

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR – CONSULTATION

Topic: “Thinking Catholic Interreligiously”
 Convener: Jennifer Newsome Martin, University of Notre Dame
 Moderator: Megan Heeder, Marquette University
 Presenters: Daniel Drain, St. Bernard’s School of Theology and Ministry
 Nathan Bradford Williams, University of Toronto
 Respondent: Kathleen Cavender-McCoy, Marquette University

In his paper, “Crossing Deepest Hell: Balthasar’s *Descensus* Theology,” Daniel Drain examined the interaction of divine and human freedom in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s narrative of Christ’s death, descent into hell, and resurrection. Through a close engagement with and exegesis of Balthasarian texts across the trilogy which amplify themes of separation and even wrath, Drain identified as crucial the unity of Christ’s life and mission in his analysis of the passive, obediential, but ultimately free quality of the *descensus*. “Rather than obfuscating the power of human freedom,” Drain argues, “Christ’s rule over the eschaton secures the seriousness of human freedom, presenting each eschatological state as a real possibility.” Likewise, even the radical expression of divine freedom in the free descent into hell—the revelation of divine forsakenness—does not weaken the power of human freedom but rather allows “finite freedom to freely seize hold of God and not let go.” Drain closed his reflections with an ecumenical appeal to Fr. Khaled Anatolios’s gloss on sin and freedom in *Deification through the Cross* (2020), bringing insights from Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr forward to highlight the “mutual recognition... of the Son’s representation of humanity in and to the Trinity, and humanity’s representation of the Son in and to the world,” a representation which is “not merely moral but ontological and doxological.”

In “Childlikeness: A Balthasarian Entrée to Comparative Theology,” Nathan Bradford Williams suggests that, despite some of Balthasar’s own (acknowledged) limitations with substantive and non-reductive engagements with other religious traditions, there are internal methodological resources for comparative theology in Balthasar via a recovery of his theology of childhood, which is not only anthropological but also Christological and trinitarian. Relying primarily upon Balthasar’s *Unless You Become Like this Child* and Joshua Brown, “Strange Companions? Hans Urs von Balthasar as Resource for Comparative Theology” (*Theological Studies* 78:2 [2017]), Williams argued that Balthasar’s late interest in the phenomenon of “childlikeness”—in clear dialogue with Ferdinand Ulrich’s *Der Mensch als Anfang*—can be a useful resource for thinking interreligiously. His paper drew out such features of childlikeness as a recognition of one’s own absolute need, a delight in developing mastery, the obediential readiness of Christ (the eternal, archetypal child!) to the will of the Father, and the ability to marvel and wonder at the givenness of all phenomena. As Balthasar reads John 14:28, when Christ says that “the Father is greater than I,” the comparative between Christ and the Father as “other” expresses “the linguistic form of amazement” (*Unless*, 46). Williams advocated that an analogous subjective disposition be adopted by the comparativist which attenuates in a salutary way the temptation either to cultural appropriation or to ideological reduction.

In her response to the foregoing papers, Kathleen Cavender-McCoy offered an integrated essay which deployed and developed insights of the previous speakers. Her contribution elevated the presence of Erich Przywara as one of Balthasar's primary interlocutors, identified the theme of play and its connection to the virtue of childlikeness, and indicated the perduring quality of childlikeness, even in adulthood. Powerfully drawing together the themes of birth and childhood with the theme of death, Cavender-McCoy observed that both childhood and death are forms of a luminous poverty which expose vulnerability and dependence at the root of fundamental human experience. Her paper identified the poverty of Ignatian indifference, "the freedom to fully accept God's will for one's life," as a possible thread which joins Drain's and Williams's papers, and concluded with a brief discussion of how the theological fact that human beings are God's children may support the position of universal salvation.

A wide-ranging discussion followed in response to questions on the status of hell in Balthasar as "discarded sin," the phenomenon of loneliness in the church, the limits and possibilities of models of "representation" in soteriology, Balthasar's reading of Dante's *Inferno*, connections between childlikeness and liturgical modes of speech like prayer and confession, literary and spiritual figurations of childlikeness in Péguy's poetic Joan of Arc and Bernanos' novels (e.g. *Under the Sun of Satan*, *Diary of a Country Priest*, and *Joy*), and some practical implications for a disposition of wonder and childlikeness for interreligious dialogue and comparative theology.

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