

EXPERIENCE AS A THEOLOGICAL CATEGORY: HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

The Balthasar Society took up the convention theme from the perspective of the theology of Balthasar. Peter Casarella (University of Dallas) and Christophe Potworowski (Concordia University, Montreal) began the session with brief papers. There followed a discussion of forty minutes which was devoted largely but not exclusively to questions involving comparison of Balthasar's theology with that of George Lindbeck and Bernard Lonergan, among others.

Casarella unfolded his argument in four distinct but interrelated claims. (1) The theological concept of experience for Balthasar is intelligible only when shaped by the perception of the basic form of revelation. As Louis Dupré has pointed out, Balthasar recovers the patristic and Orthodox understanding of the union of faith and experience. What is important to underscore here is the inseparability of the experience created by faith and the form of God's revelation as it appears in the surrender of the whole person to the act of faith.

(2) There are pre-theological aspects of perceiving the form which argue for its basic and universal intelligibility: namely, the experience of the expressive image or symbol and the experience of kenotic love. Image (*Bild*) is what attracts us and draws us into the perceptible form of the divine self-revelation. For Balthasar, the perception of the image is thoroughly sensual and never spiritualized. One of Balthasar's most important contributions to contemporary theology and exegesis is his recovery of the spiritual senses, a doctrine first elaborated by Origen and later reformulated by Bonaventure and Ignatius of Loyola. A proper understanding of the sensuous nature of our perception of the divine is necessary if Western theology is to remain faithful to its sacramental and liturgical origins.

Balthasar's theory of the expressive image does not imply that there is a direct, comparable proportion between the infinite archetype of all visible expression and finite forms of expression. Such an implication contradicts Balthasar's repeated insistence upon the *maior dissimilitudo* between creature and creator affirmed at the Fourth Lateran Council. Kenotic love provides for Balthasar the resources to help here. The expression of an archetype in an image is neither a necessary emanation from the One nor a dialectical movement of reason itself: it is rather the expression of unexacted personal love.

(3) The pre-theological aspects of perceiving the form allow for and even demand an ever more expressive christological concentration if one is to permit what is fully known about the God of Jesus Christ to be revealed in concrete form. Jesus is the theophany of God himself. As the complete and perfected human, he constitutes the entirety of the experience of who God is. He unifies and orders all images of God in creation to himself. Moreover, since, in accord with

the Gospel of John, Jesus and the Father are one, the appearance of Christ must also transcend the created relation of archetype and image. For Balthasar, the relationship of Father and Son embodies an absolutely singular, *hypostatic* union of archetype and image.

Similarly, there is the christological concentration of kenotic love. Christ is the true man, especially in his experience of suffering. Christ's experience in its absoluteness may even include the non-experience of God. Important in this connection is Balthasar's sometimes controversial defense of the abandonment of the Son by the Father in Christ's descent into hell.

(4) Finally, there is the question of where Balthasar's theology of experience fits in the context of current North American theology. Casarella argued that Balthasar's theological concept of experience cannot be reduced to either an experiential-expressive or a cultural-linguistic model of religion. Balthasar's difference from George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model lies not in his defense against the reproach of fideism but in his theory of language. Like David Tracy, on the other hand, Balthasar sees the task of fundamental theology as intrinsic to any systematic elaboration of Christian faith; but unlike Tracy, there is no overarching "method of critical correlation," which seems to imply that the sources of fundamental theology and the sources for identifying appropriateness to the tradition are from the outset extrinsic to each other. Instead of this method, Balthasar offers something more like a hermeneutics of *integration*.

In the second presentation, Christophe Potworowski confronted Balthasar's view of Christian experience with some main aspirations of North American theological literature: a concern for the integrity of human existence, the preservation of a certain incarnational structure as paradigmatic, and the privileged and ultimately normative role given to human experience. In the light of these concerns, Potworowski posed the question of whether Balthasar's position on Christian experience does justice to the integrity of human experience.

Beginning with Balthasar's early philosophical treatise, *Wahrheit* (written in 1947, but republished by Balthasar without change in 1985 as the first volume of *Theologik*), Potworowski underscored receptivity as the basic ontological feature of human experience. Balthasar's understanding of Christian experience is characterized primarily by obedience, and this is prepared by certain philosophical options: specifically, Christian obedience is intelligible because of the prior elaboration of the creaturely *a priori* structures of receptivity, of the creature *as* receptivity. Receptivity, then, is not an impoverishment of being, but has to do rather with being's richness. As Balthasar puts it,

to a greater power of self-determination, there corresponds a greater possibility and capacity to allow oneself to be determined by another. The passivity which must then be admitted depends on the deepest freedom of the spirit which accepts, in all the freedom of love, to be freely determined in love. (*Wahrheit*, 40-41).

In relating the state of receptivity to an act of freedom within a dialogical situation, Balthasar is already intimating a trinitarian horizon for human existence

seen as *imago Dei*. There is here no anticipation on the part of the subject which could somehow already know what the other is about to reveal.

For Balthasar, then, there is a dialogical foundation of human consciousness. The example Balthasar constantly uses is that of the infant who is awakened to consciousness, and to self-consciousness, by the smile of the mother. In the encounter between the mother and child the horizon of unlimited Being is opened to the child, and in this process a series of implications unfold which lead to the judgment that Being and love are coextensive. The experience of consciousness awakening in intersubjectivity—or better, love—provides a context, in Balthasar's view, which is fuller than that provided in the transcendental subjectivity of Maréchal, Rahner, and Lonergan.

Building on the structures of human experience uncovered in the above, Potworowski moved on to consider Christian experience proper. Christian experience is the fruit of a receptivity understood as obedience. Revelation is fundamental here and the reception of revelation is seen as active receptivity. The priority of receptivity in our relation to God involves an act of renunciation: there must be a surrender of one's self and one's knowledge as the norm of experience. The proper context of this surrender is ecclesial, that is, within the fullness of Christ: the "individual with his experience is ever an expropriated member of the whole and must feel and behave this way" (*The Glory of the Lord*, 414).

The category of expropriation is thus applied to all Christians and becomes the very form or configuration of their existence. In faith, Christians must surrender their own experience to the archetypal experience of Jesus Christ, which is above all an experience of kenotic humiliation and self-renunciation. The Son's obedience to the will of the Father, an obedience even unto death, reveals a new image of God. Here, in the kenosis or self-emptying of Christ, we find the heart of Balthasar's theology. Through the identity of word and deed, Jesus points to an author of his mission, and thus reveals God as Trinity.

Christian existence therefore is participation in the trinitarian drama of love: allowing oneself to be molded by and into Jesus's attitude in relation to the Father. By moving from the disposing to the allowing oneself to be disposed, Christians become types or figures of the archetypal experience of Christ. The lives of the saints become particularly important for Balthasar in this regard because they are most informed by this archetypal experience. Through them, the *forma Christi* becomes perceptible to others: Christian love becomes credible.

Thus in the process of examining *Wahrheit* with its ontology of creatureliness, a more conventional account of human experience is transformed: from the human subject who is an isolated agent attempting to move out towards the world and the neighbor, we have travelled to the personal identity of one who is called and is given a mission.

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