

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR CONSULTATION

- Topic: Rethinking Sacrifice: The Role of Jewish Atonement Theology and Early Christian Understandings of Sacrifice in Hans Urs von Balthasar's Thought
- Convener: Barbara Sain, University of St. Thomas
- Moderator: Carolyn Chau, King's University College at the Univ. of W. Ont.
- Presenters: Robert J. Daly, S.J., Boston College
Richard J. Barry, Marquette University

The von Balthasar Consultation focused its session this year on the theme of sacrifice and atonement in von Balthasar's thought. In his presentation, Robert Daly described how the concept of Christian sacrifice in von Balthasar has some aspects in common with, but other aspects in contrast to, that developed more recently by Daly himself. They agree (1) that sacrifice, in Christ and in Christians, is profoundly trinitarian, and (2) that the theological method for approaching such a mystery is synthetic rather than systematic. On the other hand they disagree on the extent of the continuity with Christian sacrifice—strong in von Balthasar but reserved in Daly—of OT sacrifice and the idea of sacrifice in the history of religions. Which approach is more faithful to the mystery of Christian sacrifice remains under discussion.

Richard Barry's paper interpreted von Balthasar's controversial soteriology against the backdrop of recent Jewish historical-critical research into the Levitical Day of Atonement. After pointing out how von Balthasar's emphasis on Christ's descent to hell is often dismissed as unbiblical and non-traditional, Barry focused on recent investigations into the notion of "sin" as a substantial burden in ancient Jewish thought. He then described how this ancient approach to sin helps to explain the crucial purpose of the Day of Atonement in the Hebrew Bible, where sin must be physically removed, cast into the outer wilderness. Barry considered, too, how these ancient priestly insights make sense of von Balthasar's emphasis on Christ bearing away the load of "sin in itself," away to the great wilderness of hell. Finally, Barry mentioned how emphasis on Yom Kippur soteriology also brings to light areas where von Balthasar's thought needs supplementation.

A wideranging discussion followed the presentations. The issue of interpretation garnered attention: how ancient Jewish practices are interpreted in Christian thought and how von Balthasar interprets both Jewish and Christian sources on sacrifice. If the idea of sacrifice, taken from Judaism or from the history of religion, is spiritualized or transformed christologically, is it also at risk of being sanitized? Does placing sacrifice in the context of the Trinity reveal something about the trinitarian life that corresponds (in an analogous way, von Balthasar would say) to difficult aspects of sacrifice in this world? Another issue raised in the discussion was the influence of Adrienne von Speyr: whether her description of the concreteness of sin might have been more influential than ancient Jewish soteriology on von Balthasar's theology of atonement. Another focal point was the role of symbols and physicality in liturgy and popular piety and the larger context of sacramentality of creation.

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