

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR – CONSULTATION

Topic: Social Salvation
 Convener: Charles A. Gillespie, Sacred Heart University (Connecticut)
 Moderator: Catherine Yanko, Catholic University of America
 Presenters: Brian Bajzek, Molloy University
 Henry Shea, S.J., Boston College
 Kristen Drahos, Baylor University

The organizing team took the theme “social salvation” as an invitation to scholarly collaboration in Balthasar’s expansive style. The Consultation very successfully experimented in connecting the Balthasar Breakfast to the paper session. At breakfast, we read and discussed a scene from Shakespeare in light of Balthasar’s ideas on drama, guilt, salvation, and the task of theology. In the session, papers opened further conversation between Balthasar, the social, and those gathered thanks to Catherine Yanko’s astute work as moderator.

Brian Bajzek opened the panel with a paper titled “Form, Face, and Otherness: Cruciform Church as ‘Event of Intersubjectivity’.” Bajzek pointed attention toward those whom the church renders “other” and the pain of religious pronouncements about their identity. Bajzek continued the fruitful scholarly dialogue between the thought of Balthasar and Bernard Lonergan. The paper focused particularly on Joseph Komonchak’s critique of Balthasar’s ecclesiology as one that marks the church a suprapersonal entity removed and aloof from the lives of sinful human beings. Komonchak suggests an alternative articulation: church as “event of intersubjectivity.” For Bajzek, Balthasar’s writings on *Gestalt*, Christ, the cross, and even the church present nuanced approaches to intersubjectivity. Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Lonergan, Bajzek demonstrated harmonies between Balthasar’s understanding of human intersubjectivity with and in Christ and the church’s need to cooperate with and conform to the drama of Christ’s mission. “Each encounter with the face of the other leads me to recognize that avoiding help of the other makes me complicit in their pain.” Balthasar’s ecclesiology, in Bajzek’s view, thus calls for a cruciform church as an ongoing event of intersubjectivity.

Henry Shea continued the panel with a paper titled “Balthasar, Social Salvation, and Vatican II.” Looking at Balthasar’s commentaries on *Gaudium et Spes*, Shea highlighted one of Balthasar’s chief concerns: the ways in which the distinction between the church and the world increasingly blur after the council. Mass culture may also become destructive of the person. Across writings, Balthasar worries, at times apocalyptically, about Christians adapting and adopting “worldly” strategies and political powers, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*. For Balthasar, too much focus on social issues risks a secular messianism rather than longing for the liberation that can come only by and through Christ; everything else, including work for greater political and economic freedom, must be and is entirely relative. Shea’s paper crafted an elegant analysis of some of the tensions within Balthasar’s treatment of *Gaudium et Spes* and Balthasar’s wider thought. Just as there is no pure nature apart from grace, there can be no human nature apart from sociality. Shea remains concerned that “Balthasar never enables the ‘self-denying and obedient attitude’ of kenotic love to be rendered social

such that it may grow within and transform the broadly socioeconomic and political aspects of life.” Aiming to play the gadfly and push Balthasar’s thought in new directions, the paper uplifted St. Oscar Romero who was martyred in the midst of a celebration of the Eucharist and shortly after reading a selection from *Gaudium et Spes*.

In the session’s final paper, Kristen Drahos pointed attention towards two literary engagements with “The (Im)Possibility of Social Salvation in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Gabriel García Márquez.” Drahos looked to Balthasar’s work on the Spanish baroque drama of Calderón de la Barca in the first volume of *Theo-Drama*, particularly Calderón’s *Life is a Dream*, and the twentieth-century novel *Autumn of the Patriarch* by Gabriel García Márquez. Both works of fiction call into question the reality of social worlds and ask to what end is social salvation. Drahos disclosed the baroque vision of social salvation in Calderón where transcendent goodness only emerges in the action of the play. Márquez offers a vivid contrast in the horror of dictatorship by a general that never, really, dies in a world where reality is subject to the general’s command. Both Márquez and Calderón reject tragic dramatic trajectories and both suggest the importance of love in drama’s unfolding. Drahos offered these contrasting images of social salvation as an opening for Balthasar’s theological commentary, expanding his use of forgiveness as a dramatic baroque form of love to address social concerns raised by Márquez. Literature maintains a flexibility for eschatological thinking that informs not only social living but also theological creativity.

The session included ample time for conversation about the papers and whether to consider Balthasar a pessimist, the precise nature of “the social,” Balthasar’s contexts, the intelligibility of the historical Christ-form, and the fact that, for Balthasar, salvation is missional. A final word praises the panelists’ forbearance during interruptions caused by military flyovers. Mostly a nuisance, the jets did produce moments of laughter when phrases like “inbreaking reality within our world” or “transforming fire of God” were punctuated by an overwhelming roar. As one panelist said, “I feel like Elijah.”

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