

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR – CONSULTATION

Topic: Another World is Possible: Violence, Resistance and Transformation
Conveners: Jennifer Newsome Martin, University of Notre Dame
Moderator: Charles Gillespie, Sacred Heart University
Presenters: Kristen Drahos, Carthage College
John Laracy, Seton Hall University

In her paper, “Cosmos or Chaosmos? The Challenge of Umberto Eco and the Catholic Response of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” Kristen Drahos began with an overview of Umberto Eco’s turn away from classical and medieval aesthetics. Inspired by the novels of James Joyce, Eco, in his later writings, called for a new vision of the beautiful, freed from the ideas of a transcendent divinity and an ordered cosmos. At the heart of this new vision is the idea of chaos as the creative force of the universe: “Chaosmos ... emerges as the cosmos of beauty reconfigures according to the epiphanic work of the new age of Joycean poets who have abandoned the rule of transcendence and embraced divinity for themselves, [it] becomes the Heraclitan world ‘of incoherent, flashing, unstable impressions. ... Only singular moments remain, seizable for an instant then immediately vanishing.’” Drahos argued that Hans Urs von Balthasar’s interpretation of Dante offers a credible response to Eco’s aesthetics of chaosmos. Although sympathetic to some of Eco’s concerns, von Balthasar presents a view of the cosmos configured to accommodate both the darkness of infinite variability and the light of aesthetic formal clarity: “Rather than dismantling cosmic order with the un-chartable’s newness and disruption, as does chaos within chaosmos, love opens new paths by linking the cosmos. It forges unheard of pathways for the poet between realms that guide Dante from hell’s depths toward heaven’s heights. Where universal epiphany comes at the price of obscurity in Joyce, Dante’s epiphany of love’s nature and end comes with increasing clarity and light as he ascends toward his beloved.”

In his paper, “Dare We Hope for Reconciliation? Dostoevsky and Balthasar on the Problem of Innocent Suffering,” John Laracy notes that von Balthasar’s thesis that we should hope for the salvation of all encounters a serious obstacle when we contemplate certain kinds of evil. What about those who perpetrate evil and violence on innocent children? Should we hope for their reconciliation? By what right? This was the question that tormented Dostoevsky and his character Ivan Karamazov. Drawing on the resources of von Balthasar and Dostoevsky, Laracy sketched a response to this question on the basis of human solidarity and communion in guilt—“each of us is guilty before all and on behalf of all”—and on the basis of the deeper mystery of Christ suffering *pro nobis*. Within the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, the figure of Alyosha offers a concrete response to the suffering of innocent children: “After receiving faith in Christ’s universal presence, [Alyosha] patiently suffers in solidarity with sinners and victims alike, helping them to gradually reconcile with each other . . . patiently letting Christ’s *transitus* take form in himself and his neighbors.” He continues: “After death, each of us will come to know Christ’s suffering together with oneself and with all humans. Those in despair might experience solidarity in their extreme suffering for the first time and therefore choose, finally, to love one’s fellow sufferers. Perhaps, in this moment, the most scandalized among us will be able to

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understand, together with God, that the goodness of communal existence is worth the cost of suffering. Fully delivered from desolation by Christ's transformative compassion, the victims of cruelty may be able to forgive their assailants, thereby becoming agents of conversion together with Christ."

A wide-ranging discussion on Balthasar's aesthetics and soteriology followed the presentations, with questions on the relationship between human suffering and divine love, on the figure of Beatrice, and on the universality of Christ's redemptive work.

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