

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR—CONSULTATION

Topic: Conversion, Language, and Dialogue
Conveners: Peter Casarella, DePaul University
Nicholas J. Healy, Pope John Paul II Institute
for Studies on Marriage and Family
Barbara Sain, University of St. Thomas
Moderator: Mark Yenson, King's University College
Presenters: Gill K. Goulding, C.J., Regis College, University of Toronto
Anne M. Carpenter, Marquette University

In her presentation, “Critical Conversion—Dialogue and Gift,” Gill K. Goulding explored the theme of conversion in Balthasar’s theology, bringing to light on one hand the influences of the Ignatian *Exercises* on Balthasar’s thought and on the other hand the affinities in Balthasar with the priorities of the New Evangelization. For Balthasar, conversion is both profoundly personal and ecclesial; it is situated within the larger drama of redemption, drawing the individual into the dialogue of finite and infinite freedoms that is ultimately grounded in the Trinitarian exchange of love.

Goulding began by treating the divine initiative in the call to conversion, thus establishing the trinitarian and christological basis for Balthasar’s understanding of conversion. Like Augustine and Ignatius of Loyola, Balthasar construes created being as being-in-tension, characterized by longing for God. This tension is a positive attribute of creaturely being which finds both its foundation and its fulfillment in the trinitarian love of God made visible in Christ. Balthasar describes the ongoing process of conversion as a reception of the impression of the Christ-form, as the attunement of the whole person to God’s will, and as the personalizing bestowal of a mission by God. The recognition of one’s poverty and the encounter with Christ echo the first and second weeks of the *Exercises*.

Balthasar further situates the conversion of the individual within the drama of redemption. Echoing Ignatius’ meditation on the two standards, Balthasar reads individual election within the cosmic, eschatological confrontation against the anti-human. More positively, conversion is dramatic in that the divine invitation to dialogue does not diminish human freedom but rather guarantees it. Goulding noted that within this dramatic approach to conversion the Church plays an indispensable role: it is a community-in-struggle, the locus of dialogue, and the apostolic axis of conversion. Goulding closed her reflections by noting that Balthasar’s approach to conversion and his postconciliar critique of culture find deep resonance in the New Evangelization proposed by John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis.

Conversion and dialogue also figured in the second presentation, albeit in distinct permutations. In “Converting and Straining Language: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Theological Grammar of Holy Saturday,” Anne M. Carpenter examined Balthasar’s theology of language in response to several recent critiques, particularly of his theology of Holy Saturday. According to Carpenter, Balthasar’s language strains beyond the strictly metaphysical, forcing us to attribute to him either sheer nonsensicality or a new understanding of theological language. Balthasar converts theological language while maintaining a metaphysical grounding: his mode of discourse is neither *only* metaphysical nor *only* metaphorical; rather, Balthasar

develops a “theological poetic,” a theology of language and metaphysics that allows him to use highly charged terms in a new way, performing the work of speculation while also functioning like art. It is this plasticity of language that Balthasar’s critics have not taken fully into account.

Carpenter offered a variety of examples of such a theological poetics, including Balthasar’s use of the concept of *Gestalt*, his appeal to Chalcedonian Christology, the notion of *distance*, and the language of passivity in the description of the Son suffering in the abyss of hell. Adequate interpretation requires attention to metaphysics and to the theological tradition, but also requires attention to the rich poetic and mystical resonances ranging from epic poetry to Dostoyevsky to Thérèse of Lisieux and beyond. According to Carpenter, Balthasar’s theological project not only attempts to take account of the Christian theological past and its forms, but also seeks to expand itself into the broad horizons of the artistic past and its forms, all for the sake of a vibrant articulation of the present.

The presentations yielded engaging discussion and cross-pollination. Analogies were drawn between Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and between Balthasar and Ignatius of Loyola on the place of “structure” and freedom in their thought. While acknowledging her notion of “theological poetic” might not appease all critics of Balthasar, Carpenter suggested potential resources within Balthasar that might be tapped by feminist and other theological perspectives.

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