

“Love Alone is Credible”
H.U. von Balthasar as Interpreter
of the Catholic Tradition
Washington, April 14-17-2005

Balthasar as Interpreter of the Catholic Tradition

Jacques Servais
Università Gregoriana
Roma

I. A WITNESS OF THE WELLSPRINGS OF TRADITION

I would like to begin by thanking Dr. Schindler for having invited me to speak on the topic, “Balthasar as Interpreter of the Catholic Tradition,” which is also the subtitle of the conference which has brought us all here this weekend.

Balthasar had a chalet in the village of Rigi, perched high in the Swiss Alps where he would spend vacations working, often with de Lubac. One evening, I and an other—then young—Jesuit were there with them and, knowing Balthasar to be an aficionado of hand made puzzles, we set out to complete a particularly difficult one, with plenty of blue sky and no two pieces quite the same. As the evening grew on, so did our perplexity: we were puzzled by the heavens, divided out as they were in so many tiny pieces on the table before us. Balthasar watched from a distance, tempted to help but holding back, while de Lubac began pacing beside us: perhaps a bit agitated because we were delaying the daily evening get-together. Finally, Balthasar walked up and joined us, picking up a piece, and putting it into place, then the next, and the next, until the whole puzzle was finished, and in less than ten minutes. We, quite frankly, would have probably been there for ten hours.

I tell this story because it is a concrete example of the “Johannine vision of the whole” so characteristic of Balthasar down to its most concrete manifestations, such as seeing the *gestalt* of a clear blue sky even through the jumble of scrambled hand-cut puzzle pieces. Before we consider more exactly how he works on the basis of the Whole he sees, let us refer a few circumstances of his life which make evident that he simply wanted to be a witness of the Catholic truth.

On June 23rd 1984, John Paul II presented the International Paul VI Award to Hans Urs von Balthasar, with the following clarification: “He is the only prominent contemporary Catholic theologian who has dared to undertake—on his own—the tremendous venture of a theological *Summa*, one whose conceptual unity and impressive scale give it the right to be placed in the line of the other great syntheses that have marked the pace of western theology”¹. Accepting the award from Pope Wojtewa’s hands, the Swiss theologian pointed towards the intended center of his work,

an “oeuvre plutôt amorcée que terminée,” more an inception than an achievement: the *St. John Community*. What is of immediate interest here is not this community—the secular institute that he founded together with Adrienne von Speyr—but rather the fundamental purpose its initiator pursued. Balthasar makes clear that this, his principle work, “intends to be Catholic in the largest and most theological sense of the word”. At the award ceremony Balthasar explained what he had tried to accomplish through the founding of the *Johannes Verlag* publishing house and the many volumes he wrote or issued. He sought to “make as concrete as possible the sense of ‘catholicity’ through the translation of that which, in the great theological tradition, seemed [to him] worthy of being known and assimilated by Christians of this day”². All these served but one aim: to prepare the way for communities of lay Christians that would abide in the world in the spirit of the beloved disciple. His works sought to convey a Johannine spirit “deeply rooted in the mysteries of the Catholic faith”³ that would allow laymen consecrated to the Lord to bear witness through their lives to the organic unity and interconnectedness of the divine mysteries.

The Holy Father’s intent to bestow the cardinal’s red hat on the Swiss theologian in 1989 only confirmed his continued certainty regarding the catholicity of the theologian’s work and highlights its importance for the Church’s engagement in the world today. Wojtewa’s suggestive gesture goes beyond mere confidence in Balthasar’s person; it demonstrates an objective appreciation of his project that places itself at the service of what is central and enduring in the faith, so as to orient the life and activity of Christians menaced by the neo-paganism that surrounds them.

Henri de Lubac called Balthasar “perhaps the most cultivated [man] of his time”⁴. His culture was not something that he pursued as an aim in itself, but rather was an expression of the project of implanting the ecclesial spirit within a sound culture of man. The French Jesuit saw the distinctively catholic outlines of his friend’s work from its earliest stages. Highlighting the breadth of the catholic tradition from which the Swiss theologian draws, he exclaimed with admiration: “If there is a Christian culture, then here it is! Classical antiquity, the great European literatures, the metaphysical tradition, the history of religions, the diverse exploratory adventures of contemporary man and, above all, the sacred sciences, St. Thomas, St. Bonaventure, patrology (all of it)—not to speak just now of the Bible—none of them is not welcomed and made vital by this great mind. Writers and poets, mystics and philosophers, old and new, Christians of all confessions—all are called on to make their particular contribution. All these are necessary for his final accomplishment, to a greater glory of God, the Catholic symphony”⁵.

De Lubac emphasizes that the return to the sources that characterizes the “Catholic Ressourcement” cannot merely consist in an academic pursuit of historical data under the pretext of finding therein a foundation for “scientific” research. Indeed, Balthasar’s own words reveal an altogether different motivation: that of one who has no need to search for the objective in the data, but rather continuously keeps his eyes fixed upon it. “I consider my own theology,” he explained to a young disciple, “as a kind of Johannine finger pointing to the fullness of Revelation in Jesus

Christ, developed in the huge fullness of its reception in the history of the Church, first of all in the mediation of the saints”⁶. “To make known the greatest and most spiritual among our brothers and sisters,” he further elucidates, “seemed to me to be in the spirit of he who is known simply as ‘the Theologian’”⁷. Balthasar draws from the Greek and Latin Fathers through the great medieval Christian theologians and mystics to the Christian culture of Dante and Calderon, and through to that of the present day with Péguy and Bernanos. So well does he know Revelation and the clearly delineated figure that shines forth in it, that he even discovers its hidden presence outside of the ecclesial Tradition in every authentic expression of human genius. He assumed all this into his work, seeking nothing else than to serve the most intimate heart of the faith and provide a steadfast beacon that might light the way for truly Christian life and work in the midst of today’s neo-pagan haze⁸.

Balthasar has his critics; for example, some Jesuits are concerned by his exit from the Society of Jesus in order to continue his work with Adrienne von Speyr⁹. For these, his convinced avowal of Ignatian obedience through to his very last days seems to ring hollow: did he not go against the intentions of his Jesuit general in departing from the Society of Jesus? Yet this assessment fails to consider not only that Balthasar had not taken his final vows and that he was legitimately dismissed for the sake of the new Community, but also that obedience is offered to God above all. The Jesuit Peter Henrici¹⁰ has a more pondered view of the episode. He cites in particular Balthasar’s farewell letter to his Jesuit confreres, a letter that Henri de Lubac courageously published in his *Mémoire* before dying¹¹. In the letter, Balthasar explains to his fellow Jesuits that his decision to part from their company was nothing other than an act of Christian obedience to God, who can freely call a man to surrender not only his physical home, but also his spiritual home in an order, to be used for God’s own purposes within the Church. At the end of his life, Balthasar would reaffirm the same certainty before the Holy Father: he had left the Jesuits, his ‘spiritual homeland,’ with great personal sacrifice only in order to “obey a formal order from St. Ignatius” and “bring about a sort of continuation of his idea in the world”¹².

Today, as we commemorate the immense person and work of John Paul II, we cannot refrain from joining Pope Benedict XVI as he stresses the significance of his Predecessor having nominated cardinal Balthasar *in extremis*. In the homily pronounced by the prelate at Balthasar’s funeral, he explained, on the Pope’s behalf, that it was precisely his Ignatian obedience that made the Swiss theologian “a man of the Church for the world”¹³. In this context, Joseph Ratzinger alluded to Balthasar’s reluctance to accept the Cardinalate in which he, alongside Wojtewa’s mentor de Lubac, saw and praised the marks of an authentic Jesuit. “Balthasar had a great reverence for the Petrine, for the hierarchical structure of the Church. (...) But [he] was hesitant in opening himself for the honor intended for him by his being named to the cardinalate. This [hesitance] was motivated (...) by the Ignatian spirit which characterized his life. In some way, his being called into the next life on the very eve of being so honored seems to show he was right about it. He was allowed to remain himself, fully. But what the Pope intended to express by this mark of distinction and of

honor remains valid: no longer only private individuals but the Church itself, in its official responsibility, tells us that he is right in what he teaches of the Faith, that he points the way to the sources of living water—a witness to the word which teaches us Christ and which teaches us how to live”¹⁴.

In the school of St. Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises, we would argue, Balthasar lets himself be taken to the Gospel’s very origin. From this surging font, the living Tradition of the Church is continually reborn as the Holy Spirit leads the Church of saints ever again to the gushing wellspring, to the Figure of Revelation in which God portrays himself, to the One, the Uniquely Singular One in whom the entire universe is integrated: Jesus Christ. In him, the eyes of loving faith see—as Balthasar puts it—the “image and figure, Image of all images, Figure of all figures [that], as such, possesses an evidential power of his own which he himself communicates”¹⁵. A living faith sears at the core of Balthasar’s great undertaking, which consists in nothing less than an effort to recover the Christian’s contemporaneity with Christ in a new way. By this means, he offers an authentic and immediate interpretation of Revelation that draws directly from the purest and deepest wellsprings of Tradition.

Thanks to the hermeneutical key he expresses in the title of his book “The Whole in the Fragment”¹⁶, Balthasar can penetrate to the heart of the whole-reality and take in the singular event in which God appears and communicates himself in Jesus Christ. One cannot attain the whole of reality by means of outline notes. Only in Christ does the whole present itself, but precisely in Christ, the whole of his person shines forth in every particular aspect. Just as the sun’s rays rebound through chips of glass, so the one Light gives itself entirely in each “fragment” that reverberates its rays. The Whole manifests itself through the fragments, but even while the fragments proceed in a well ordered cadence, they do not allow themselves to be brought down into a system. No: the Whole does not reveal itself to a rationalistic mind but only to a simple glance. Indeed, this alone, paired with an architectonic sense of reality, is capable of gathering together various lines of thought so that they may converge around the unitary Figure implicitly present in each fragment.

II. THE ART OF CATHOLIC SYMPHONY

Balthasar explains his notion of Catholic totality using an analogy drawn from the sphere of music: “Symphony means ‘sounding together.’ First there is sound, then different sounds and then we hear the different sounds singing together in a dance of sound. (...) In the authentic symphony, all the instruments are integrated in a whole sound”¹⁷. The Figure of Revelation can only unfold fully in the whole of space, the “space between heaven and earth, God and world, Old and New Era”. Balthasar continues: “If, in order to be able to unfold, the figure requires such breadth from the beholder, then the latter must allow himself to be stretched until the required space has been created within him. A whole symphony cannot be recorded on a space that is too short”¹⁸. No finite spirit can proffer a complete copy of Christ’s figure. One must

not succumb to the temptation to isolate certain aspects and take the fragment for the Whole itself, thus skirting along the risk of losing the vision of the Whole entirely. The sight of the fragment without the vision of the Whole can only offer an obscured meaning. “In order to see that each individual aspect in truth receives its full meaning only by its overall relationship to the Whole, that ‘art of total vision’ is required”¹⁹. “Mozart”, the theologian further explains, “had this whole sound in his ear to such an extent that, on occasion, he could write down the single instrumental line of an entire movement because he ‘heard’ it within the symphony of all the parts”²⁰. Balthasar himself possessed the ability he observes in Salzburg’s ‘divine’ composer; he readily saw every particular aspect within the framework of the greater Whole.

In a review of the book *Cosmic Liturgy* in the 1940s, Karl Rahner wrote that in Balthasar’s interpretation of Maximus the Confessor, “everything seems to dissolve into an immense unfinished dialectic of views in conflict with one another, and whose synthesis shifts away to an ungraspable distance”²¹. The German Jesuit found altogether incomprehensible Balthasar’s way of hearing each assertion made by an author in the context of an ungraspable Whole. Rahner’s perplexity illustrates the fundamentally different hermeneutical methods adopted by the two theologians. Two years earlier, Rahner had requested and hoped for a collaboration from his Swiss confrère in his project of a new dogmatic theology—what would later evolve into *Mysterium Salutis*. Yet, in the same year 1941, Rahner received from him a friendly but unequivocal refusal: “No, I cannot cooperate...”²².

Balthasar’s refusal did not concern Rahner’s project as such and its opportuneness in the new era that was dawning. In fact, in the second informal part of the letter, he encouraged Rahner to continue the project with other associates, esteeming the new dogmatic theology “absolutely necessary”²³. Nonetheless, he perceived that he was being called by an even more pressing need: “to let the Christian reality radiate from its inmost center, and, thus, in such an irrefutable way that the beacons shine towards the exterior and penetrate into the darkest underbrush before the Church”²⁴. In order to accomplish his mission, he thought it necessary to renounce constructing a closed system that would fail to do justice to the ever greater mystery. Certainly, Hegel is right in saying, “the Whole is the Truth.” Yet the ‘Whole’ does not open its proper sense up to a dialectical thought that seeks to reconstruct the Truth on the basis of particular fragments. In Hegel’s dialectic, Balthasar critically observes, “the opposing points of view are fitted into a thoroughgoing schematic structure:” “none of them however peculiar and eccentric, can drop out of the system of truth.” Absolute Knowledge, in the pure ‘logic’ associated with the internal mobility within the dialectic, embraces the One and the Multiple as two faces of the same Being. As a matter of fact, the theologian continues, this process “yields an inner relatedness of the Absolute, the One, to all its possible prismatic refractions, which can then be reintegrated into the fullness of concrete unity.” Balthasar recognizes in this dialectical method the temptation to squelch Christ’s event—God’s absolute personal point of contact in the world—into the incalculable mass of other worldly forms. “What has happened here is that the standpoint of God, who freely discloses himself to the world, has been

equated with the standpoint of man, who has adopted God's revelation as a universal law of being and now imagines that he can use it as a key to all mysteries"²⁵.

Balthasar opposed this dialectical approach to his idea of symphonic truth, constantly pointing the listener towards an ever-greater Whole, a figure that is more than the sum of its parts. Such a figure "can be described and seen from every side. Ever anew one perceives something different, and yet it is always the same thing"²⁶. Every fragment manifests the one unique center, the living figure, the 'contingent' determination distinct from every other worldly figure, in which God in his infinite Freedom wanted to represent his love before humanity: Jesus Christ, the "heir of all things" (Heb 1:1), the Son for whose sake the polyphonous orchestra of Creation had been assembled. "As it performs God's symphony under the Son's direction," Balthasar explains, "the meaning of its variety becomes clear"²⁷. Working from 1961 to 1987 on the basis of this central idea, Balthasar single-handedly erected his Trilogy, the monumental venture that the Paul VI Institute did not hesitate to qualify as an authentic *Summa* for the present time. Indeed, some scholars suggest that with his Trilogy, Balthasar offered the mature fruit drawn from the first outlines of a dogmatic theology he had sketched together with K. Rahner²⁸. In any case, Balthasar's own statements suggest that he aimed at something other than a *Summa* in the classical sense of the word. In 1965, he wrote on the brink of finishing the first panel of the triptych: "While the fullness of the Church's tradition has been my only concern, it is only for the sake of preserving what is valuable for the future, since only the best has a chance to survive (...). Thus the plan for a trilogy matured"²⁹. Years later, in an epilogue to his threefold opus, Balthasar wrote that in it, "the traditional theology of treatises or loci was presented in a completely different way: embarking from the transcendentals, in which the passage from a true (and therefore religious) philosophy to a biblical theology of Revelation flows more smoothly"³⁰.

Balthasar takes for granted in his concept of 'Gestalt' (understood, to say it again, as the figurative expression of the Whole that offers itself to be seen) the precedence of transcendental Beauty. Here the Pulchrum—Being as wonder—precedes the Bonum and the Verum. First among the trilogy then, he develops a *Theological Aesthetics*. In this "un-Thomistic way"³¹, the Swiss theologian intends to overcome the lure of modern rationalism. The temptation would otherwise be to identify "the standpoint of God who freely discloses himself to the world" and "the standpoint of man, who has adopted God's revelation as a universal law of being and now imagines that he can use it as a key to all mysteries"³². In the face of this risk, the author underlines the epiphany of divine freedom made manifest as love, as free election, as unmanipulable grace offered to the indifferent and obedient man.

III. THE SOURCES OF CHRISTIAN MYSTERY DISCLOSED BY THREE IGNATIAN NOTIONS

Three Ignatian notions undoubtedly assisted Balthasar in disclosing the sources of the Christian Mystery. He discerns a threefold center in the method of the *Exercises*: election, indifference, and obedience. The theologian explains that the Ignatian

method opens one's vision to Revelation by means of these central notions. Revelation can then appear exactly as it presents itself: as an indivisible Whole. Everything within Revelation begins with the gratuitous *election* of a God who takes the free initiative of calling man to share in his own life. In order for man to fulfill this vocation—which aims at the salvation of all the nations from the outset—God's elective grace must give rise to an elementary openness within him. The Catholic tradition calls this spiritual stance *indifference*, identifying it as the fundamental attitude of active receptivity towards God's will. Within this existential position, which corresponds to his ontological creatureliness, man is enabled to be given God's election in the form of a particular mission for the sake of the world. He can assent to it using his *obedience*, letting the Infinite Freedom make use of his finite liberty.

We will briefly elaborate these three notions before saying a final word about the form of the Catholic *Summa* Balthasar proposes to the Church in this day.

A. Election

At the center of his theology stands—by Balthasar's own account—the fundamental Christian idea of election. Balthasar sees Ignatius of Loyola as having reclaimed the full sense of election from where it was languishing in the straits of the Augustinian doctrine of predestination. More than anyone before him, Ignatius brings to the full light of day God's freedom, upon whose acquiescence every finite being depends. The image of Yahweh in the Old Testament was that of the Lord who sovereignly elects and rejects. Almost retroactively, this becomes the image that determines the relationship between the Creator and his world. In his incomprehensible self-abasement of love, God calls and drafts his creature to serve his unforeseeable ends. For his part, the man is invited to embrace the opportunity to respond to God's call, which aims to place man in position to fulfill his true end: the praise, the reverence, and the service of God's glory. The grace conferred by this election enables man to renounce his liberty, insofar as it is soiled by original sin, and as such, marked by estrangement before God. Man now prefers the will of God to his own will by this grace, and thus he receives a new liberty by which he may participate in God's elective liberty.

Ignatius, Balthasar declares, “appears to me as the point in history where the encounter of man with the God who is the Word and has the word, who addresses, chooses and calls, has become inescapable”³³. The Spanish saint places the entire economy of grace—made manifest in the flesh of the Son made man—under the heading of ‘vocation.’ Thus vocation becomes, in a strong sense, the essence of human life. Already in salvation history, the image of God and man finds its definitive figure in the Word that the Father addresses “to the whole world and to each one in particular within it”³⁴, since “in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:2). Christ decides freely and sovereignly to meet each man, offering him his pardon and inviting him to follow. By becoming flesh, the Son of God opens up to him the space of the kingdom into which he may be admitted. Christ's proclamation involves something that is going on at the very moment in full force, a ‘happening’ into which

each one—from the beginning of time and without exception—is called to enter, freely assuming his part in the event of salvation. The Gospel’s proclamation to the world is always its proclamation to every single person individually, since Christ invites each one personally to “not be deaf, but rather ready and diligent in doing God’s will”³⁵. Only one who has first been invited and then freely responds can play a supporting role in the divine drama of salvation. The election of a particular person is always in view to the realization of God’s universally encompassing design. By means of the elect, the not-as-yet elect come to the knowledge of the divine plan of creation and redemption that involves the entire universe. Here Balthasar adopts as his own the social and universal vision that another son of Ignatius, Henri de Lubac, presents in his book *Catholicism*: “Since the divine plan of creation and of redemption is one, and since humanity—insofar as it is created—also forms a unity, God’s design through the world’s ransom in Jesus Christ cannot but embrace the human race except as an entire whole”³⁶.

In the Son, St. Paul explains, God the Father “chose us in him before the creation of the world (...); he predestined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,” which was that, “we might live for the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:4-6,12). In the Son sent to save man, each one is carried by a grace of election that precedes the knowledge that one has of it. The ontological prerequisite of both election and the call (the eternal election’s occurrence in temporal life) emerges in the *Spiritual Exercises* as a moral-ascetic attitude of being ‘disposed’ and ‘indifferent’ before the call. The attitude receives the Ignatian label ‘indifference,’ and like obedience, which will also be examined, it is already practically included in election. Nonetheless, each of these constitutes a distinct notion that merits consideration as such.

B. Indifference

As an ontological prerequisite, indifference constitutes a fundamental act of the creature: the opening up of finite freedom to infinite Freedom. In his most intimate conscience, man knows that he is given to himself as an *imago Dei*, and as such, evokes the free manifestation of God. In the face of this revelation, man always already finds himself in a state of ready availability (a letting-be), which he himself has freely ratified.

Man’s spirit is not pure activity, nor is it pure spontaneousness, nor again is it pure passivity. St. Thomas considers the problem in the light of the Aristotelian distinction where man’s spirit is at once both ‘agent intellect’ and ‘possible (or patient) intellect.’ The agent intellect reveals its universality by abstracting the intelligible form out of matter and causing the intelligibles in potentiality to pass into actuality. The possible intellect yields before the real by receiving the imprint of the form thus extricated. Just as ‘common being’ is a participation in uncreated being, the natural light of the human intellect found in the human soul is itself an active reflection of divine intelligence. “Ipsium (...) lumen intellectuale, quod est in nobis, nihil est aliud quam quaedam participata similitudo luminis increati, in quo continentur rationes

aeternae”³⁷. What Thomas situates on the ontological level as the super-essential and inexhaustible actuality of being has its counterpart on the epistemological level in the light of the agent intellect (which permits judgment in the strict sense). On the other hand, essence finds its counterpart in the intelligible species (by which one apprehends things).

Balthasar sees in Ignatius’s notion of indifference a recovery of the profound balance found in St. Thomas’s conception which—alongside unlimited *esse*—assigns a positive value to essence as limitation and capacity to receive. Unlike Eckart, who tends to dissolve being into God, Thomas firmly maintains the ontological difference and so bypasses a point of view that interprets subjectivity as “pure (mystic) opening in the sense of a receptivity without any spontaneous act of one’s own”³⁸. In the line of this tradition, the Swiss theologian clearly emphasizes the spontaneity of the human spirit that is capable of making itself ‘quodammodo omnia.’ The freedom of the person’s decision does not derive from the absolute Freedom of the infinite Being, which—as such—is not tied to the world. Rather, freedom is the faculty to choose the elective will of God *in all things*. The human spirit’s active spontaneity—that is to say, the capacity to act according to eternal wisdom—is understood as the spirit’s contemplative receptivity in the face of that wisdom. Such receptivity includes in itself the necessity of ‘finitization’ (F. Ulrich) of being (since being does not subsist in itself but rather exists only in created essences).

Hence Balthasar follows Ignatius in proposing a conception of indifference that holds the balance between two one-sided solutions. One ought not consider indifference as merely a function of his decision for the “thing which is more conducive to the end for which I am created”³⁹, nor as a passive abandon to God’s action in him⁴⁰. The decisionality of the first solution emphasizes—with fairly good reason—the spontaneity of finite freedom and thus highlights the action and the temperance it entails. For modern man, however, this easily leads to the to a Stoical-Buddhistic type interpretation of his activity as a personal conquest (the “self-made man”). What results is a pseudo-ethical air of superiority in the face of the ‘common’ man that stands in stark contrast to the true Christian sense of an inter-subjective encounter. The passiveness in the second solution rightly insists on the motions and inspirations of the Holy Spirit in the human subject. However, it overemphasizes Christian transcendence to the detriment of the “conversion ad phantasmata” and the “service of the divine Goodness in all particular things.” The second solution thus risks reintroducing the old dualism between action and contemplation.

Indifference should not be interpreted in a unilaterally ethical-ascetical key that entails the peril of unknowingly taking one’s own will for the will of God, nor should indifference be interpreted in a mystical-quietist key that carries the opposite risk of undervaluing the true font of all engagement: the Creator’s personal and active presence in the world and in man. One cannot rightly define indifference as a customary detachment from created things in order to dedicate oneself to contemplation. Nor can one call indifference a temporary distancing from them in view to a more universal engagement. Indifference is the fundamental attitude of active receptivity to the

will of the Father that characterizes the Christian existence, the ordinary existence of a healthy and safely intact creature living according to the original divine plan. In his *sume et suscipe*, St. Ignatius interprets this free opening and industrious participation in God's elective mission as the loving disposition of the man who offers his finite freedom, choosing ahead of time that which would be most pleasing to His Divine Majesty. Balthasar bears the merit of having found in this attitude the distinguishing trait of what he calls (like Bremond before him, but in an entirely different sense) the metaphysics of the saints. The equilibrium of Balthasar's theology bears itself out on this decisive point.

C. Obedience

The third characteristically notion bears the Ignatian label 'obedience.' Viewed from the central axis of the Balthasarian vision, the *analogia electionis*, the question of obedience might be posed in the following terms: in what sense might finite freedom's abandon to infinite Freedom be a grace; that is, what is the truly positive character it bears for the subject himself? Balthasar's turns to consider anew St. Augustine's "totum exigit te qui fecit te," where the free grace of the divine election commandeers finite freedom, incorporating it fully within infinite Freedom. In commending one's self into the hands of God and his elective will, the human subject's freedom intentionally renounces any prospect of actualizing the possibility of being autonomous, of ever separating from God. The creature necessarily appears in his negativity before God's absolute positivity. The creature could repudiate his creatureliness, asserting an autonomous freedom in the face of his Creator, but the rebellious attitude would be in vain. Already the philosophy of the ancients taught that self-realization requires that one accept the Absolute as his uncontestable norm. Balthasar rejects the extreme Platonist suggestion that the creature's *suscipe* is nothing other than its acquiescence to its negativity, to its not-being-God. Rather, the *causa secunda* possesses the authentic positivity of its own proper freedom and dignity. These two qualities—freedom and dignity—find their positive accomplishment in the participation in divine freedom offered to the creature by God in His very person. If the negative aspect draws the most attention, it is only because fallen man sees or understands his personal liberty as a good that exists alongside divine freedom and disposes of a full autonomy before it. This perspective does not correspond with reality. Man finds his own quintessence and genuine autonomy by returning his created freedom to absolute Freedom: his liberation is the grace of his participation in God. Forgoing himself, the creature finds access to himself. In this way, and in this way only, it is given to the creature to, as Ignatius puts it, "approach his Creator and Lord and join [llegar] him"⁴¹. Only to he who detaches from himself—in order to hand over his heart and his entire being—is it given to grasp He who is essentially ungraspable.

The theology of obedience that Balthasar develops does not revolve around man but rather Christ standing before the Father. From the core, a theology of Trinitarian obedience radiates through the work. The Son's coming into the world to save it from sin and death is his free act and supreme profession of love towards his Father. All

three of the divine Persons decided upon the Incarnation, seen at once to its farthest consequences. As the irrevocable witness of this common deliberation, the Holy Spirit must in some way guarantee its execution (cf. Mt 1:20, Lk 1:35). The Son then passively offers himself to the Spirit's action. "In entering the world," by the power of the Holy Spirit, does the Son not say: "a body hast thou prepared for me," "Io, I have come to do thy will, O God" (Heb 10:5ff, citing and commenting Ps 40:7-9 [LXX]). The depth of his will is none other than love and the joy that love contains that always urges him to accomplish what pleases the Father (cf. Jn 8:29). Recalling the interpretation of the Greek Fathers, Balthasar hears in the words "the Father is greater than I" (Jn 14:28) the revelation of Trinitarian obedience.

The Son who "came down from heaven, not to do [his] own will, but the will of [He] who sent [him]" (Jn 6:38) kindles a spousal response. In the face of God's call in the Gospel, creaturely indifference offers itself (actively) in the (passive) docility before God's sovereign dispositions. Because it is made accessible to the world, Christ's objectively manifested Trinitarian obedience shows man the way by which he can integrate receptivity and activity, the spirit of a child with an adult responsibility in a single attitude. Created in the Son and in view of the Son, man does not cease to be an independent and free subject when he seeks to follow the Son. Rather, he lives a voluntary act of total receptivity before the superior thought and will of God that characterizes his genuine but finite freedom and independence. The subject no longer wishes to be anything other than transparent service to the Master who has allotted him a mission. He effaces himself before He who sends and whom he represents, "like a viceroy who more perfectly represents the king the more absolutely he places his personal, intellectual and creative powers at the service of the thought and will of his monarch"⁴². In metaphysical terms, one would say that self-sacrifice, the subject's self-annulment, does not destroy one's being before the "always greater glory" he wishes to serve. Once again, Balthasar's merit as a faithful disciple of St. Ignatius is to have taken seriously the *analogia entis*, and thus take into consideration the divinely willed consistency of 'second causes' and the creature's own activity. Man's *suscipe* does not destroy his nature. It is a voluntary abnegation of his spirit that freely chooses God's choice in his regard, and chooses it such that God acts from inside his activity.

Conclusion

In the school of St. Ignatius, Balthasar caught sight of the highest and most free expression of the divine love present in all created things in Jesus Christ. The inconceivable greatness of this love breaches whichever system would claim to be able to contain it. The *analogia entis concreta*, Jesus Christ, he who "constitutes in himself, in the unity of divine and human natures, is the measure of every distance in the relationship between God and Man"⁴³, manifesting the 'ever-greater God.' His incomparable figure verbalizes what God is, beyond merely human concepts and images. Augustine acutely observes, "Semper ille major est, quantumque creverimus"... "sub illo majore semper nos pulli sumus"⁴⁴. Far from being the end goal of rational effort,

the *Deus semper major* that the theologian invites us to hear is in itself “*id quo maius cogitari nequit*”⁴⁵, the living reality of He who freely reveals himself in his Word made flesh, according to the descending movement of Love. In his work, the Swiss theologian makes heard the symphony God performs in his revelation. Those who hear discover that they are thus enabled to join in as co-performers in the same symphony.

Balthasar, as interpreter of Catholic tradition, helps us to contemplate Jesus Christ who is the way and therefore shows the way that leads towards the Father. The way the Son shows is that which he is, and has been before the Incarnation, since from all eternity he is the content of the promise. It is the way which his mother, a creation of his, is given a share by the incarnation. It is finally the way that he represents in his person—and in his body the Church—before mankind. There is no possibility to comprehend the “whole” object of faith, hope, and charity, to comprehend the nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Balthasar makes clear that the faithful can only sense something of it when they follow on this way.

-
- ¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar. *Premio Internazionale Paolo VI 1984*, Istituto Paolo VI, *Notiziario* n. 8 (Mai 1984), Brescia 1984, p. 25.
- ² Balthasar H. U. von, “Il discorso di Hans Urs von Balthasar”, in *Hans Urs von Balthasar. Premio Internazionale Paolo VI 1984*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 27s.
- ³ Balthasar H. U. von, *Unser Auftrag*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1984, pp. 102-103 (*Our Task*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1991, p. 121). For the ease of the reader, we refer to available translations of Balthasar’s works, while reserving the possibility to revise the cited text.
- ⁴ Lubac H. de, *Paradoxe et Mystère de l’Église*, Aubier, Paris 1967, p. 184 (*The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, Ecclesia Press, Staten Island - New York 1969, p. 105).
- ⁵ *Loc. cit.*
- ⁶ Albus M., “Geist und Feuer. Ein Gespräch mit Hans Urs von Balthasar”, in *Herder-Korrespondenz* 30 (1976) p. 73.
- ⁷ Balthasar identifies a few of these ‘greatest’ saying, “I began with the apostolic fathers: Ireneus, Origenes, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus, Augustine, passed through the Middle Ages with Anselm, Bonaventure, St. Thomas, and the great English and Flemish mystics, to arrive at Dante, Catherine of Sienna, John of the Cross, Bérulle, Pascal, and in our day, Thérèse of Liseux, Madeleine Delbrêl, Claudel, Péguy, Bernanos, Cardinal de Lubac, Adrienne von Speyr” (Balthasar H. U. von, “Il discorso di Hans Urs von Balthasar”, in *Op. cit.*, p. 27).
- ⁸ The titles of many of von Balthasar’s volumes colorfully illustrate this very purpose. For example, *The Office of Peter* (published in German under the even more striking title *Der antirömische Affekt*), *The Moment of Christian Witness* (German: *Cordula oder der Ernstfall*), *In the Fullness of Faith. On the Centrality of the Distinctively Catholic* (German: *Katholisch*), *A Short Primer for Unsettled Laymen* (German: *Kleine Fibel für verunsicherte Laien*), *Credo*.
- ⁹ Löser W., “Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar”, in *America* (October 16, 1999), pp. 16-20; Oakes E. T., *Pattern of Redemption. The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Continuum, New York 1994, in particular the last chapter, “Last Things”, pp. 300-323.
- ¹⁰ Henrici P., “A Sketch of Balthasar’s Life”, in *Hans Urs von Balthasar. His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1991.
- ¹¹ The letter of H. U. von Balthasar can be found in: H. de Lubac, *Mémoire sur l’occasion de mes écrits*, Culture et Vérité, Namur 1992, pp. 371-375 (*At the Service of the Church. Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances That Occasioned His Writings*, Communio Books – Ignatius, San Francisco 1993, 370-375).
- ¹² Balthasar H. U. von, “Il discorso di Hans Urs von Balthasar” in *op. cit.*, p. 27.
- ¹³ Ratzinger J., “Homily at the Funeral Liturgy of Hans Urs von Balthasar”, in *Hans Urs von Balthasar. His Life and Work*, *op. cit.*, pp. 291-295, here p. 293.
- ¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, 293-295.
- ¹⁵ Balthasar H. U. von, *Herrlichkeit I*, Johannes Verlag, Freiburg 1988³, p. 493 (*The Glory of the Lord I*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1983, p. 512).
- ¹⁶ Balthasar H. U. von, *Das Ganze im Fragment*, Johannes Verlag, Freiburg 1990² (*Man in History*, Sheed & Ward, London & Sidney 1967; *A theological Anthropology*, Sheed & Ward, New York 1967).
- ¹⁷ Balthasar H. U. von, *Die Wahrheit ist symphonisch*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1972, p. 7 (*Truth Is Symphonic*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1987, p. 7).
- ¹⁸ Balthasar H. U. von, *Herrlichkeit I*, *loc. cit.* (*The Glory of the Lord I*, *loc. cit.*).
- ¹⁹ *Loc. cit.*
- ²⁰ Balthasar H. U. von, *Die Wahrheit ist symphonisch*, *loc. cit.* (*Truth Is Symphonic*, *loc. cit.*).
- ²¹ Rahner K., “Hans Urs v. Balthasar, Kosmische Liturgie”, in *Stimmen der Zeit* 138 (1941) p. 155. Cf. Id., in *ZkTh* 66 (1942) 153-156.
- ²² Neufeld K. H., *Die Brüder Rahner. Eine Biographie*, Herder, Freiburg 1994, p. 183.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Balthasar H. U. von, in Speyr A. von, *Erde und Himmel II*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1975, pp. 194-195. See Servais J., “The *ressourcement* of contemporary spirituality under the guidance of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar”, in *Communio* 1996, p. 303.
- ²⁵ Balthasar H. U. von, *Die Wahrheit ist symphonisch*, *op. cit.*, p. 38 (*Truth is Symphonic*, *op. cit.*, p. 44).
- ²⁶ Albus M., “Geist und Feuer”, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
- ²⁷ Balthasar H. U. von, *Die Wahrheit ist symphonisch*, *op. cit.*, p. 8 (*Truth is Symphonic*, *op. cit.*, p. 8).
- ²⁸ Löhner M., “Zur Entstehung von Mysterium Salutis”, in *Mysterium Salutis*, Ergänzungsband, Zürich 1981, p. 13. Cf. Albus M. “Geist und Feuer”, *op. cit.*, p. 75. The authors use however significantly different hermeneutical hypothesis to interpret the general plan of Balthasar’s Trilogy. See, for example, Henrici P., “La dramatique entre l’esthétique et la logique”, in *Pour une philosophie chrétienne*, ed. P.-Ph. Druet, Paris 1983, 109-132; Id., “La structure de la Trilogie”, in *Transversalité* 63 (1997), pp. 17-22; Lochbrunner M., “Hans Urs von Balthasars Trilogie der Liebe. Vom Dogmatikentwurf zur theologischen Summe”, in *Forum Katholische Theologie* 11 (1995), pp. 161-191; Wallner

K., “Ein trinitarisches Strukturprinzip in der Trilogie Hans Urs von Balthasars?”, in *ThPh* 71 (1996), pp. 532-546. Critical: Biser E., “Dombau oder Triptychon? Zum Abschluss der Trilogie Hans Urs von Balthasars”, in *ThRv* 84 (1988), p. 184.

²⁹ Balthasar H. U. von, *Zu seinem Werk*, Johannes Verlag, Freiburg 2000², pp. 67-68 (*My Work In Retrospect*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1993, p. 79).

³⁰ Balthasar H. U. von, *Epilog*, Johannes Verlag, Trier 1987, p. 7 (*Epilogue*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2004, p. 9).

³¹ Balthasar H. U. von, *Unser Auftrag*, *op. cit.*, p. 82 (*Our Task*, *op. cit.*, p. 97).

³² Balthasar H. U. von, *Die Wahrheit ist symphonisch*, *op. cit.*, 38 (*Truth Is Symphonic*, *op. cit.*, p. 44).

³³ Balthasar H. U. von, *Zu seinem Werk*, *op. cit.*, p. 20 (*My Work In Retrospect*, *op. cit.*, p. 20).

³⁴ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, # 95.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, # 91.

³⁶ Balthasar H. U. von, *Henri de Lubac. Sein organisches Lebenswerk*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1976, p. 31. “The human race is one. By our first nature and still more in virtue of our common destiny, we are the members of one same body. Now, the members live from the life of the body. How, then, could there be a salvation for the members if, *per impossibile*, the body itself were not saved? But salvation for this body—humanity itself—consists in its receiving the form of Christ, and that is possible only through the Catholic Church. [...] Thus this Church, which as the invisible Body of Christ is identified with final salvation, as a visible and historical institution is the providential means of this salvation. ‘In her alone mankind is refashioned and recreated’ (Augustine)” (Lubac H. de, *Catholicisme. Les aspects sociaux du dogme*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, t. VII, Cerf, Paris 2003, pp. 184-185 [*Catholicism. Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1988, pp. 222-223]).

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* I 84, 5, resp.

³⁸ Balthasar H. U. von, *Herrlichkeit III/1.2*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1975², p. 970 (*The Glory of the Lord V*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1991, p. 641).

³⁹ “Quod magis conducit ad finem” (Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, # 23). In this direction, Alfonso Rodriguez, *Ejercicio de perfección y virtudes cristianas*, Madrid 1946 (*The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection*, J. Duffy and C., Dublin [s.d.]), and today Rahner K., *Betrachtungen zum ignatianischen Exerzitienbuch*, Kösel, München 1965, p. 27-39.

⁴⁰ “Sume et suscipe” (*Ibid.*, # 234). In this direction, Francis de Sales, *Traité de l’amour de Dieu*, IX, chap. 4ss.; cf. A. Ravier, *Francis de Sales. Sage and Saint*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1988, in particular pp. 199- 211.

⁴¹ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, # 20.

⁴² Balthasar H. U. von, *Herrlichkeit III/1.2*, *op. cit.*, p. 459 (*The Glory of the Lord V*, *op. cit.*, p. 106).

⁴³ Balthasar H. U. von, *Theologie der Geschichte*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln, 2004⁷, p. 53 (*A Theology of History*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1994, pp. 69-70).

⁴⁴ Augustin, *En. in Ps.* 62, 16 (in CCL 39, p. 804).

⁴⁵ Anselm, *Proslogion* 2, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt, Stuttgart 1968, pp. 111-112. Cf. *St. Anselm Basic Writings*, Open Court Publishing Company, La Salle 1962², pp. 53-54.