

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR CONSULTATION

Topic: Hans Urs von Balthasar as Theologian of Mercy
Convener: Nicholas J. Healy, Jr., John Paul II Institute
Moderator: Barbara Sain, University of St. Thomas
Presenters: Jennifer Newsome Martin, University of Notre Dame
Randall S. Rosenberg, Saint Louis University

In *Misericordiae Vultus*, Pope Francis declared an extraordinary jubilee of mercy, in part, that the church might renew her commitment to *corporal and spiritual works of mercy*. “We will be asked,” Pope Francis writes, “if we have helped others to escape the doubt that causes them to fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness.”¹ Drawing on these words, the von Balthasar Consultation focused on the theme of mercy in the context of spiritual poverty, loneliness, and despair.

In her paper, “Playing Wise: Spiel & Phronesis in Balthasar’s Hermeneutics of Judgment and Mercy,” Jennifer Newsome Martin brought together Balthasar’s interpretation of both Scriptural and non-Scriptural texts of judgment and lostness as evocative sites of existential decision into dialogue with Gadamerian hermeneutics in order to rehabilitate the “existential seriousness” of Balthasar’s optimistic, or at least optative, reading of judgment and mercy. More specifically, the paper developed Gadamer’s hermeneutical concepts of *phronesis*, a mode of practical self-knowledge that is concrete, ethical, and personal, and *Spiel* (play), which names the dynamic back-and-forth movement in literary interpretation by which spectators are transformed into participants. In *Dare We Hope*, Balthasar suggests that the judgment passages in the New Testament present being lost as a genuine possibility, but in so doing actually make a claim about the nature of all freely acting subjects; namely, to be a human being is to experience a “final-being-placed-in-the-position-of-having-to-decide” (*Dare We Hope* 33), such that a robust assertion of divine mercy does not nullify human personal responsibility. With the Gadamerian lens in place, Martin interpreted selections from Marilynne Robinson’s luminous new novel *Lila*—a fictional narrative about the possibility or the impossibility of rescuing human solidarity, mercy, and salvation—to argue that recourse to the non-discursive images of modern fiction can not only retroactively illuminate Balthasar’s interpretation of the judgment passages in Scripture and function as a transformative experience of existential decision in itself, but also provide an analogy in its resistance to the univocal for the openness and tentativeness with which questions of judgment and Christian hope ought be approached theologically.

In “Balthasar as Theologian of Mercy in a Secular Age,” Randall S. Rosenberg began with a reflection on Charles Taylor’s account of various kinds of spiritual poverty in the modern world. Contemporary secularity consists, for Taylor, in a move “from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”² In this context, Rosenberg showed the fruitfulness of Balthasar’s appropriation of St. Thérèse of Lisieux’s experience of night of nothingness, along with her desire to feast at the table of sorrow and share in the

¹ *Misericordiae Vultus*, 15.

² Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 19–20.

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experience of those who no longer believe in God. In Balthasar's theology of the saints, Thérèse constitutes a living icon of mercy for the modern world—a world wrought by spiritual darkness. Rosenberg argued that Balthasar's presentation of Thérèse contributes to Taylor's project of helping us feel what it's like to inhabit the immanent frame, and does so with great sympathy to those who tend toward a closed take on questions of transcendence. However, with his particular "methodology" of the saints, Balthasar illuminates in a more profoundly theological way Taylor's project of pointing to exemplars who show us that it is possible to break out of the closed take in favor of a more open take in the immanent frame. A saint like Thérèse of Lisieux serves as a living testament that, even those in the secular age—those who feast bitterly at the table of sorrow—can be seized by mercy, "by a sense of the overpowering force of God's love, and a burning desire to become a channel of this love."

A wide ranging discussion followed the presentations, with questions about Thérèse's crisis of faith, the communion of saints, and the relationship between von Balthasar and Gadamer.

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