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Enlightenment and Ecumenism

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ENLIGHTENMENT AND ECUMENISM: DOM BEDA MAYR, O.S.B. (1742–1794)

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The contribution of monasticism to Christian theology's framework in almost all periods is undisputed. However, the eighteenth century as a period of monastic theology is still—unjustly—overlooked. That was precisely the time when monks, mostly Benedictines, challenged the traditional ways of theologizing and, along with a number of dedicated individuals, initiated what came to be called the Catholic Enlightenment.¹ This movement worked not only for a renewal of ecclesiastical practice and thought, but also for a peaceful dialogue between the Christian churches and even toward an ecumenical theology. One of the most intriguing figures of this enlightened theology is the Swabian Benedictine Beda Mayr (1742–1794)—the forgotten "grandfather" of ecumenical theology.

1. BENEDICTINE ENLIGHTENMENT

There is no clear, monocausal explanation of why the Benedictines became the champions of the Catholic Enlightenment. However, a number of factors contributed to this phenomenon.

First, unlike the Jesuits or the mendicants, the prelate orders were organized in a decentralized way. The advantage of this decentralization was that each superior was free to open or close the doors of his monastery to Enlightenment thought. No abbot was bound, as other religious superiors were, to a specific theological school.2

Second, the houses of the prelate orders communicated with each other on a regular basis and maintained common colleges or novitiates for their monastic students. Only the Benedictines, however, who enjoyed a privileged status in the ancien régime church, seem to have engaged thoroughly in international relations. The correspondence of German Benedictines with their fellows in France and Italy brought the ideas of Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), Malebranche (1638–1715), and Muratori (1672–1750) to study cells in southern Germany.

Third, we can detect not only letter exchange, but another medium of communication, namely the exchange of scholars and students, that contributed to the transfer of knowledge. For example, the monks of St. Emmeram in Regensburg and of St. Blasien in the Black Forest invited professors of the French Maurist abbeys to teach their young monks sacred and modern languages. In exchange, some German monks studied in St. Maur. Even a Parisian study house for Benedictine students from Germany was planned—although never established. The 1683 journey of the erudite French Benedictine Jean Mabillon (1632–1707) through German, Austrian, and Swiss abbeys increased the monks’ enthusiasm for the spirit of St. Maur, that is, for the integration of church history into the theological curriculum and for the careful, critical analysis of historical documents. Even when the monks of St. Maur tried to convert their German brothers to Jansenism or at least philo-Jansenism, the German abbeys (e.g., St. Emmeram in Regensburg) initially rebutted such attempts.3 Yet, over time, the publications of the Maurists spread the ideas of a Jansenist church reform in Germany. This philo-Jansenism included a clear preference for the church of the first centuries over medieval theology, criticism of privileges for the clergy connected with an appeal for the renewal of church structure in the light of the Holy Scriptures, criticism of ecclesiastical and papal infallibility, and support for a stronger influence of local churches on dogmatic decisions or episcopal appointments. Separated


from their origin in a dogmatic heresy about predestination and rigorism, these ideas soon became central to the eighteenth-century Catholic Enlightenment.

Fourth, besides letters and scholars, a book exchange system was established. The Benedictine monks in southern Germany not only sent free copies of their publications to other abbeys—including ones abroad—in order to receive their scholarly works in return, but they also had invented a highly sophisticated interlibrary loan system that allowed Benedictine scholars to have access to the rarest books on the continent.

Fifth, Benedictines all over Europe tried to organize themselves into scholarly societies. While the founding of a Benedictine academy in the empire was not successful until the 1790s, the monks contributed heavily to the other scholarly societies, for instance, the Olmütz Academy of the Unknown or the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.

Sixth, these innovative ways of communication and transfer of knowledge steadily decreased the fear of contamination with Protestant thought and increased the readiness of the Benedictines to engage with the most pressing contemporary problems in theology, philosophy, science, and church politics. Many monks saw no problem in corresponding with Protestants. Here are just a few examples: When the Italian Benedictine Cardinal Quirini travelled to Swabia in 1748, he met a Lutheran theologian in order to discuss the works of Christian Wolff. Around the same time, Oliver Legipont wanted to start the Benedictine Academy of Sciences, for which he recommended a Protestant, Johann Christoph Gottsched, as honorary member.

Seventh, the influence of the Enlightenment on Catholics increased around 1740 or 1750, when the philosophy of Christian Wolff (1679–1754) became acceptable to Catholic scholars, since it promised to be a positive improvement of philosophical theology and an apologetic weapon in the fight against freethinking. In his books, Wolff gave a rebuttal to skepticism and Spinozism, as well as an integration of all sciences to the end of an encyclopedia of knowledge. He principally acknowledged the rights of theology in his system, which was based upon rigorous application of the "mathematical method" and intended to be understood as modern Scholasticism. However, for the Benedictines, Mabillon was not

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far off from Wolff, since the latter regarded the *cognitio historic* as the foundation of philosophical knowledge and regarded the application of historical scholarship—very much like Bossuet—as an important tool for teaching the virtues. This might explain to a certain extent why Wolff's "mathematical method" gained ground particularly in those Benedictine abbeys of Germany that had been influenced by Maurist historical-critical scholarship. A Benedictine Wolffianism evolved, which was followed by a broad and positive reception of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Johann G. Fichte (1762–1814) until the nationwide dissolution of the monasteries in 1802–1803 put an end to the experiment of monastic Enlightenment, in which the Swabian Benedictine Abbey of the Holy Cross in Donauwörth, near Augsburg, had played a crucial part.

2. LIFE AND WORK OF BEDA MAYR, O.S.B.

Beda Mayr was born on 17 January 1742, in Taiting, close to the village Dasing (diocese of Augsburg) to an upper-middle-class family of farmers and was given the name Felix Nolanus. After attending the abbey school at Scheyern and the high school in Augsburg, he studied philosophy in Munich for two years and then mathematics in Freiburg/Breisgau. In 1761, he was received into the Abbey of the Holy Cross in Donauwörth, where he professed his solemn vows on 29 September 1762 and received the name Beda. After three years of studying theology at the common Benedictine college in Benediktbeuern, he was ordained a priest on 6 January 1766. Just a year later, Mayr was appointed to serve as professor of philosophy and theology within the abbey, a duty that he fulfilled until 1785. Occasionally he also taught natural sciences and mathematics, and even published in these fields. However, it

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was his fifty-seven other publications that made Beda Mayr a famous name within German theology. The Catholic universities of Ingolstadt, Dillingen, and Salzburg offered him professorships, all of which he declined.12

From 1772 until 1776 Mayr worked as a pastor in the village of Mündling, where he made contact with the Protestant superintendent Wasser and other Protestants.13 He hoped for a reunion of the great Christian denominations and to solve the problem of its alleged biggest stumbling block, the papacy and ecclesiastical infallibility. During these years, Mayr also became acquainted with popular Enlightenment publications, which prompted him to publish a plea for the use of the vernacular in the Roman liturgy in 1777. In 1776–1777, he became prior of his monastery.14

A year later, however, Beda was at the center of an enormous scandal when a personal letter to his friend, the school reformer and ex-Benedictine (Abbey of Tegernsee) Heinrich Braun (1732–1792), was published without his knowledge or consent under the title *First Step towards the Future Reunification of the Catholic and Protestant Churches* (1778).15 It was put on the *Index of Forbidden Books* on 31 July 1783. The uproar was so great that a number of theologians started to conspire against Mayr. Even some of his fellow monks denounced him as a "Lutheran heretic."16 As a result, an official episcopal visit to the monastery of Donauwörth took place.17 Its board members asked Mayr to give a written explanation of his letter. This explanation was officially approved but never published because the abbey did not want to contribute to the ongoing theological controversy over one of its members.18

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17. The visitation protocols describe the situation of the abbey as being better than it had been in 1769 or in 1774. However, the community was split in 1778. Hörmann, "P. Beda Mayr," 204.
Even though Beda was acquitted, in 1779 the episcopal chancery of Augsburg pressed for Mayr's dismissal as professor of the monastic college.\(^\text{19}\) The only person to disapprove of this step and to defend Mayr was Abbot Gallus Hammerl (1776–1793), under whose patronage the Abbey of the Holy Cross had become a center of enlightened thought and liberal arts.\(^\text{20}\) He was already used to encountering resentment to Enlightenment ideals in his own monastery—and in the diocese of Augsburg.\(^\text{21}\) Mayr could continue to work, but he was required to send his lecture notes and theses to the abbot and the episcopal chancery for approval.\(^\text{22}\) The censors were never able to find anything “revolutionary” in these writings, since the basis of his lectures were \textit{auctores probati}. Mayr’s new ideas were reserved for the academic circles outside the monastery.\(^\text{23}\) He never taught his theology students the new philosophy because, in his view, the Enlightenment seduced young monks all too easily to adopt a libertine lifestyle, which was essentially hostile to the monastic one.\(^\text{24}\) If a monk were to find Enlightenment on his own, then Mayr regarded this as a blessing, although he did not encourage him to pursue it. Why? Beda Mayr knew very well the dynamics of living in a community, and the clash of new and old ways of thinking could easily destroy a monastery. “Either all have to think—on the same level—in an enlightened manner, which is hard to hope for, or nobody.”\(^\text{25}\) Supporting a monk’s ideas about the Enlightenment could also easily make him proud so that he would look down on his brothers and protest against monastic obedience.\(^\text{26}\) Finally, he might regard his vows as null and void, but because of the state laws he would be forced to stay for the rest of his life “unhappily” wed to his community.\(^\text{27}\) This considerate kind of theologizing, which was not in the least directed against divine revelation, the sacraments, or the church, disappointed radical Enlighteners who thought that Mayr would stand by their side.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{19. Hörmann, “P. Beda Mayr,” 193.}
\footnote{21. Mayr, \textit{Apologie}, 167. Hörmann, “P. Beda Mayr,” 191. The visitation minutes were destroyed in World War II. Therefore I quote Hörmian, who was able to work with the originals long before the war.}
\footnote{22. Hörmann, “P. Beda Mayr,” 208.}
\footnote{23. Hörmann, “P. Beda Mayr,” 192; Mayr, \textit{Apologie}, 4.}
\footnote{24. Mayr, \textit{Apologie}, 163.}
\footnote{25. Mayr, \textit{Apologie}, 163.}
\footnote{27. Mayr, \textit{Apologie}, 164.}
\end{footnotes}
Like Benedict Stattler, S.J. (1728–1797), Beda Mayr attempted to implement Enlightenment thought in his theology in order to reform Catholicism from within and to free it from the "burdens" of Scholasticism. Stattler, professor of systematic theology in Ingolstadt, was certainly the most prominent Catholic theologian of the German-speaking lands. His multivolume Wolffian philosophy was initially praised as a renewal of the Catholic university curriculum, but when he applied Wolff's principles to theology, he increasingly caused unease among theologians, who feared that these ideas would result in semirationalism. The rise of Kant, his main opponent, brought an end to his reception in the academy; and Stattler's influence in the church became limited when his greatest theological work was censored because of the weak position he assigned to the pope. However, unlike Stattler, Mayr built his own theological system without the help of Wolffianism. Mayr never questioned Christ's role as the only savior or the legitimacy and authority of the Catholic Church since he was convinced that Christianity was the source of all true Enlightenment and that only the neglect and abuse of doctrines had led to the eclipse of reason. Furthermore, he was confident that, in the face of the massive critique of religion in the eighteenth century, the doctrines of (ecclesiastical and papal) infallibility and tradition needed to be redefined with the newest means of logic and Enlightenment insights into morality and praxis, lest they wither away altogether.

One of Mayr's major theological writings was a trilogy called Defense of Natural, Christian and Catholic Religion (1787–1789), written to address in detail the work of late Enlightenment thinkers (especially Lessing) and to propagate the moderate Catholic Enlightenment ideals of Ludovico Muratori and others. These volumes were considered a new summa of Catholic theology. Not only a brilliant academic, Mayr also supported reform: he thought that the powers of the papacy regarding jurisdiction and the declaration of magisterial teaching should be more restricted than did most of his contemporaries, but foremost he became famous as a champion of ecumenism. Unfortunately, the late publication of this important work resulted in his never achieving the fame of his work's contemporaries. The second and third volumes were printed when the French Revolution began. Soon afterward, the Napoleonic wars put an end to the German ecclesiastical system and contributed indirectly to ultramontanism, to which Mayr's view of the papacy was unacceptable.

30. Mayr, Vertheidigung, 3:V–VI.
Moreover, Mayr’s most important works, his *The First Step towards Future Reunion between the Catholic and Protestant Church* (1778), as well as his trilogy had been placed on the *Roman Index of Forbidden Books.*

Despite the censoring or because of it, the *Defense of Natural, Christian and Catholic Religion* became a Catholic bestseller. However, a number of theologians felt uncomfortable about Mayr’s sympathies towards certain Enlightenment ideas, for instance, criticism, and charged him with Enlightenment proselytizing, which he vehemently denied. Yet critics, especially the intransigent ex-Jesuit Johann Evangelist Hochbichler (1740–1817), claimed he was an apostate. Responding to these accusations cost him considerable time and energy. Exhausted, he died at the abbey in Donauwörth on 28 April 1794.

3. THE ECUMENICAL DESIRE

The growth of radical Deism in Germany in the second half of the eighteenth century forced Protestant and Catholic scholars sincerely to consider reuniting their forces. Already Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Jerusalem (1709–1789), in his speech *Von der Kirchenvereinigung,* which was published without his consent in 1772, spoke of the necessity of ecumenical task forces. At the same time, however, he described Catholic traditions (e.g., the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church) as illegitimate “additions.”

The Catholic thinker Jakob Heinrich von Gerstenberg (1712–1776) made this view more precise in his *Allgemeine Gedanken von der Trennung der Christen* (1773). He stated that ecclesiastical infallibility is the centerpiece of Catholic theology and the biggest stumbling block for reunification. Mayr read Jerusalem’s *Betrachtungen über die Wahrheit der christlichen Religion* and his short piece on the reunification, and it is very likely that he also knew Gerstenberg since his book was available in the monastery library.

Mayr was, like Gerstenberg, inspired by the thought of a reunion of the Christian churches, even if he personally had doubts that such a step would be taken within his lifetime. His twenty-two-page publication, *The First Step towards the Future Reunification of the Catholic and

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32. See note 15 above.
33. Rauwolf, “P. Beda Mayr,” 320, quotes the necrology of Hl. Kreuz (Stadtarchiv Donauwörth III/c), which gives the correct date and supersedes the wrong date passed on in secondary sources.
37. Mayr, *Vertheidigung,* 3:XVII.
Protestant Churches (1778), which was put on the Index in 1783, expresses a decisive farewell to "classical" but fruitless polemic theology.\(^{38}\) It is an honest piece of theological reflection, mostly because it was never intended for publication but was a private letter to a friend.

The pamphlet starts with an analysis of the current state of ecumenical dialogue. Mayr describes how both sides, Protestant and Catholic, cling to sectarian monologues instead of talking with each other. Mayr wanted to soften the petrified denominational borders, first of all by acknowledging Protestant erudition, goodwill, and good conscience, all of which were great achievements: only a few decades before, the Catholic theologian Nikolaus Weislinger, himself a convert, had severely damaged interdenominational rapport with his ferocious attacks on Luther.\(^{39}\) With this statement Mayr tried to bring both camps of theology together to join in rigorous academic negotiations concerning a possible reunion.\(^{40}\) An Academy of Reunification consisting of Protestant and Catholic theologians would be, in Mayr's mind, the institutional framework for this kind of challenge.\(^{41}\) The theologians of the academy would review all different doctrines and then work on possible solutions. The final drafts of the solutions were then supposed to be handed over to the church (most likely Catholic) for a decision.\(^{42}\) As a formal secretary of the academy, the professor for reunification would have to guide the committed theologians to be tolerant, irenic, highly argumentative, and constructive.\(^{43}\) In the revised edition of the First Step, published in the third volume of the Defense (1789), Mayr himself seems to play the role of the reunification professor when he collects all different doctrines and gives suggestions for ecumenical agreements.\(^{44}\) It was not extraordinary for a Benedictine to put so much trust in a society of academics. Some decades earlier it was the Benedictine order that helped to start the distinguished Bavarian Academy of Sciences (1759). Simply put, the monks trusted in the corporate power of reason.\(^{45}\)

\(^{38}\) See note 15 above.


\(^{40}\) Mayr, Der erste Schritt, 14.

\(^{41}\) Mayr, Der erste Schritt, 12–14.

\(^{42}\) Spehr, Aufklärung und Ökumene, 121.

\(^{43}\) Mayr, Der erste Schritt, 18–19.

\(^{44}\) Spehr, Aufklärung und Ökumene, 134.

Like the Protestant thinkers who inspired him, Mayr considered ecclesiastical and papal infallibility to be the central problem of ecumenism. Therefore, he focused on a critical examination of the concept of infallibility in regard to its legitimacy and extension. He hoped that a compromise on this subject could bring about or at least start the reunification process. Other different doctrines—for instance, sacramental confession, confirmation, purgatory, and so forth—were reduced by Mayr to the level of school disputes, which must not impede the reunification.

4. RECEPTION AND RESISTANCE

Benedikt Werkmeister (1745–1823), the radical ex-monk, considered Mayr’s First Step one of the groundbreaking events of Enlightenment Catholicism because it was considered by contemporaries the first public commitment of a Catholic professor to ecumenism. The attempts at reunification by the Benedictines of Fulda (ca. 1776–1783), initiated by the reformed theologian Johann Rudolf Anton Piderit (1720–1791), were influenced by Mayr’s work, even if their leaders, Peter Böhm, O.S.B. (1747–1822), and Karl von Piesport, O.S.B. (1716–1800), a philo-Jansenist, criticized the First Step severely. Böhm considered Mayr’s pamphlet—like the cathedral preacher of Augsburg, Aloys Merz (1727–1792)—as being outside the boundaries of Catholic theology. Since Böhm was still unaware of Mayr’s authorship, he doubted the Catholicity of the writer: “In my opinion, this is a Step which cannot come from a Catholic; if he really is Catholic, this was his ‘First Step’ towards becoming Protestant.” Despite this harsh critique, Mayr was asked to join the ecumenical circle around Piderit and Böhm, but it is highly unlikely that he accepted the invitation. Prince-Abbot Martin II Gerbert, O.S.B. (1720–1793), of St.

46. Mayr, Der erste Schritt, 11.
47. Mayr, Der erste Schritt, 9–10.
48. Benedikt Werkmeister, Thomas Freykirch: Oder freymüthige Untersuchungen über die Unfehlbarkeit der katholischen Kirche [... ] (Frankfurt und Leipzig [i.e., Göttingen]: 1792), XV.
49. Piesport, who was also quite critical of papal infallibility, had good contacts with the Jansenist Maurit monks in France. Cf. Spehr, Aufklärung und Ökumene, 155n40. Cf. Spehr, Aufklärung und Ökumene, 127–245.
51. Letter of Peter Böhm to Johann Gertz (1744–1824); quoted in Spehr, Aufklärung und Ökumene, 161.
52. Piderit’s main critique focused on Mayr’s proposal to advertise a “reunification award” for the best submitted essay. Cf. Spehr, Aufklärung und Ökumene, 218, 240.
Blasien also refused to participate in the ecumenical Fulda plan by pointing to the failure of the First Step and its inappropriate critique of infallibility.\textsuperscript{53} The Protestant Johann Salomo Semler (1757–1791) criticized the Piderit-Böhm plan as well as Mayr’s in his Freimütige Briefe (1783), because the reunification project sacrificed, in his opinion, the positive side of personal religious subjectivism for the sake of institutional ecclesiastical belief and unity.\textsuperscript{54}

Some critics of the First Step even spread the rumor of Beda Mayr’s apostasy, a rumor that was unfortunately only too plausible, as he would not have been the first Benedictine to have broken with the church.\textsuperscript{55} Alois Merz said in 1778 that even the slightest disagreement with parts of the doctrine on infallibility would lead to doubts about the incorruptibility of the church and its doctrines, or at least indifferentism about them.\textsuperscript{56} Matthias von Schönberg (1734–1792) thought almost the same thing because he posited that ecclesiastical infallibility ensured the truth of the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{57} Furthermore, leading Protestant scholars, such as Justus Möser (1720–1794), also commented on Mayr’s pamphlet in his Schreiben an den P. J. K. in W... den ersten Schritt zur künftigen Vereinigung der Evangelischen und Katholischen Kirche betreffend (1780), with the main difference being that Möser regarded the primacy of the pope as a political rather than a theological stumbling block.\textsuperscript{58}

Germany’s leading Catholic theologian, the ex-Jesuit Benedikt Stattler, a moderate Wolffian, praised Mayr’s work in the appendix to his treatise on the sacraments in the Theologia Christiana Theoretica, even if it went too far for his taste.\textsuperscript{59} Instead, he put forward his own thoughts about a possible reunification. But unlike Mayr, Stattler did not see the magisterial definitions of doctrines as a “burden” for ecumenical discussions, and he regarded the idea of common, most fundamental beliefs that Protestants and Catholics could draw directly from the Bible (in the spirit of John

\textsuperscript{53} Spehr, Aufklärung und Ökumene, 194.
\textsuperscript{54} Spehr, Aufklärung und Ökumene, 360.
\textsuperscript{56} Merz, Frag, 7–8, 32.
\textsuperscript{57} Matthias von Schönberg, Die Wahrheitsgründe des katholischen Hauptgrundsatzes für die Unfehlbarkeit der Kirche wider den sogenannten ersten Schritt (München: 1779).
\textsuperscript{59} The Enlightenment tendencies of the Jesuits in Southern Germany before the dissolution in 1773 are described by Winfried Müller, “Aufklärungstendenzen bei den süddeutschen Jesuiten zur Zeit der Ordensaufhebung,” Zeitschrift für Bayerische Landesgeschichte 54 (1991): 203–217. Müller is unfortunately still right in pointing to the fact that the “methodological openness” of the Jesuits in the eighteenth century has never been researched in depth.
Locke) as a bad compromise.\textsuperscript{60} Stattler gave a detailed critique of the \textit{First Step} and the ecumenical thoughts of the \textit{Defense} in his pro-reunification book, \textit{Plan zu der alleinmöglichen Vereinigung im Glauben der Protestanten mit der katholischen Kirche und den Grenzen der Möglichkeiten} (1790).\textsuperscript{61} However, recent scholarship has overlooked the fact that Mayr was indebted to the achievements of Stattler. As an analysis of the third volume of Mayr's \textit{Defense} demonstrates, he was especially influenced by Stattler's grand new system of Catholic theology.\textsuperscript{62} Unlike some other of Stattler's concepts, however, Mayr considered Stattler's plan for a reunion with Protestants to be futile, because it did not make any concessions regarding the stumbling block of ecumenism: infallibility.\textsuperscript{63}

Mayr's harshest and most malevolent critic, though, was the ex-Jesuit Johann Evangelist Hochbichler from Augsburg. He rightly recognized tradition and infallibility as the focal points of Mayr's third volume of the \textit{Defense}, but he himself lacked a coherent concept of tradition. Also, his polemical tone is a sad example of the viciousness that Beda Mayr had to endure. Hochbichler even alluded to Mayr's hair color and his limp in order to compare him with Judas Iscariot.\textsuperscript{64} Such personal attacks, which also declared Mayr a godless atheist or heretic without ever addressing his ideas, were especially harmful to the monk's soul.\textsuperscript{65} Other critics were appalled by Mayr's statement that his work was deliberately on the cutting edge of Catholic doctrine.\textsuperscript{66}

5. CONTENT OF THE DEFENSE OF CATHOLIC RELIGION

The third volume of Mayr's \textit{Defense} is not a mere apology of the Catholic faith. It is an ecumenical attempt to find a common denominator with

\textsuperscript{60} Benedict Stattler, "\textit{Anacaephaleosis ad DD. Protestantes in Germania et Proposito Conditionum sub quibus solis Unio Religionis Exoptata possibilis est,}" in \textit{Theologia Christiana Theoretica}, vol. 6, \textit{De Sacramentis} (Eichstätt: 1780), II–IV.
\textsuperscript{61} Benedikt Stattler, \textit{Plan zu der alleinmöglichen Vereinigung im Glauben der Protestanten mit der katholischen Kirche und den Grenzen der Möglichkeiten} (Munich: 1791), 159–279.
\textsuperscript{62} Stattler is quoted numerous times with praise or at least appreciation, especially his \textit{Demonstratio Catholica} and his \textit{De Locis Theologicis}, both of which later ended up on the \textit{Index of Forbidden Books}.
\textsuperscript{63} Mayr, \textit{Vertheidigung}, 3:284, cf. Stattler, "\textit{Anacaephaleosis.}"
\textsuperscript{66} Mayr, \textit{Antwort}, 14–16.
Protestant theology in terms of different doctrines. For this reason, Mayr regards it as necessary to alter even traditional school opinions, that is, nondefined doctrines.\(^{67}\) He begins by making a number of suggestions and awaits a thorough examination by the magisterium and his fellow academic theologians. However, he is eager to emphasize that such "suggestions" are not his own "standpoints," but merely points worthy of further consideration:

I will not be afraid . . . to present my thoughts to the academic public. Should they be misjudged by some and disapproved by others without thorough examination because they are new, or because they appear to be new, there are others among Catholics and Protestants who make it their obligation to examine everything and to keep the good things. They judge an opinion not according to ordinary prejudices . . . like: No theologian ever went so far before. That is new, therefore condemnable. That is old, therefore good. Did he receive heavenly inspiration, so that he now claims to have insight into what nobody saw before? The old theologians were no fools, and they did not know of such things, etc. I hope that I find one or two theologians who are not against me before they have actually examined what I wrote. I even hope to find some Protestants who will say of me "That man deserves to be heard. What he says is not completely worthless."\(^{68}\)

The new idea that Mayr alludes to is his concept of limited infallibility, which he had already proposed in the First Step. He does not give up infallibility as a whole, but he carefully attempts to find its essential and original core.\(^{69}\) Then he goes on to show how the Catholic Church, without giving up its depositum fidei, can enable a reunion with the Protestant churches by compromising on this doctrine. In this respect, Mayr regarded the distinction between immediate or direct, and mediate or indirect revelation as especially helpful (see below).\(^{70}\)

An essential component of his proposal is an ecumenical methodology. To achieve an interdenominational agreement, the Catholic side cannot follow the majority of its Scholastic authorities in a discussion about a doctrinal difference if this majority opinion would be an impediment to a reunion. Rather, it must follow the minority opinion as long as that would not compromise magisterially defined doctrines, and as long as it would be truly beneficial for ecumenism.\(^{71}\) This shows Mayr's staunchly held belief that the scandal of a separated Christianity must be overcome. However, this revolutionary principle of ecumenical theology not only

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\(^{67}\) Mayr, Vertheidigung, 3:IV-VII.

\(^{68}\) Mayr, Vertheidigung, 3:VI-VII, XX.

\(^{69}\) Mayr, Vertheidigung, 3:XVIII-XIX.

\(^{70}\) Mayr, Vertheidigung, 3:XV.

\(^{71}\) Mayr, Vertheidigung, 3:XI.
demonstrates the self-confidence of this Benedictine, but it also indicates a considerable disagreement on the merit of “theological school opinions” in the late eighteenth century and suggests that Mayr was ready to stretch Catholic doctrine to its very limits.\textsuperscript{72} He was prepared to leave the majority of Catholic theologians behind for the sake of ecumenism.

6. THE LIMITS OF INFALLIBILITY

Mayr’s discussion about the concept of infallibility has its background in early modern Catholic ecclesiology, which was written, in reaction to the Reformation, almost entirely in the form of an apologetic treatise. It was not the doctrine of the church as God’s people that was the focal point in Scholasticism, but the church’s hierarchical structure and its magisterium. Therefore, Cardinal Yves Congar (1904–1995) described the classical treatise on ecclesiology as “hierarchology,” and Ulrich Valeske defined it more subtly as “apologetic ecclesiology.”\textsuperscript{73} Infallibility in this instance meant the \textit{infallibilitas in docendo}, which—according to such authorities as Gazzaniga; Engelbert Klüpfel, O.E.S.A. (1733–1811);\textsuperscript{74} Simpert Schwarzhueber, O.S.B. (1727–1795); Stephan Wiest, O.Cist. (1748–1797); Aloys Merz; and Johann Evangelist Hochbichler—is extended to the universal episcopacy alone.\textsuperscript{75} In their view, only the worldwide episcopacy is the highest and infallible judge in questions of faith and morals. With this definition, the German theologians named above distanced themselves polemically from Protestantism, rationalism, any kind of private revelation theory, and an exaggerated ultramontanism. The theories about ecclesiastical and papal infallibility were not yet dogmatically defined and, thus, were disputable school opinions.

Therefore, the sixth part of the \textit{Defense}, in which the Benedictine argues for a new understanding of infallibility, is the most theologically challenging part of his book. For, if the aim of infallibility is the certainty of salvation for the faithful, infallibility cannot extend beyond the necessary elements of faith and morals.\textsuperscript{76} Mayr thought it was a crucial mistake of polemical theology to remain silent about the limits of infallibility. With his new ecumenical theology he wanted to encourage the


\textsuperscript{73} Bei Bantle, \textit{Unfehlbarkeit der Kirche}, 41.

\textsuperscript{74} In Klüpfel’s view, not only the bishops, but also the priests participate in ecclesiastical infallibility. Cf. Engelbert Klüpfel, \textit{Institutiones theologiae dogmaticae in usum auditorum}, 2 vols. (Wien: 1789), at 1:150–51.

\textsuperscript{75} Bantle, \textit{Unfehlbarkeit der Kirche}, 45.

\textsuperscript{76} Cf. Mayr, \textit{Apologie}, 210–11.
Protestants to "accept all doctrines of the Catholic Church as revealed by God." 77 This new and limited concept of infallibility had, for Mayr, the potential to remove the last big stumbling block for a denominational reunion: "I call infallibility the privilege which Christ gave to his Church: to teach everything without the danger of falling into error and to teach what is necessary or useful for the faithful to achieve eternal blessedness. This also includes that she cannot teach anything that leads the faithful away from the order of salvation." 78

He viewed the church as being not only fallible in the realm of the dogmatic facts (facta dogmatica), but possibly also in the realm of truths about the faith. Certainly, such an error could not be material, but only formal, for instance, if the church were to declare an unrevealed doctrine to be revealed (such as purgatory). Such a virtual and formal error would not affect the holy order of salvation, especially if the doctrine in question were useful for the advancement of saving one's soul. 79 If somebody did not believe a doctrine that the church teaches to be revealed, he certainly would not lose salvation, but only lose a good and helpful means that could have helped him to achieve his final end. Therefore, even an "erroneous" teaching, that is a wrong proposition about the revelation status of a doctrine, would not be completely wrong, because the church can never err in teaching something helpful for achieving eternal bliss. Interestingly, Mayr saves the infallibility of the church by pointing to the primacy of ethics and praxis:

The doctrine, which we presuppose, is good and leads us into the order of salvation. In this the Church does not err, since she recommends a certain doctrine as useful. But the faithful do not necessarily need to know whether the doctrine is of direct divine origin, because the doctrine aims at the improvement of the heart, and such a proposition does not have any necessary influence on doctrines of faith or morals. Therefore such declarations cannot be part of ecclesiastical infallibility. Consequently, the Church does not lose trustworthiness if she errs in things that are beyond the sphere of infallibility. 80

In Mayr's view, such a limited account of infallibility would be appealing to Protestants. 81 Again, he denied the claim, made by some of his fellow Catholics, that his project would undermine the authority of the church by explaining once more and in detail his differentiated concept of revelation: Even if a doctrine is not directly revealed through Jesus Christ and the apostles, there remains the possibility, which becomes an

77. Mayr, Vertheidigung, 3:264.
obligation in the light of the church’s authority, to regard such a doctrine as indirectly revealed. However, such a mediate revelation has to possess a biblical foundation, even if its main point is derived from reason. With such a distinction Mayr distanced himself from most of his contemporaries (e.g., Eusebius Amort), who regarded mediate revelation as a necessary deduction or consequence from directly revealed truths. Nevertheless, doctrines of such a mediate character must not be mistaken for “school opinions” (sententiae), which never have the weight of the whole church’s witness on their side. When, for example, the Council of Trent declared the seven sacraments to be directly instituted by Christ, whereas most Protestants accept only Baptism and Eucharist as sacraments because of their biblical foundation, Catholicism could regard the latter two as directly revealed and the other five as indirectly revealed through Christ in the church (viam ecclesiam): “Nobody can really deny the Church the power of instituting new sacraments, because of the ordinary promise of Christ to bind his grace to external signs, which the Church finds necessary to remind the faithful of important truths and to strengthen their inner holiness.”

Even a hint from Christ (and Mayr viewed it as much more than that) would have given the church enough authority to institute the other sacraments. It also worth noting that Mayr tried to reinforce his “project” by using the decrees of Trent, which, in his eyes, left the direct or indirect revelation of the sacraments open for discussion—a bold and idiosyncratic way of reading Trent! Some of Mayr’s authorities for the differentiation of the concept of revelation were well-known theologians; however, a detailed recent study could show that there is an unbridgeable gap between these theologians and Mayr.

What the theologians of the past and of more recent times understand by mediate or indirect revelation would fall in Mayr’s system in the category immediate or direct revelation. Is it possible that Mayr did not realize this? In my opinion he realized it very well! It appears to me that Mayr wants to minimize or even hide the “new” and “outrageous” aspect of his project.

In sum, Mayr opposed the totality of Catholic theologians with his reading of Trent, but most importantly he opposed the self-understanding

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82. Eusebius Amort, Theologia eclectia, moralis et scholastica (Augsburg et Würzburg: 1752), vol. 1, tract. 4, pars 2 de fide, disp. 1, q. 6, Notandum 5, 55. Mayr, Vertheidigung, 3:280.
84. Mayr, Anhang, 3:369.
85. Mayr, Vertheidigung, 3:282–83. Mayr shows also that in his view the diaconate as well as the indissolvability of marriage are only “indirectly” revealed, cf., Vertheidigung, 3:365–71.
86. Mayr, Anhang, 3:371. He refutes the opinion of Bellarmine, Vasquez, Becanus, and Isambert, who claim that the institution of the sacraments is an articulus fidei, cf. 3:370.
87. Bantle, Unfehlbarkeit und Kirche, 403.
of the council inasmuch as he refused to understand the defined doctrinal differences as part of the Christian revelation (*de fide divina*). Furthermore, the question is justified as to whether Mayr’s concept of ecclesiastical fallibility would harm the reputation of the church, since it would mean that the church had taught in error for over two hundred years that certain propositions were *dogmata fide divina credenda*. However, such criticism leaves out Mayr’s main point, namely that the different, dividing doctrines are necessary to achieve salvation. Even if the reputation of the church were damaged, its doctrines and practices would not have to change, Mayr insisted.

If one does not take the theological concept of revelation into account, Beda Mayr’s theses seem insipid. In the context of a *classicist canon of revelation*, though, which saw the church only as witness, an infallible definition of the magisterium entails that this definition is implied in the *depositum fidelis*.

7. **THE DILEMMA OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM**

Despite the enormous influence of Protestant theology on Mayr, it would be an exaggeration to reduce his sensitivity for the historical development of dogma solely to Protestant impact since the Benedictine was first and foremost a champion of Enlightenment Catholicism. As recent scholarship has shown, this line of thought was less influenced by non-Catholic sources than previously had been thought. Rather, it was the late implementation of the reform spirit of Trent, combined with Enlightenment ideas. One of the most direct influences on the development of the Catholic Enlightenment was the scholarship of the Benedictine congregation of St. Maur in France. The monks there pioneered in historical-critical erudition and initiated a new interest for serious historiography throughout

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Catholic Europe. However, with the new interest in history, there also arose a new sensitivity for the historical growth of theological and monastic traditions. That Beda Mayr was fully aware of the wide-ranging consequences which historical criticism had for theology is shown by his preoccupation with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781). Despite his sincere attempt to refute some of Lessing’s ideas, the Benedictine did not hit the real point of Lessing’s argument: whether absolute certainties (e.g., God’s existence) can be built on hypothetical certainties (miracles, etc.) “by simply turning the problem around: in his work [Mayr’s] the truths of reason guarantee the truths of history.” So, Beda’s meritorious treatment of Lessing, possibly the first Catholic one, misunderstood the Wolfenbüttel librarian. Mayr’s view of Lessing conforms to the overall view of the system of Mayr’s theology that we have gained so far: although he accepted ideas from Protestant historical criticism, he could not work with them fruitfully because he was unable to free himself completely from the ahistorical concept of revelation in Catholic Scholasticism. At the bottom of Mayr’s theology, the faith of Jesus and the apostles was identical with his own in the eighteenth century. Thus, one can detect two contradictory principles in Mayr’s thought: historical awareness and ahistorical Scholasticism. This foreshadows the dilemma of neo-Scholasticism in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

But what could have been the reason for Mayr’s dilemma? Beda Mayr read the historical achievements of Protestant scholarship through the lenses of Maurist erudition, which explains why he viewed the ideas of Semler, Walch, Less, and Döderlein critically. His colleagues Matthias Dannenmayer (1744–1805) and Kaspar Ruef (1748–1825) at the University of Freiburg/Breisgau did the same regarding the doctrine of infallibility. They, too, emphasized the primacy of historical scholarship, which alone could bring about the identity of ecclesiastical dogma and Christian revelation, even if this meant that the tradition of the church had to be “corrected.” Felix Anton Blau’s (1754–1798) De regula fidei catholicae also

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94. Rene Prosper Tassin’s (1697–1777) Histoire litteraire de la Congregation de Saint-Maur (1770), which was translated into German as Gelehrtengeschichte der Congregation von St-Maur, Benedictiner Ordens (Frankfurt et Leipzig: 1773–1774), is still a gold mine.
96. Niemann, Jesus, 275.
97. Niemann, Jesus, 280.
100. Bantle, Unfehlbarkeit der Kirche, 343.
stuck to historical-critical thinking and asked for a clear proof of infal­libility in the Scriptures or the oldest traditions.101 The absence of such a “clear” proof even led him to deny this doctrine completely. The Bene­dictine (until 1791) Benedikt Maria Werkmeister (1745–1823) did the same in his infamous book *Thomas Freykirch.*102 As distinct from Gazzaniga, Wi­est, and the authorities of Catholic school theology, Dannenmayer, Ruef, and Blau did not identify the content of Catholic faith with the one the apostles held.103 However, their historical-critical thinking, like Mayr’s, stopped halfway through, since they merged the historical awareness of Maurist and Protestant historiography with the ahistorical concept of a revelation that does not develop over time. Mayr proved himself to be a captive of this line of thought; he realized that ahistorical apologetics were the theological means of the past, yet at the same time he could not find a way to reconcile historical-critical achievements with the Catholic creed.104

Mayr’s most up-to-date idea was his differentiation between direct and indirect revelation, as it led to an ecumenical concept of a hierarchy of truths that was “reanimated” in the church during Vatican II.105 During that council, Mayr’s ideas were discussed—even if his name was not men­tioned and even if it is doubtful that the council fathers knew of him—and through council fathers like Archbishop Andrea Pangrazio (1909–2005), Mayr’s concept received acceptability. Pangrazio differentiated between dogmatic truths that derive from God’s final aim (i.e., redemption) and those derived from the means of the order of salvation (*Heilsmittel*). Only the first (e.g., the Incarnation, etc.) can claim to be necessary for salva­tion, not the latter (e.g., seven sacraments, etc.). Interestingly, like Mayr, Pangrazio put the different dividing doctrines into the second category.106 Taken together, recent Catholic theology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has much more in common with the work of Beda Mayr than he had with his contemporary critics.107

8. ENLIGHTENMENT ECCLESIOLOGY?

Much more radical than his critique of the Curia, which owed its due share to Jansenist influences, is Mayr’s ecclesiology. In his theological system, the church could no longer hold claim to the title “mediator of salvation,” except as a teacher whose dogmas are helpful but not essential or necessary for achieving eternal beatitude. This reductionism is probably derived from radical Enlightenment theology, which had lost sight of the sacramental character of the church and instead regarded it only as a moral teacher. Furthermore, Mayr claimed that the church had to remain absolutely silent about the revelation status of all doctrines. Only then could the divided Christian brethren accept a doctrine as an “ecclesiastical teaching” and not as a “truth of faith.” Whoever did not want to accept such doctrines as “ecclesiastical teachings” would not be committing heresy, but rather acts of disobedience. In the case of speculative doctrines (e.g., the transubstantiation of the Eucharist), such disobedience must not be made public, according to Mayr. However, in his Apologie, Mayr corrected this terminology, since it could allow for a Protestant to doubt the infallibility of the church: “Since the Church herself does not regard speculative teachings as revealed, it must be up to the Protestant to hold them as a necessary part of the faith or not, as long as he is not doubting the truth of the teaching itself.”

This means that, in Mayr’s reunited church, a Protestant could believe that transubstantiation is not a necessary part of the Christian faith as long as he did not doubt the doctrine as such.

We can see a twofold change in Mayr’s work: a change in the understanding of what the church is and in the meaning of membership in the church. The church is no longer the mediator of Christ’s salvation, but a mere pedagogical advisor. With regard to individual members, the consequence is that the church loses the authority to ask for obedience of will and intellect; church teachings are surrendered to individual judgment. Additionally, the faithful are absolved in advance from private disobedience, which harms the unity of the church, since disobedience is an indispensable part even of Mayr’s ecclesiology and his plan for reunification. However, the result would be a community both dogmatically divided and indifferent, yet indifferent to the quest because it does not seek unity or truth—and here Benedikt Stattler’s criticism hits the nail on the head.

108. On the discussion about the authority of the Magisterium in eighteenth-century Catholic theology see Philipp Schäfer, Kirche und Vernunft (München: 1974).
The community would only be concerned with finding the most utilitarian way to heaven. The agenda for this "new church" is summarized by Mayr in six points:

I. All teachings about faith and morals that have been accepted at all times, everywhere, and by everyone as teachings of Christ and his Apostles, are teachings which are necessary parts of the order of salvation [Heilsordnung]. These are shared with the Protestants anyway.

II. All teachings that have been accepted only by Catholics are such teachings as do not necessarily belong to the order of salvation. It remains in doubt as to whether they have been regarded at all times, everywhere, and by everyone as directly revealed teachings.

III. The Church does not force these teachings on Protestants as being directly revealed. And the Church should leave it open as to whether they are directly revealed or not, because at issue is only whether these teachings do not contradict revelation and whether they advance the final goal [of revelation]; and not whether they are directly revealed.

IV. Catholics will acknowledge that all different doctrines [Differenz-lehren] do not contradict revelation, but indeed advance its final aim, and Protestants will accept them [the different doctrines, i.e., Differenz-lehren] as such.

V. If the teachings are only of speculative character, the Protestants should have a free choice to believe them in their hearts or not, but publicly must remain silent about their disbelief or restrain from criticizing the doctrine in question. But if a speculative doctrine is at the same time of practical importance, the obligation will depend upon whether the exercises of the doctrine in question are prescribed by the Church only as useful, or as being necessary. Protestants should not have to embrace the former, but should embrace the latter.

VI. Even if Protestants do not accept these doctrines and do not exercise the actions which are connected with them, they cannot be called heretics; but the Church nevertheless will be authorized to exclude them from its visible community, since they disobey its administration. For Mayr, the church would not lose its authority as a teacher if it admitted to having made mistakes in calling certain doctrines "revealed," since the infallibility promised to the church prevents it from leading

112. Mayr, Vertheidigung, 3:288–89.
anyone astray. Even incorrectly labeled doctrines can advance the attainment of heaven. Yet, because of Christ’s continuous assistance to the magisterium through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Protestants must accept the church’s teaching as such, even if they do not consider it to be directly revealed teaching.

Despite Stattler’s justified critique, one has to defend Mayr against the harsh criticism of Johann Evangelist Hochbichler and a number of ex-Jesuits, since Mayr never denied the importance of infallibility for the system of Catholic theology, nor did he deny its reality. For him, finding the limits of infallibility was nothing new; rather, such a search entailed a more generous reading of traditional doctrine with ecumenical principles in mind. A more generous hermeneutic could furthermore state that Mayr’s project was the attempt to give a rational as well as an ecumenical explanation of papal and ecclesiastical infallibility as ministry of service, which receives its authority and legitimization directly from God.

9. A FAITHFUL THEOLOGIAN

Beda Mayr died at the abbey in Donauwörth on 28 April 1794. His critics called him a “Judas,” an “apostate,” and worse. However, he always stated that he affirmed “before God and the world that I do not regard these [opinions stated in the third volume of the Defense] as certain conclusions, but rather as suggestions presented for examination so that I may learn whether they are true or false.” Unfortunately, hardly anyone gave him credit for this.

Beda Mayr’s theology certainly has its limitations; however, it is noteworthy that his way of theologizing never led to a divisive dissent, as was the case with many radical Enlighteners, but remained ever loyal to church authority and committed to the unity of Christianity.


114. The magisterium, which is—according to Catholic doctrine—guided by the Holy Spirit, clarifies revelation by defining dogmata ecclesiastica. Mayr, Apologie, 236. Mayr, Vertheidigung, 3:293-94.


