

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR—CONSULTATION

Topic: Grace and the Political  
Convener: Mark Yenson, King's University College  
Moderator: Danielle Nussberger, Marquette University  
Presenters: Michael Altenburger, University of Notre Dame  
Todd Walatka, University of Notre Dame

In “Grace and the Political: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Politics of John,” Michael Altenburger put Hans Urs von Balthasar in dialogue with modern exegetical and theological appropriations of Pauline apocalypticism. Altenburger charted the development of Pauline apocalyptic theologies in the twentieth century, including the contributions of Schweitzer, Käsemann, J. Louis Martyn, and more recently P. Ziegler. Such interpreters of Pauline apocalyptic reject salvation-history perspectives that emphasize evolution and continuity between grace and culture. Instead, proponents of Pauline apocalyptic stress divine freedom in paradoxical engagement with a sinful world, and dualism between old and new creation. Balthasar, however, offers a more robust apocalyptic theology than a purely Pauline apocalyptic-political theology. Altenburger noted the centrality of the Book of Revelation in Balthasar’s thought, arguing that Revelation ought to be central to any adequate apocalyptic theology. Against an overly linear salvation-history model, Balthasar maintains the dramatic tensions stressed by “the politics of Paul.” But for Balthasar, the “Lamb slain before the foundation of the world” overcomes the sharp dualism of old and new creation. Divine engagement with the world is not only paradoxical, but analogically structured, since Christ is both creation’s originating pattern and fulfillment. Echoing the liturgical imagery of Revelation, the Eucharist becomes the concretization of cosmic reconciliation. And in the themes of solidarity and the descent into hell, Balthasar offers a vision of service to the world, entering into the hell of the other, rather than a turn away from the world and its sinfulness.

In “Balthasar, Politics, and the Option for the Poor,” Todd Walatka explored Balthasar’s theodramatics in terms of the Church’s engagement with the political dimension of human life and the theological concept of the option for the poor. Balthasar’s theological vision aligns with *Gaudium et spes* 42 in the insistence that Christian mission is in the world and in service of the world, against gnostic or quietist tendencies. Appealing to Óscar Romero, Walatka argued that the option for the poor is an essential, constitutive dimension of this mission to the world. Yet while Balthasar affirms Christian responsibility for the world, he neglects the centrality of the option for the poor as a datum of revelation and epistemological option. Such inattention weakens his own theological project. Walatka noted occasional references in Balthasar to socio-political oppression and to Jesus’ merciful partiality to the poor, but such references remain atypical of his Christology and theology of Christian life. Balthasar emphasizes the apocalyptic crescendo of opposition to God’s will, yet he typically associates such opposition with idolatry and promethean ideology. Liberation theologians such as Jon Sobrino and James Cone, however, show that the forces hostile to the Gospel include concrete situations of inequality, oppression, violence, and racism; these realities also belong to the theodramatic struggle of history. Thus,

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Balthasar's own theodramatic project is in need of attention to systems of oppression and the call to resistance and solidarity.

The ensuing conversation was wide-ranging and provocative, touching on Balthasar's theology of the saints in relation to figures such as Romero; implications of the option for the poor for ecclesiology; the lack of sustained engagement with liberation theologians in Balthasar's theology, and political dimensions of the Eucharist.

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