightenment, modernity, liberalism.

The series will publish out-of-print or as yet untranslated studies by earlier authors associated with the *ressourcement* movement. The series also plans to publish works by contemporary authors sharing in the aim and spirit of this earlier movement. This will include interpretations of de Lubac and von Balthasar and, more generally, any works in theology, philosophy, history, literature, and the arts which give renewed expression to an authentic Catholic sensibility.

The editor of the *Ressourcement* series, David L. Schindler, is Gagnon Professor of Fundamental Theology at the John Paul II Institute in Washington, D.C., and editor of the North American edition of *Communio: International Catholic Review*, a federation of journals in thirteen countries founded in Europe in 1972 by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, Joseph Ratzinger, and others.

# 'In the Beginning . . .'

*A Catholic Understanding of the Story  
of Creation and the Fall*

Pope Benedict XVI

Joseph Ratzinger

*Translated by*

Boniface Ramsey, O.P.

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*Gratefully dedicated to  
those who heard these homilies  
in the Liebfrauenkirche in Munich*



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## *Preface*

**T**he human threat to all living things, which is being spoken of everywhere these days, has given a new urgency to the theme of creation.

Paradoxically, however, the creation account is noticeably and nearly completely absent from catechesis, preaching, and even theology. The creation narratives go unmentioned; it is asking too much to expect anyone to speak of them. Against the background posed by this situation I set myself the task, in the early part of 1981, of attempting a creation catechesis for adults in four Lenten homilies in the cathedral of Munich, the *Liebfrauenkirche*. I was unable then to meet the request of many people to publish the homilies in book form; I had no time to go through the transcripts of them that different persons kindly placed at my disposal. Since then, from the perspective of my new work, the critical state of the creation theme in the pres-

ent-day kerygma has become so much more evident that I now feel pressed to bring out the old manuscripts again and prepare them for printing. The basic character of the homilies has not been changed, and the limits imposed by the homiletic form have been taken into consideration. I hope that this little book may be the occasion for others to pursue this theme better than I have, and for the message of the God who is Creator to find its appropriate place once more in the contemporary kerygma.

*Feast of Saint Augustine*  
1985 Rome

JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER

### Author's Note

**F**or the practical abandonment of the doctrine of creation in influential modern theology I would like to mention here just two significant examples. In J. Feiner and L. Fischer, eds., *Neues Glaubensbuch. Degemeinsame christliche Glaube* (Basil-Zurich, 1973), the theme of creation is hidden away in a chapter devoted to "History and Cosmos," which in turn belongs to the fourth part of the book, entitled "Faith and World." The three previous parts deal with "The Question of God," "God in Jesus Christ," and "The New Human Being." One dare not hope for anything more posi-

tive from this arrangement, but the text itself, by A. Dumas and O. H. Pesch, goes beyond one's worst fears. The reader discovers here phrases such as "Concepts like selection and mutation are intellectually much more honest than that of creation" (p. 433); "'Creation' as a cosmic plan is an idea that has seen its day" (ibid.); "The concept of creation is withal an unreal concept" (p. 435); "Creation means a call addressed to the human being. Whatever else may be said about it, even in the Bible, is not the message of creation itself but rather its partly mythological and apocalyptic formulation" (pp. 435-36). Would it be too harsh to say that the continued use of the term "creation" against the background of these presuppositions represents a semantic betrayal?

The same reductionist position, less crassly formulated, appears in *La foi des catholiques. Catéchèse fondamentale* (Paris, 1984). This 736-page work dedicates five full pages to the theme of creation. These are found in the third part, under the heading "Humanity according to the Gospel." (The first two parts are entitled "A Living Faith" and "The Christian Revelation.") Creation is defined as follows: "Thus, in speaking of God as Creator, it is affirmed that the first and final meaning of life is to be found in God himself, most intimately present to our being" (p. 356). Here, too, the term "creation" has completely lost its original meaning. Moreover, in type different from that which appears in the rest of the text and which is

otherwise used for lengthy citations or supplementary texts, the “current objections to creation” are presented in four points, to which the average reader (myself included) can find no response in the text. He would then have to reinterpret creation in an existential sense. With such an “existential” reduction of the creation theme, however, there occurs a huge (if not a total) loss of the reality of the faith, whose God no longer has anything to do with matter.

## FIRST HOMILY

# *God the Creator*

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day. And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And God made the firmament and separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day. And

God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. And God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a third day. And God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

*Genesis 1:1-19*

**T**hese words, with which Holy Scripture begins, always have the effect on me of the solemn tolling of a great old bell, which stirs the heart from afar with its beauty and dignity and gives it an inkling of the mystery of eternity. For many of us, moreover, these words recall the memory of our first encounter with God's holy book, the Bible, which was opened for us at this spot. It at once brought us out of our small child's world, captivated us with its poetry, and gave us a feeling for the immeasurability of creation and its Creator.

Yet these words give rise to a certain conflict. They are beautiful and familiar, but are they also true? Everything seems to speak against it, for science has long since disposed of the concepts that we have just now heard — the idea of a world that is completely comprehensible in terms of space and time, and the idea that creation was built up piece by piece over the course of seven days. Instead of this we now face measurements that transcend all comprehension. Today we hear of the Big Bang, which happened billions of years ago and with which the universe began its expansion — an expansion that continues to occur without interruption. And it was not in neat succession that the stars were hung and the green of the fields created; it was rather in complex ways and over vast periods of time that the earth and the universe were constructed as we now know them.

Do these words, then, count for anything? In fact a

theologian said not long ago that creation has now become an unreal concept. If one is to be intellectually honest one ought to speak no longer of creation but rather of mutation and selection. Are these words true? Or have they perhaps, along with the entire Word of God and the whole biblical tradition, come out of the reveries of the infant age of human history, for which we occasionally experience homesickness but to which we can nevertheless not return, inasmuch as we cannot live on nostalgia? Is there an answer to this that we can claim for ourselves in this day and age?

### **The Difference between Form and Content in the Creation Narrative**

One answer was already worked out some time ago, as the scientific view of the world was gradually crystallizing; many of you probably came across it in your religious instruction. It says that the Bible is not a natural science textbook, nor does it intend to be such. It is a religious book, and consequently one cannot obtain information about the natural sciences from it. One cannot get from it a scientific explanation of how the world arose; one can only glean religious experience from it. Anything else is an image and a way of describing things whose aim is to make profound realities graspable to human beings. One must

distinguish between the form of portrayal and the content that is portrayed. The form would have been chosen from what was understandable at the time — from the images which surrounded the people who lived then, which they used in speaking and in thinking, and thanks to which they were able to understand the greater realities. And only the reality that shines through these images would be what was intended and what was truly enduring. Thus Scripture would not wish to inform us about how the different species of plant life gradually appeared or how the sun and the moon and the stars were established. Its purpose ultimately would be to say one thing: *God* created the world. The world is not, as people used to think then, a chaos of mutually opposed forces; nor is it the dwelling of demonic powers from which human beings must protect themselves. The sun and the moon are not deities that rule over them, and the sky that stretches over their heads is not full of mysterious and adversary divinities. Rather, all of this comes from one power, from God's eternal Reason, which became — in the Word — the power of creation. All of this comes from the same Word of God that we meet in the act of faith. Thus, insofar as human beings realized that the world came from the Word, they ceased to care about the gods and demons. In addition, the world was freed so that reason might lift itself up to God and so that human beings might approach this God fearlessly. In this