

Reviews:

Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr, *TO THE HEART OF THE MYSTERY OF REDEMPTION* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2010). 135 pp. Reviewed by *Chris Hackett*.

Hans Urs von Balthasar always considered the saint to be the ideal theologian (and the theologian, for that matter, to be the ideal philosopher).¹ Perhaps, privately, he considered his close associate, the mystic Adrienne von Speyr, to be a saint. It is at least true that he was deeply convinced that she bore a profound and urgent vocation for the Church today - so much so that he went to extraordinary lengths not only to affirm and promote her work but also to explicitly tie his own vast theological labors to hers. Among a number of similar statements scattered throughout his work, somewhere Balthasar suggested that his work ought to be considered simply a “forecourt” to her teaching. This book demonstrates, or rather enacts such a relation, even more clearly, perhaps, than Balthasar’s own reflective attempt in his little book *Our Task: A Report and A Plan*. It helps us understand why this act of deference on behalf of perhaps the greatest Catholic theologian of the twentieth century ought not to be lightly disregarded. It is too easily pushed to the side – perhaps because the phenomenon of Adrienne von Speyr does not fit very well into our conceptions of Christian theology and of religion (if we have reflected on them at all). Yet Balthasar’s mentor and *confrère*, the renowned Henri de Lubac refused to do so, as this book indicates.

This book, a collection of lectures given by Balthasar to French priests, fixed together with a brief anthology of texts from von Speyr’s spiritual works and

¹ Excuse the footnote in a review. Allow me to refer the reader to Balthasar’s explicit statement to this effect in his “Theology and Sanctity,” published in *Explorations in Theology* vol. 1, trans. A. V. Littledale and Alexander Dru. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989, p. 195. There is of course a distinction in “philosophy” and “theology” for Balthasar (and Catholic thought in general), yet it does not require that the theologian is not a philosopher. On the contrary.

commentaries on the Passion, was first published at de Lubac's initiative in 1980 as *Au cœur de mystère rédempteur* (of which a second edition appeared in 2005). The text published by Ignatius Press wisely includes de Lubac's original preface, which, though brief, sparkles with theological acumen. In order to introduce the reader to Balthasar's synthetic style, de Lubac, in a few swift sentences, programmatically affirms the integral relation of a theology of the Cross with the Eucharistic (and therefore ecclesial) structure of Christian faith: the more central we consider the Cross to be to Christianity, the more *radically Eucharistic* will our faith be, sine qua non. Jesus himself provided the hermeneutic, de Lubac points out, when, on the night he was betrayed, he gave the *verba*, the "words of institution," thus offering a definitive interpretive key to his Passion. It is interesting to see de Lubac's well-known *Corpus Mysticum* thesis, according to which the Eucharist, as mystical body, founds the Church as the Body of Christ, offered implicitly here as the starting point for an *all the more radical* "theology of the Cross." Balthasar and von Speyr's elaborations, though disparate in style, converge in the direction that de Lubac points. One can see manifest here the deep conversation with the Reformation that always marked Balthasar's work and Vatican II Catholicism more generally. The brilliance of de Lubac's brief preface shows yet again that the most adequate "dialogue" with Protestant thought is so often surprisingly achieved by means of a direct *ressourcement* of the Tradition itself.

Balthasar's two conferences attempt to rediscover the centrality of the Cross to Catholic spirituality, mission and identity. The fundamental question that drives his reflections is a uniquely modern one: how can the Cross, where one somehow "died for all" (2 Cor. 5), be made intelligible and spiritually meaningful to contemporary people? How can we, today, return to the heart of the mystery of redemption? In order to make the fullest approach, Balthasar takes as a starting point Thomas' four-fold categorization of the rich phenomenon of the Cross: sacrifice, atonement, satisfaction and merit. Yet he reorients these traditional loci around a new center, swiftly and masterfully reinterpreting them in its light. Balthasar sees the salvation wrought by the Cross primarily as the revelation and communication to men of a divine suffering that is (against the worst of modern theology) much more than mere divine "solidarity" with us in our suffering, but rather the *embrace* of our suffering by God which carries it into

the heart of his own life. In this way is the divine life itself opened to humanity in the midst of its suffering which is thereby transfigured into divine life-giving love. This revelation – through the Cross as God's response to sin – of the interior "wound" that defines God's life as absolute love, is not only thoroughly indebted to Adrienne von Speyr's mystical theology but also to Russian sophiology as developed by Sergei Bulgakov. The convergence of these two influences on Balthasar ought to be more thoroughly investigated.

It is interesting that in these brief reflections Balthasar, in deference (yet again) to Protestant thought in general, undervalues the concept of sacrifice (along with, for that matter, the "embarrassing" notion of divine wrath, which is hardly undervalued in the New Testament). Despite his best intentions, Balthasar does not yet give full scope to these more problematic (and most central) elements of biblical and traditional reflection on the Cross. He still seems to conceive them as simply unintelligible or at least incredible to "modern man." Therefore they become virtually exempted from the Church's proclamation, "mythological" elements of the biblical traditions that can today only be, at best, relegated to the margins. Such a Bultmannian non sequitur seems to me to be *solös* – and from our vantage today rather premature. And here, as an aside, we have located what may be the one great problem endemic to twentieth century theology in general and which is, finally, I would suggest, a *philosophical* problem: a removing of philosophical enlightenment from its radical origins in revelation, as in the New Testament and the Fathers, and its return to a crude *Logos vom Mythos* conception – such a return is an abandonment of the religious/philosophical revolution of Christianity and thereby a return to a *merely* pagan mode of thought. In making the point, I am being too hard on Balthasar: his "light Bultmannianism" is only loosely bound by such philosophical, if I may say so, modernism. At least Balthasar sees these traditional images as central and irreplaceable aspects of the phenomenon of the Cross. Still, one would do much better here by first listening to Guy Stroumsa from *The End of Sacrifice* in collaboration with Pope Benedict in the second volume of his *Jesus of Nazareth*. The Pope demonstrates that the notions of sacrifice and divine wrath/justice are central concepts to any adequate approach to the biblical material pertinent to the person of Jesus and the significance of his Cross. Yet it is precisely here that Benedict shows that a more avid return to Scripture already achieves a

“philosophical” purification as much of the mythological elements of the ancient world as of the myths of modern conception. Hence, the transformation, or even “demythologization” (if you like) of sacrifice (and other “mythological” elements of revelation) occurred already in the *philosophical* revolution that transformed the Hellenistic world *through* the Judaism and Christianity of the New Testament age (and of which the patristic age was simply a faithful outworking). The thinking of “modern man” must be assessed in the light of the *original* “enlightenment” of man achieved by the definitive self-revelation of the one true God. This simultaneously *more* biblical and *more* philosophical orientation to the re-presentation of perennial Christian truth to the modern age reveals the limitations of what seems to be a premature genuflection before the narrow *theological* preconceptions of modern philosophy. The best twenty-first century theology will begin here (surely, despite this, on Balthasar’s shoulders) along with Benedict XVI, with a definitively “post-modern” philosophical orientation which allows Scripture itself to perform the first critique of *mythos* as much as *logos* (instead of allowing a preconception of what is and is not “modern” first condition our interpretation of the Cross), and therefore takes as philosophically central the revolution for thought achieved by the “awesome and unbloody sacrifice” of the Cross-Eucharist which made the ancient regime of blood sacrifice, Jewish as much as pagan, redundant, as much as it brings – then and now – an a priori conception of philosophical reason under the same judgment. Liturgy, as bearer of revelation through history, radicalizes philosophy as much as it transforms the historical dimension into a more radical bearer of transcendent truth than myth (or a bare *logos* detached from the mythic and thereby ultimately reduced to *merely* human proportions). Such a hermeneutical reorientation of philosophical “enlightenment” onto revelation itself would radicalize the project of patristic *ressourcement* that Balthasar represents without the hasty denigration of key biblical and theological concepts that appears to accommodate modern, secular thinking rather than challenging it at its roots.

The more successful of the conferences is the second, where Balthasar demonstrates how Mariology is fundamental to Christ-centered, Eucharistic, ecclesial – and therefore biblical – Christianity. It is traditional Marian piety, reformed by return to its center, Balthasar boldly asserts, that makes the phrase “sacrifice of the Mass” capable of being properly understood. Mary, the “Mother

of the Crucified” and “icon of the Church,” is the Church’s “archetype” because her mode of humble “acquiescence” to the death of her Son is the “original form” of participation in the sacrifice of Christ that defines the “ecclesial piety” of Christ’s disciples. It is at the foot of the Cross that Mary’s initial “fiat,” opening human nature to the incarnation of God, paradoxically reaches its apogee. It is the Cross that adequately discloses the act of absolute grace that properly grounds her “co-redemptive” act of pure human obedience, and therefore finally, her immaculate conception, *ex post facto*. In an all too brief comment in his postscript (which alone already makes it valuable), Jacques Servais, the current director of the Casa Balthasar in Rome, in the midst of a discussion of merit in Thomas Aquinas’ theology of redemption, implicitly widens the discussion of grace that Balthasar finds at the heart of Mariology and (if I may) strikes upon a point of convergence between the Bible’s notion of covenant and de Lubac’s thesis regarding the supernatural. According to Servais, the “principle of collaboration” at the heart of the Bible’s notion of grace requires that merit before God is rooted in an order of justice (graciously) pre-established by God, which alone confers on the creature a “right” to beatitude. This “order of justice,” at once lying at the heart of the creation *and* of God’s free relation to humanity in sacred history, ought to be familiar to anyone who has studied the role of Ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties at the heart of the earliest biblical traditions, especially insofar as they fundamentally inform the cosmic and historical repetitions of the exodus in the creation cycle and narratives of the patriarchs, respectively (and which the ultimate exodus of the new Joshua is a final recapitulation). Servais points out how clearly the Thomist notion of merit by supernatural infusion of grace articulates the Bible’s vision of “non-competitive” (to use Kathy Tanner’s language) relation between divine grace and human action. The biblical origin of this link between medieval notions of merit and the biblical concept of the covenant of course collaborates well with the research of Gary Anderson on the centrality of economic metaphors in the Bible’s theologies of redemption in his still under recognized, *Sin: A History*.

The fragmented character of the book risks an awkward presentation, and the reader cannot help but be aware of it. Yet the intellectually/spiritually astute ought not to care that much, however. Even beyond the indications already given, this little text is enthralling. And not only because of the rich, surprising,

manifold orthodoxy that it manifests, so compelling nowadays to more than *Communio* circles. True, Balthasar's lectures are so brief and undeveloped that they can only be taken as the barest of sketches requiring much imaginative work to even begin to fill out. This could be a source of frustration for the reader, although it is classic Balthasar. His curt responses to questions posed by the audience of priests are sometimes almost as difficult to comprehend as the questions – they bewilder as much as they entertain. These questions in particular show how confusing the post-conciliar period really was for theology. Of much interest, yet this time for its theological acumen, buried deep within the “Answers to Questions” of the second conference, is a remarkable statement by Orthodox priest and theologian, Fr. Boris Bobrinsky (author, of course, of the superior *The Mystery of the Trinity*, and still to this day professor of dogmatics at the celebrated St. Sergius Institute in Paris) on the pneumatological pertinence of Mariology. The historical interest of such a statement, along with Balthasar's response, is matched perhaps by its continued ecumenical import.

Yet it is von Speyr's reflections, which make up the third part of the text, entitled “Flashes of the Passion,” that are most noteworthy. These fragments from her work, originally selected by Balthasar, not only disarmingly confront the reader with the breath of an authentic spirituality, like a burst of wind out of nowhere, but also evince startling theological depth. This, I must say, surprised me, for I have always previously been simply unable to see what Balthasar saw in her thought, even after reading her *The World of Prayer* and the first volume of *The Book of All Saints* as well as the fifth volume of Balthasar's *Theo-Drama*, whole chapters of which are hardly more than strings of quotations from von Speyr. The texts collected within the little anthology here struck me at least as somehow different; perhaps because it was late Lent when I first read them, and perhaps it is that here one can most easily enter into the heart of her radically *cruciform* spirituality, which seems to become the key by which her constellation of ideas emerges in synthetic fashion. In these very brief fragments on the Passion the entire landscape of her thought is repeatedly lit up: one sees a Trinitarian mysticism – a mysticism that is somehow simultaneously ecclesial (where the biblical narrative is hermeneutically peeled back to disclose institutional, sacramental and liturgical realities that form a sort of cosmic sub-structure to the soul's dramatic relation to God) and psychological (concerned

with “states” or attitudes of the heart as most fundamental) – rise up astonishingly fresh again from its *fons et origo* in the Cross.

Many thinkers today have no idea what to do with Adrienne von Speyr, and many still perhaps, for some reason or another, find her distasteful – but these “flashes of the passion” encourage the reader to set all that to the side. Ignore whatever unsettles you about her and read these “flashes” as a profound passageway into that Mystery that enacts the world’s redemption. As de Lubac says in his preface, we all (even theologians) are “called to enter” into the heart of this Mystery and “there is no better initiation into this mystery than the experience received from the mystics, who” he says, rightly, “are no more lacking to the present generation than to earlier ones.” Such an entrance is precisely what Balthasar never ceased to attempt to prepare us for in his works.

It is interesting that von Speyr’s German texts were translated into French by the notable figures, Fr. Georges Chantraines (until his recent death the executor of de Lubac’s intellectual estate) and the prominent French philosopher Rémi Brague, whose frank and lucid works continue to steadily appear in English translation. All of this is well documented in Servais’ brief foreword.

As mentioned above, the volume is finished by a long postscript by Servais on the basic elements of the Thomistic theology of the Cross that Balthasar sought to re-launch in the conferences. Besides his refined discussion of merit and grace, of note also are his marginal comments on Balthasar’s “eidetic Christology” and more generally the “phenomenological method” that Balthasar developed through the seven volumes of *The Glory of the Lord*. Here Servais rightly shows the central role of such a phenomenological Christology to Balthasar’s constructive response to historical criticism of Scripture. Such a synthesis between exegesis and phenomenology ought to be further developed. Rumbblings of this sort are just starting to occur in the works of such Balthasar-inspired theologians as Kevin Hart and Jean-Luc Marion, as well as in the coming generation of their students. Here I will only mention the startling essay by Jean Vioulac, “Apocalypse de la vérité” (*Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 108.3 (2010) pp. 443-76).

The message that Balthasar sought to communicate in these lectures and which is illustrated in von Speyr’s reflection on the Cross is perhaps best

articulated by Balthasar himself. I quote from the end of his second conference where he creatively interprets modern Marian apparitions under the general horizon of the heavenly Church's "spiritual direction" of the Church in sojourn on earth. "It would not," he says, "be a matter of special devotions, which are useful for some but in no way obligatory for all." Instead it is a "matter of a deep, general orientation that could be called Marian and that would be the central motive for the course of the Church: consent to the fundamental demands of the Gospel such as it presents itself and not such as we transform it into a postchristian ideology." The articulation of such a "consent" is the perennial task of theology as it seeks to make intelligible the Cross for believers today, a task that, understood this way, is one throughout the ages. It is here, finally, that we see most clearly the heart of Balthasar's sane response to the post-conciliar turmoil that we must continue to press forward today. De Lubac commends it here to our reflection. In this sense the final importance of this book may very well be the fact that it vividly illustrates that which is perhaps Balthasar's greatest (if also most easily overlooked) contribution to Catholic theology and philosophy: viz., his conviction of the necessary place of *sanctity* in the tasks of human thought and action. It is in the works of Parisian philosopher Jean-Yves Lacoste – in the days of his priestly formation an apprentice of de Lubac's – that this conviction is most powerfully carried out today.