theology and life

Christian Existence and Theology's Relevance

The Swiss thinker Hans Urs von Balthasar is something of an enigma. He has been called the greatest Catholic theologian of the 20th century. He is the inspiration behind many believers who understand themselves as "orthodox" or "solid" Catholics. His work has been seen as an example of greater integration of spirituality and theology. He is the author to whom Jon Sobrino SJ refers in his reflections on the "faith of Christ," a controversial position which has been criticized by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. His ideas about gender complementarity and women's ordination have angered many. Some scholars, with strong Thomist commitments, have vigorously criticized his Christology and soteriology. Other scholars besides Sobrino are beginning to make use of his thought to meet the concerns of liberation and political theology.

My plan here is not to analyze all these currents. Rather, I intend to look at Balthasar's distinctive ideas about the aesthetic-dramatic constitution of Christian reality. He sees God's revelation, God's self-disclosure, as occurring first in aesthetic and dramatic forms, and he sees Christians as called to be co-actors in this "theo-drama" through liturgical ritual and a distinctive way of living.

A Generational Concern

Some of my attraction to Balthasar is probably generational. I was born ten years after the Second Vatican Council. Although my childhood was shaped by a wonderful Catholic parish and school, my contemporaries and I still experienced what William Portier has called "the dissolution of the American Catholic subculture." Not that I particularly desire a restoration of the good old days; for many, those days were apparently not so good. But it seemed to me, as I began to read Balthasar, that he was not only restoring something of the Christian vision's rich particularity and oddness, but also pointing out to people how beautifully and dramatically that vision has enhanced all kinds of human lives, the great variety of saints most eminently. As he writes in *Love Alone Is Credible*, "Lovers are the ones who know most about God; the theologian must listen to them" (p. 12).

It was exciting to discover a thinker who brought into his theology the witness of holy people and great texts not normally found in systematic theologians' reflection: Thérèse of Lisieux, John of the Cross, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Dante, to name just a few.

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And yet this same thinker also engaged seriously the thought of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. In other words—Rodney Howsare has shown this in his book *Balthasar and Protestantism: The Ecumenical Implications of His Theological Style*—Balthasar's theological vision had room both for God's revelation in Christ and for the works of religious-philosophical scholars as legitimate moments in understanding and presenting Christian truth. Balthasar preserved what he called a "kneeling theology," without downplaying the use of reason in Christian life. His enviable display of both loving devotion and a critical engagement with modernity prompts me to see him as embodying in important ways the dual task of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* set by Vatican II.

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Christian Existence as Theo-Drama

The aesthetic-dramatic nature of Christian life is shown in the Scriptures. Moses and Paul experienced, aesthetically, the beauty or glory of God in the burning bush and on the road to Damascus. These aesthetic encounters were also dramatic, and they led to the rest of their lives' being high drama as well. It is a common feature of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures that experiences of God are not just holy feelings; they have a vocational, missionary purpose. The first part of Balthasar's multivolume trilogy, *The Glory of the Lord*, describes the way we first encounter the phenomenon of divine revelation as beautiful. The second part of the trilogy, *Theo-Drama*, recognizes that God's revelation is not something we merely look at; rather, we are drawn into the drama of revelation and are called to respond. Robert Barron nicely captures Balthasar's aesthetic-dramatic emphasis:

> Christianity—like painting, baseball, and philosophy—is a world, a form of life. And, like those other worlds, it is first approached because it is perceived as beautiful. A youngster walks onto a baseball diamond because he finds the game splendid, and a young artist begins to draw because she finds the artistic universe enchanting. Once the beauty of Christianity has seized a devotee, she will long to submit herself to it, entering into its rhythms, its institutions, its history, its drama, its visions and activities. And then, having *practiced* it, having worked it into her soul and flesh, she will know it. The movement, in short, is from the beautiful (it is splendid!) to the good (I must play it!) to the true (it is right).

In my own encounter with Balthasar, I have most appreciated his dramatic emphasis. In the first volume of his breathtaking five-volume *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar gives attention to the drama of human existence by using writers like Shakespeare, George Bernanos, Bertolt Brecht, Eugene Ionesco, and even the American Arthur Miller in a kind of prolegomenon to his understanding of Christian existence as "theodramatic." His range of reference to Christian, non-Christian, and even anti-Christian dramatists is astonishing. He uses the theater to illuminate the risk and gravity of human life, the catastrophes and tensions that constitute our existence, and the finite time span within which we must struggle for the good, under judgment and in the face of death. The theater can offer an opening to people's encoun-

ter with revelation. Balthasar's theodramatic approach employs the metaphor of the world stage. As actors in history, human beings share in the Son's mission, under the Holy Spirit's direction. Just as an actor's role in a theatrical drama constitutes a limited part of the play for a particular purpose, the finite lives of persons who share in the mission of Christ, no matter their life span, disclose meaning that is relevant for the whole of history.

On a personal note, I have appreciated Balthasar's dramatic treatment of the tragic in human existence. I have made my own the following remark of Rowan Williams: "What I found in Balthasar's work was an extraordinary depth of contemplative understanding, along with vivid awareness of the tragic quality of human existence—the hellishness of humanity and God's involvement in it—which resonated very deeply with me." Ever since I was a child, I have been particularly sensitive to this tragic dimension, a disposition that has been heightened by my wife's daily work with children who suffer from cancer. The problem of evil as it manifests itself in sickness, natural disasters, random acts of violence, war, oppression, and genocide is never far from my mind.

The late British theologian Donald MacKinnon, noting that Balthasar rarely treats the horror of the Holocaust directly, adds that "the nervous tension of the whole argument witnesses to the author's passionate concern to present the engagement of God with his world in a way that refuses to turn aside from the overwhelming, pervasive reality of evil." Balthasar does not paper over the pathos of the real world, a pathos full of darkness and ambiguity. For him, God, in the incarnation and passion of Jesus, "steps to his opponent's side and, from within, helps him reach justice and freedom. Finitude, time, and death are not negated: they are given a new value in a way that is beyond our comprehension. Indeed, even what is hostile to God, in all its profound abysses, is not abandoned; God does not turn his back on it: it is taken over and reworked."

Balthasar never taught academic theology at a university. He spent many years, however, as a university chaplain. In the Switzerland of the 1940s this kind of work was largely cultural. Balthasar the chaplain spent his time giving lectures, in the evening debating in various student societies, and giving retreats. To borrow John W. O'Malley SJ's useful categories from his *Four Cultures of the West*, Balthasar's thought more resembles cultures three and four—"Poetry, Rhetoric, and the Common Good" and "Art and Performance"—than it does culture two—"The Academy and the Professions." O'Malley's remarks on Erasmus could be said about Balthasar: "He felt he could criticize Scholastic theology because he had an alternative to offer: a return to the more literary and rhetorical style of the Fathers. That was the 'ancient and genuine' theology, quite different from the 'modern' theology. It was genuine because it was drawn directly from the sacred texts and because it had led to a 'theological life.' It touched the heart and centered on the few truths that were essential to Christianity rather than on the secondary issues the Scholastics pursued" (p. 160). Balthasar once remarked that his study with the Jesuits, largely in Neo-Scholastic mode, was a "grim struggle with what men had made out of the glory of revelation." He

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"could not endure this presentation of the Word of God and wanted to lash out with the fury of Samson," tear "down the whole temple," and bury himself "beneath the rubble." It is often true that Balthasar's mode of presentation resembles a patristic sermon more than a scholastic treatise.

In my recent experiences of presenting papers, giving academic lectures, and doing job interviews, it has become evident that this aesthetic-dramatic emphasis genuinely excites scholars and ordinary laypeople. This emphasis could also be said to be Balthasar's greatest shortcoming as a "systematic" theologian. He is called "unsystematic" by those who argue for the indispensability of a more scientifically or theoretically constructed theology in the manner of Thomas Aquinas. Let me address both sentiments.

On the one hand, I am convinced that Balthasar's aesthetic-dramatic emphasis nurtures an appreciation for the inexhaustible mystery that resides at the heart of Christian revelation. He offers a richly symbolic and imaginative approach—one that fosters better Christian living, namely, the dramatic artistry needed for fulfilling our own unique missions. That is, his theology can give momentum to the religious feelings and beliefs that help us accomplish good in the particular circumstances of our lives. On the other hand, the aesthetic-dramatic emphasis is not always helpful when one does "systematic theology" in order to answer the further questions that arise out of one's aesthetic-dramatic, liturgical, or devotional life. Balthasar's theology, besides being eclectic, has a contemplative emphasis that prefers to let "paradox" be the answer, rather than carefully working out a set of terms and relations and bringing a theological intelligibility to the concrete conditions in which Christians live their lives. One is more likely to find this kind of intelligibility in Bernard Lonergan or Karl Rahner.

Let me offer an example. It was my encounter with the writings of Balthasar that helped me discover the "weightiness" of the mystery of the cross. Balthasar is not content with presenting the cross as merely a consequence of Jesus' prophetic stance in the world. It is that, but it is also much more. It contains a vicarious element, which somehow involves Jesus' "taking on" the sin of the human race. Balthasar desires to do justice to a dominant theme in the Fathers, namely, the *admirabile commercium*, God's "wondrous exchange," with sinners. With aesthetic and dramatic power, Balthasar communicated to me the cross's power and centrality. And yet as questions arose—How did Jesus "take on" sin? Did he also take on our guilt? If so, did he also experience a loss of hope and the kind of darkness sinners experience?—I became less satisfied with his systematic answers (or lack thereof).

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In my own research I have been more satisfied with a Thomist pattern of explanation (also not without its critics), given contemporary expression in Bernard Lonergan's writings on "Satisfaction" and the "Law of the Cross." Such writings offer terms and relations that can be used in engaging the modern sciences constructively. Balthasar has often prompted in me an excitement and concern about such theological questions

and then failed to give me adequate answers. In his *De Verbo Incarnato*, Lonergan writes that, if one approaches Christ's passion and death with primarily a "symbolic mentality," where image and feeling predominate, then one is likely to express the meaning of the cross in terms of "substitution" or "satispassion," that is, in terms of Jesus' "suffering enough" for sins. These words do not do justice to the sophistication of Balthasar's approach, but they indicate something about his theological style in general and his theology of Christ's passion and death in particular. In my estimation, because of its dramatic terminology and its reliance on the mystical experiences of Adrienne von Speyr, Balthasar's theology of Christ's passion and death is often unclear and even reckless. I wonder, though, whether this theological question, sparked by the power of Balthasar's presentation, would have occurred to me at all without his help.

Balthasar himself was not concerned with meeting the requirements of a technical, theoretical, systematic theologian. He once said in an interview, "My books are not the kind of theology that belongs to the academic guild and therefore they are not particularly suited for dissertations." He remarked, "I have to say that for me the only truly interesting theologians are the saints: from Irenaeus through Augustine to Anselm, to Bonaventure, or figures that allow the radiation of holiness to show forth, such as Dante or Newman; one could also mention Kierkegaard and Solovyov."

A Call for Fruitful Integration

My concern goes beyond the question of Balthasar's adequacy as a systematic theologian. I have accentuated his aesthetic-dramatic approach here, but I know there are many other approaches as well. My concern is the shape of Catholic theology in the 21st century and the place of the aesthetic-dramatic style therein. What does theology conceived in Anselmian fashion as "faith seeking understanding" mean in light of the many theological styles we have inherited from the 20th century, from what Fergus Kerr has called "the Heroic Generation"? In my discussion of the cross, I have offered a "theoretical" or "explanatory" challenge to Balthasar's theological style. Let me now say that Balthasar, too, offers a challenge. He makes us ask: Must not theology go well beyond understanding to an understanding that is aesthetically and dramatically in touch with the joys and challenges of ordinary Christian existence? Shouldn't theology be more attentive to the Mystery that is encountered in aesthetic and dramatic form in our workaday world's prayer and worship?

A question remains regarding what to do with the diversity of theological styles we have inherited. R.R. Reno has suggested that "we need a period of consolidation that allows us to integrate the lasting achievements of the Heroic Generation into a renewed standard theology." Let me suggest, without adequate exposition, one possible way forward, a way which has been similarly outlined by Robert Doran SJ. The challenge of this generation is to integrate three 20th-century theological movements—contemporary Thomism, the *ressourcement* project of *la nouvelle théologie*, and the various expressions of political-liberation theology. These three movements could be of help (1) in explaining theological doctrines in a theoretical manner that is capable of engaging with the natural and social sciences in search of a unity of knowledge; (2) in experiencing and mediating Catholic thought and culture through aesthetic-dramatic forms; and (3) in

dealing with concrete human suffering of all kinds in light of the gospel mandate to transform a world in need. Such a grand vision would require sympathetic and critical conversations, the highlighting of complementarities and dialectical differences, and the humility to be open to revision. If such an integration were to occur, it would require doing justice in an orderly way to the richness of being human in the flow of history, that is, being psychological, intellectual, rational, moral, loving, mystical, and worshipful. For this enterprise Balthasar would certainly not have all the answers, but he would have much to contribute to it.

By Beauty Tethered

God of the dawn
and high noon
and of twilight
and midnight;
God of the tides
and the myriad
droplets of dew;
God of gardenias
and larkspur
and tulips;
by beauty, God,
tether my being to you.

Mary Anne Huddleston IHM

How You Eat Matters

If the title seems a bit puzzling, I propose another: "Eating, A Joyous Sacrifice." In the matter of eating, as in every other human exercise or experience, there is surely more to it than meets the eye, or indeed the tongue or any other sense organ. Perception of such impalpable reality may take no time or consume no little time. Communicating that reality, however, normally requires time, and maybe a detour. Anyway, in the present case, the process has been for me an experience of *obscurum per obscurius*, though at the end it was all *clarum* (clear), bathed in light.

"Hindu Prayer: A First for Congress"—that was the title of the news item from India Abroad News Service on 14 September 2000. The news was the historic event of a Hindu priest delivering the opening prayer in the United States House of Representatives.[1] The prayer ran as follows: "O God, you are omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. You are everything, and nothing

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