

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

- Topic: Adrienne von Speyr as Theologian
 Conveners: Peter Casarella, The Catholic University of America
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Adrienne von Speyr (1902–1967) has been the subject of a number of German-language monographs (including Hans Urs von Balthasar's own *First Glimpse at Adrienne von Speyr*) and several international theological conferences, but English-speaking theologians have hardly paid sufficient attention to this important Catholic thinker. In order to assess her contribution as a theologian, one cannot separate the witness of her life, personal experiences, and mission in the Church from her copious literary output.

Her meeting with Hans Urs von Balthasar in 1940 was a turning point in the lives of both figures, although it took von Balthasar longer to realize the importance of the event. That same year Adrienne became a Roman Catholic after having practiced in Basel for nine years. The work of von Speyr and von Balthasar in the secular institute known as "The Community of St. John" became a life's task and a collaborative articulation of an Ignatian identity.

Several aspects of von Speyr's "spiritual profile" are noteworthy. She combined courage (*Exponiertheit*) and innocence (*Geschhztsein*) in a unique and by no means self-demeaning form of availability for suffering. She explored the stance of confession (*Beichhaltung*) as a search for a new religious starting point as well as a manifestation of truth and gift of self. She saw in Jesus' love for the sake of humanity a model of representative and substitutionary *kenosis* that was exemplified in her own decision to abandon a musical career for the sake of practicing medicine. Finally, her experiences of the "objective intimacy" testify to the quasisymbiotic relationship that she shared with the Lord and the saints.

The theological contributions of Adrienne's witness can be assessed in a number of ways. She practiced a form of "undivided theology" that belies the usual methodological specializations. She possessed a prophetic and contemplative charism that often resulted in the direct dictation of her thoughts and visions to Hans Urs von Balthasar. In at least twelve ways one can identify theological themes of *her* inspiration that were later incorporated into his published writings: (1) the paschal anguish of Christ as expressed in von Balthasar's *The Christian and Anxiety* and *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5; (2) a Johannine conception of truth; (3) the theology of the Christian states of life; (4) a conception of ecclesial obedience; (5) the Christological centering of history; (6) Catholic universalism; (7) a new union of theology and holiness; (8) a theology of prayer drawing upon the wisdom of Scripture; (9) a Johannine conception of glory; (10) an Ignatian theology of mission that responds to the tension between infinite and finite

freedom; (11) a theology of the priesthood and of the office of Peter; and (12) an understanding of Christ's obedience as both Ignatian and Johannine.

The theology of Adrienne von Speyr is not so much a synthesis of ideas or abstract concepts as an *iter marianus*. Her works are filled with rapidly formulated and highly original expressions that evince a new, more synthetic form of theological activity and reflection. She saw theology as a form of abiding in mystery that grows out of prayer and puts prayer into practice. She had a special charism in the service of God's own Word and developed a correspondingly "theological" language that combined an eschatological vision of heaven and earth with the Ignatian discernment through "indifference."

There is also an overtly Mariological dimension to her work. Mary for Adrienne was the *lieu par excellence* of God's overabundant gracefulness. Overcoming a palpable lacuna in her own Protestant upbringing, Mary became the focal point of the human craving for salvation precisely because Mary's mission is accomplished through the Son of God. There is an elasticity to the Marian "Yes," whereby she leaves no merely subjective accent when she chooses to let the Word of God into her life. This Marian stance reconfigures the very being of the Church. Mary's freedom to create a dwelling place for the Lord in her life is a self-giving in the guise of an ecclesial task (*Gabe ist Aufgabe*). In fact, the overall cohesion of Adrienne von Speyr's theology lies no less in its thoroughly Marian watermark than in its consistent return to the Trinitarian God.

Starting with their founding of a secular institute and until his death in 1988, von Balthasar labored tirelessly to have Adrienne von Speyr recognized as an authoritative voice in the Church. For this to take place in the context of U.S. Catholic theology, many challenges still have to be faced and critical evaluations undertaken. First, only twenty-three of Adrienne's sixty-five works are translated into English and the early diaries (especially the two posthumously published volumes entitled *Erde und Himmel*) need to be carefully studied. Second, her methodological significance needs to be weighed in light of her own style. For example, her spiritual output resembles more of a river than a bookshelf in that one cannot undertake the usual scrutiny of learned sources in order to grasp the full scope of her intellectual development. Third, the inculturation of Adrienne's thought will have to face the appearance of a certain elitism, which is counterbalanced by a much more radical universalism. Finally, her theology of the sexes and also the manner of collaboration with von Balthasar has yet to be studied in all of its dimensions.

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