

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR SOCIETY

Topic: Eschatology as Communion
 Conveners: Peter Casarella, The Catholic University of America
 David L. Schindler, John Paul II Institute
 for Studies of Marriage and the Family
 Moderator: Peter Casarella, The Catholic University of America
 Presenter: Nicholas J. Healy, III, Ave Maria University
 Respondent: Robert Imbelli, Boston College

The session focused on Nicholas Healy's paper "Deification in the Theo-Drama: Hans Urs von Balthasar in Dialogue with Thomas Aquinas and Gregory Palamas." Healy noted that both Aquinas and Palamas sought to promote the Patristic notion of *theosis* or deification as a final union between God and creatures and articulated the difference between the two positions in terms of the holding together of two seemingly incompatible truths: (1) that the difference between God and the world abides in the eschaton; and (2) that the God of Jesus Christ gives nothing less than God's own divinity in the sharing of divine life with the creature.

Both Aquinas and Palamas want to affirm that what is communicated to the creature in the beatific vision is nothing less than God himself, even as God remains infinitely transcendent to the human mind; however, a clear divergence between them is found in their accounts of the vision of God. For Thomas knowledge occurs when an object or a similitude of the object informs the soul of the knower. However, because of the divide between created and uncreated being, it is not possible for the essence of God to be seen by any created likeness or similitude. God himself must be both the object and the medium of knowledge. Thomas is careful to note, however, that the creature does not see only a part of God: "God is called incomprehensible not because anything of Him is not seen; but because He is not seen as perfectly as He is capable of being seen." The creature sees the whole of God, but does not wholly see God, *totus sed non totaliter*.

Palamas's answer to this question is complex, but the key for him is the distinction between the divine essence (*ousia*) and its uncreated energies (*energeiai*). The essence of God is strictly unknowable and incommunicable, while the energies are the mode of God's being as communicated to the creature: "God is one, the same being incomprehensible in substance but comprehensible for his creatures according to his divine energies." The idea that creatures could directly participate in the divine essence is for Palamas "the greatest absurdity." Deification or *theosis* is possible only through knowledge of, and participation in, the uncreated energies.

These differing approaches indicate some problems that accompany the notion of deification when viewed through the lens of a scholastic dispute. Von Balthasar addresses the controversy in the final volume of his *Theo-Drama* by shifting the terms of the discussion to a more concrete consideration of the Christological and pneumatological form of deifying grace. The new question posed by Balthasar concerns how creation as a whole can be taken into the divine life. In Balthasar's

view the key is the notion of Christ as the concrete analogy of being universalized by the Holy Spirit. In essence, this means that the central point of reference for the life and mission of the Son is the Father. Christ's mission, which is a prolongation and expression of his eternal procession, involves reconciling the world to the Father. The way in which the Son makes known the mystery of the Father is in and through the assumption of a human nature. Moreover, the Holy Spirit is the "interpreter" of Christ. Only in the Son's return to the Father can his concrete existence be universalized and distributed in the twofold gift of Spirit and Eucharist. For Christ himself, the universalization of his body and his life is not something foreign to him, but something he already allows as a gift and participates in through his relation to the Holy Spirit.

In his response Robert Imbelli underscored Healy's delineation of the new horizon opened by von Balthasar, which focuses upon Christ as the concrete analogy of being, universalized by the Holy Spirit. From this perspective matter, body, history, and community are given new prominence as they are incorporated eucharistically into the process and term of deification. Hence Balthasar, Imbelli argued, seems to transpose reflection upon deification from an individualist-intellectualist key to a relational-dramatic key. Imbelli suggested that Balthasar's vision is congruent with that of Dante in his *Divine Comedy* and offered several passages from Balthasar's study of Dante in *The Glory of the Lord*, volume 3, to support the claim that "even in the eternal beatitude, in which we shall see God face to face, our vision will not be a worldless vision."

A lively discussion followed, which centered, *inter alia*, on whether the apparent conflict between St. Thomas and Gregory Palamas could ever be resolved, the Ignatian understanding of the spiritual senses, and Balthasar's critique of Dante's theology of hell.

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