

UNIT 5: THE CHRISTOLOGY OF HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

If you are completely unfamiliar with the life and thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, the following introduction will be very useful: John O'Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992).

Key text: Hans Urs von Balthasar, trans. Adrian Walker, *Theo-Logic II: The Truth of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), V.A-B, pp.219-316.¹

The Reformed Protestant Karl Barth and the Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar shared a long a fruitful correspondence, and von Balthasar wrote a lengthy work on Barth's theology. They share many of the same contexts and concerns. With regard to Christology and the incarnation, both are concerned with the Prologue to John's Gospel and the meaning of the Word becoming flesh. Both are also concerned to reject the priorities of modernity and establish theology as its own 'theo-logic'.

Von Balthasar was as prolific a theologian as Barth. His principal work is a sixteen volume 'trilogy'. The three parts of this immense achievement are entitled *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (7 volumes), *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (5 volumes) and *Theo-Logic* (3 volumes) plus a short Epilogue. In addition to these works, von Balthasar was a prolific essayist and wrote numerous devotional works and books on other theologians (for example, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor).

Von Balthasar's style is rather different to Barth's. His writing includes asides on history, literature, music, aesthetics and philosophy. He is more concerned with the implications of Christian theology for other human discourses, most particularly metaphysics. For example, he asks questions such as 'what difference does the incarnation make to our understanding of material nature as such?'

Von Balthasar never held an academic post. He joined the Jesuits in 1928 and was ordained priest in 1936. He eventually left the Jesuits and endured some turbulent times in his relations with the Vatican, but in 1988 was invited by Pope John Paul II to become a Cardinal. Von Balthasar died in his home in Basel, Switzerland two days before the ceremony. His theology was highly influential during the Second Vatican Council, and Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI are amongst his greatest admirers. The Catholic journal *Communio*, which von

¹ This is a very challenging text, but perseverance will pay dividends. The Supplementary Readings also include guide to this text from Aidan Nichols, OP, *Say it is Pentecost: A Guide through Balthasar's Logic* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 2001), ch.16.

Balthasar helped to found, along with Ignatius Press which publishes many of his works, continue to provide an important focus for Balthasar studies.

Some of von Balthasar's writings have a deeply mystical character (and some would argue that he says rather more about the inner life of the Trinity than he ought!). This is because his one abiding influence is his friend, confidant and mystic Adrienne von Speyr. Von Speyr converted to Catholicism under von Balthasar's care in 1940 and dictated a number of books to him which are based on her mystical experiences.

Further details of von Balthasar's fascinating biography can be found in David L. Schindler Sr, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991).

So what of von Balthasar's Christology as this is articulated in the passage of *Theo-logic II*? At first glance, one of the most striking aspects lies on the same trajectory as Barth's Christology, namely the Word's taking flesh. This is indeed crucial for von Balthasar, and he seems to emphasise even more than Barth this aspect of Christology. But how and why?

The history of 'the body' – the flesh – in Western thought is extremely complex. On one reading, our material existence is indicative of the Fall (according to certain forms of Gnosticism), while the human body is also thought to be a hindrance to communion with the transcendent and spiritual divine (according to a certain reading of the Platonic tradition and St Augustine, one which some believe to be largely mistaken). Yet Christianity has at its heart the rather shocking thesis that salvation is accomplished by the transcendent, eternal God assuming *and redeeming* human flesh. It is not that God rescues us from the flesh – for Christ's bodily resurrection is part of Christian orthodoxy – but that Christ re-forms human bodies. Meanwhile, the nature of 'the body of Christ' – its identity and location – is constantly problematised in the Gospel narrative (particularly in the resurrection and post-resurrection accounts), but the 'sarx' of Christ is nevertheless asserted and maintained. Traditionally, the body is also regarded as the locus of the incarnation (God assuming to himself a created nature) because humanity lies at the hinge of material and spiritual being – somewhere between inanimate objects and animals on the one hand, and angels on the other. Therefore, humanity lies at the heart of the cosmic hierarchy. In assuming *human* nature (rather than, say, angelic), God comes to stand at the *centre* of his creation and his redemptive power radiates outwards.

In relating Christology to a wider understanding of the nature and place of the body in creation, it seems that von Balthasar is moving beyond the rather strict dogmatic limits of Barth's thought. Here we have Christology informing an

understanding of human nature (theological anthropology) and materiality (a doctrine of creation – what creation *is*, particularly in relation to its divine origin). What do we find? There are many layers to von Balthasar's writing at this point, but one crucial aspect of his thought is the self-declarative and relational view of being which, in no small measure, he learns from the Greek tradition of philosophy and the Eastern tradition of theology (particularly Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor). To what does this refer? In fact, the idea is fairly straightforward. Scripture attests to God's creation *through* the Word. What is 'the Word' in this context? It is God's self-expression, at first eternal, and then, in the incarnation, in time. To put it colloquially, God does not keep himself to himself. God makes himself known. First, he makes himself known to himself (as it were) in the procession of the persons of the Trinity. Creation is an act of divine 'out-pouring' or 'self-expression' (what one might call 'kenosis', or 'self-emptying'). For von Balthasar, this is the character of 'being' or 'existence' itself: it declares itself. Creation does not hide, nor does it hold itself back. It shines with a brilliance which reflects the glory of its creator. In becoming flesh, Christ is the joining of the eternal Trinitarian self-expression of God (the procession of the Son from the Father) with the constant self-donation we witness in creation. There is nothing particularly complex in this idea: the tree outside does not hide itself, but makes itself known; the sunset displays its fleeting beauty and *gives itself* to be known. The incarnation reveals that this is not accidental, just the way creation happens to be. It is the character of created being insofar as it is a reflection, an image, of divine being: things make themselves known, because the one in and through whom they are made, the divine Logos, is the 'making known' of being itself, namely God.

The highest instance of this 'declaration' is language (we cannot escape the connection with 'the Word'). Human beings declare themselves in a way that other creatures do not: by speech. The elements of language – metaphor, narrative, analogy, myth and so on – are of particular concern to von Balthasar. This aspect of von Balthasar's thought is discussed in the chapter by Nichols provided with this section of Unit 5 (p.117). For the moment, let us consider some introductory reflections based on the concept of analogy.

You will meet 'analogy' at various intervals during your studies in Christian theology. It is an aspect of language (and some would say 'being' itself) which is crucial for theology. Why? Analogy refers to the relation between two or more terms. For example, we might say that 'as sight is to the body, so is the intellect to the soul.' In other words, there is an analogy between sight and body on the one hand, and intellect and soul on the other. This kind of analogy is called 'proper proportionality' for it seems to rest on two identical proportions or relations: as the sight is 'proportioned' to the body, so is intellect 'proportioned' to the soul. To put this in baldly mathematic terms, we could say that 'as 2 is to 6, so is 3 to 9'.

So, could we use this kind of analogy to understand the relation of two theological terms, say my relation to my father and the Son's relation to the Father? There is clearly a problem here. Whatever we mean when we talk of the relationship of Father to Son in eternity, it is really not like the biological, created, time-bound and therefore changing relationship between me and my father. So analogy of proper proportion does not seem to work very well in this theological context. But maybe we could try a different understanding of analogy: attribution. We could suggest that the primordial and perfect relation is Trinitarian – between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In so far as my relations – for example, my relation to my father – reflect or participate in the relationality of God, then my relationship with my father might be called 'love'. But 'love' is only attributed to my relationship with my father in the sense that it is the primordial, original, eternal and perfect relations of the Trinity which enable me and my father to enjoy a relationship of love. My relationship with my father is not a relationship of love in and of itself, but only by virtue of its reference to the love which created it, namely the Trinitarian God. Transferred to the doctrine of creation, we might say that creation does not exist in itself (as it were, by virtue of its own power alongside God). Existence is attributed to creation by virtue of its participation in the existence of God, for only God exists necessarily and truly in himself. So what is the nature of the analogy between God and creation? It is an analogy of attribution whereby existence is attributed to creation by virtue of its participation in being itself, or God.

For von Balthasar, the incarnation of the Word in Christ presents us with a new basis for analogy. Why? Because we have a new coincidence of terms: the divine and human. We discussed above the analogical relation between two terms, God and creation. What is the analogical relation between the divine and human in Christ? It could be said that Christ's human nature is rendered more human by virtue of its relation to Christ's divine nature. As we have seen in previous study units, many of the debates in the early Church revolved around the sense in which Christ could be said to be properly human, or the sense in which Christ could be said to be properly divine. There is a long tradition of so-called docetic Christology which suggests that Christ is either 'superhuman' or only human 'after a fashion'. One reason for this is the importance of the sinlessness of Christ. All orthodox theologians maintain that Christ is sinless, yet Barth equally maintained that Christ adopts human flesh (*sarx*) that is fallen. Von Balthasar seems to have a good deal of sympathy with Barth's view. But does the undoubted sinlessness of Christ not in the end separate him from us? Does this not render Christ somehow 'unhuman' or 'superhuman'? From a certain point of view, it makes Christ more human than we are, and closer to us. Why? If sin is that which separates us from each other and God, and Christ is without sin, then Christ does not bear in his person the sinfulness which drives wedges between

human beings and God. Christ, in his sinlessness, is not only closer to God, he is closer to us because he 'lacks' the sin which divides and fractures relationships. Christ is closer to each one of us than we are to each other. Christ is sinless because of the union in his person of two unmixed natures in such a way that the grace of the divine flows directly and unrestrictedly to the human. So the relation of divine to human in Christ makes Christ *more* human – and that includes his corporeal nature – not *less*. He is, as it were, the archetypal human who takes the place of Adam as the archetypal human (and in that sense Christ is 'the new Adam'). So we can now talk of the analogy between our humanity and that of Christ: by participation in the humanity of Christ mediated to us through the Church, so 'humanity' can be attributed to us. It is not that we are properly or fully human in and of ourselves (as it were, by virtue of our own merits), but insofar as we are grafted in to the body of Christ to become the recipients of grace. This is the basis of a theological anthropology whose foundation is Christological. For von Balthasar, it is also the place where we become not more 'spiritual' and less 'bodily', but more truly bodily for we find out in the Church what our bodies are *for*: showing forth the love and delight which created them, whether this be in speech, gesture (a kiss), the smile, the delight in material beauty (a good meal, the sight of a flower which blossoms for human eyes), sex, the bearing of children; the list could go on.

In addition to this anthropological perspective, there is also a cosmic, or 'creation', perspective. Christ's enfleshment has implications not only for material human nature, but material nature per se. If material nature can be conjoined in one person to the divine and thus reveal God, there can be no limits to the possibilities for material nature per se. What Christ reveals is not only God, but creation as God's act. We see in Christ's enfleshment the possibilities for materiality, and what material nature *should be*. What should it be? It should be a showing forth, in its own particular way, of the goodness and gratuity of Almighty God. So creation is not a 'resource' or a series of banal objects. Creation is, in its materiality, God declaring himself through the Word who, in time, unites himself fully – but 'unmixedly' – to created, material nature.²

² This is why, in Catholic teaching, a proper understanding of the doctrine of transubstantiation at the Eucharist should maintain that the host after the consecration is *more truly bread* than it was prior to the consecration. Why is it more truly bread? Because it is now doing what bread – and material nature as such – are supremely created to do: show the body of Christ. Aquinas adopts this view in his insistence that the accidents of bread and wine remain. They not only remain, but paradoxically become *more real and lucid*.