

THE DEBATE OVER *LIGHT IN DARKNESS* AND THE CATHOLICITY OF HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

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Abstract: *The publication of Alyssa Pitstick's Light in Darkness has raised questions about the status of von Balthasar's theology, in particular his theology of the descent of Jesus. The paper will consider her claims, and responses to her thesis, and those of others who have raised critical questions about his theology. It will not address the question as to the orthodoxy of his theology, but will ask how his theology can contain so many elements which stretch boundaries yet not attract official concern. It will consider his position on the descent into Hell, divine immutability, his Trinitarian thought and his position on the beatific vision of Jesus. It will compare his treatment with that given to the writing of Sobrino's Christology.*

The work of Hans Urs von Balthasar has grown in stature over recent decades, assisted to some extent by words of appreciation and approval from Pope John Paul II and more recently by Pope Benedict XVI. In recognition of his theological standing, John Paul II sought to make him a cardinal, though Balthasar died before the actual conferral. At a conference on the work of Balthasar Benedict XVI recommended further study of his work to help uncover its riches. In the complex world of competing theological currents and movements, some find in his work a touchstone of orthodoxy, a safe anchor in times of change.

On the other hand there has been a growing chorus of authors who have raised serious concerns about his theological writings, concerns, which if they were present in any other author might give rise to official suspicion and investigation. Indeed some have said things directly related to Balthasarian positions, only to find themselves censured by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This set of concerns has found a focus in the book, *Light in Darkness*, by Alyssa Pitstick.¹ Focussing on his work on the descent into Hell, Pitstick goes so far as to evoke the category of heresy in her analysis. Whatever one might think of this conclusion, what even his admirers accept is that his theology of the descent

¹ Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007).

into Hell is novel, a theological innovation, perhaps a legitimate development of doctrine,² but something not reducible to what has gone before.³

Pitstick's work has precipitated a furious debate, with most of her critics pointing to her methodological preference for Thomistic theological formulations and her alleged lack of sympathy for the aesthetic nature of Balthasar's project. She, on the other hand, has not been slow to rise to her own defence and in a recent contribution identifies a swag of theologians who have voiced similar if less detailed concerns than her own, certainly a collection of authors not reducible to some Neo-Thomistic remnant.⁴ A constant theme among her detractors is the support Balthasar has received from two popes is proof enough of the legitimacy of his theology. How, it is regularly asked, could two popes get it as wrong as she would seem to indicate? Indeed this is a legitimate question, but the way it is raised presupposes the answer than they could not and have not, rather than allowing the question to be explored and a positive suggestion to be made in relation to it. Rather "the pope's recent acclamation of him as a 'most authoritative guide' to the Catholic faith also implies that talk of a suffering descent, even if not correct in all its details, is not heretical."⁵ On the other hand perhaps we should take the question more seriously and ask, why does Balthasar receive special treatment over matters that in any other context would be treated with some suspicion?

The paper will proceed as follows. I begin with an outline of Pitstick's main concerns in relation to Balthasar, in particular to his teaching on the descent into Hell. I then consider critiques that have appears in various reviews of her work. I then take up three areas where concerns can be raised, on divine immutability, on the problem of tritheism, and on Jesus' beatific vision, all of which could, and in one particular case has for a theologian who adopted a similar if not identical position to Balthasar, provoked official censure. I shall then try to take the oft put rhetorical question concerning the support he has received from two popes more seriously and make a suggestion as to why it is so. My concluding remarks will concern the nature and boundaries of a Catholic theology, if indeed there is such a thing.

PITSTICK'S THESIS

Pitstick's thesis at its most basic is that Balthasar distorts the Church's traditional position on the descent into Hell and in doing so he is forced into other serious distortion in major areas of Catholic belief, including the doctrine of the Trinity, Christology and Mariology. For Pitstick the traditional doctrine of the descent involves Christ's glorious descent into the "limbo of the fathers", those for whom heaven is not yet available until the time of Christ's passion, to raise them with him to the glory of heaven. This descent is the descent

² A position proposed by Edward T. Oakes, "The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2007): 184-99.

³ It is interesting to note how often the various and sympathetic contributors to Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, Cambridge Companions to Religion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), refer to his work as idiosyncratic.

⁴ Alyssa Pitstick, "Development of Doctrine, or Denial? Balthasar's Holy Saturday and Newman's Essay," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11 (2009): 129-45, at 129-30, n.2.

⁵ Stephen Bullivant, "Light in Darkness: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell," *Journal of Theological Studies* 59 (2008): 424-26, at 426.

of the divine person of the Son by means of his human soul and does not involve suffering. Christ's redemptive action is not one focused on the amount of suffering, but on the merit of the one suffering, the Christ. She documents this with extensive references to Scripture, Church Fathers, traditional art of the descent, liturgical texts, the teaching of Aquinas and various Church statements.⁶

For Balthasar the descent into Hell is the descent into the Hell of the damned, so that Christ suffers the punishment due for every sin ever committed, in what is really a very strong version of the penal substitutionary model of the atonement.⁷ This account shifts the soteriological priority from the death of Jesus on the cross to the descent into Hell where Jesus bears the full brunt of all human sin, past and future. Such a suffering cannot be borne by the human soul of Christ, only by the divine person of the Son, so the descent is not a function of the incarnate one, but of the divine person alone. However, it is a divine person not only stripped of humanity but also a kenotic loss of the privileges of divinity, such as the beatific vision.⁸ This divine suffering then becomes an element in a large theo-drama involving Father, Son and Spirit.⁹ The Trinitarian speculations he thus develops involve a significant rewriting of traditional theological themes, locating both creation and sin within the "distance" between the Father and Son, a distance which is traversed by the Spirit who is the bond that maintains the unity of Father and Son.¹⁰ Every element of the mission of the incarnate Son must find some corresponding element in the dynamics of the immanent Trinity. So the death of the Son becomes a model of the "super-death" within the Trinity;¹¹ the kenosis of the Son is matched by a "super-kenosis" within the Trinity,¹² and so on. Even the temporal elements are matched by a "super-time" within the Trinity.¹³

Balthasar's warrants for this shift are important to note. As Pitstick points out much of the impetus for such a shift comes from writers in the Reformed tradition, Luther, Calvin¹⁴ and more recently Karl Barth. Balthasar is explicitly critical of the received

⁶ Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 9-29, for her summary of creedal and magisterial statements on the descent. For the fuller account, see 30-85.

⁷ Ibid., 105: "For Balthasar, then, the descent is a continuation of the cross. It is a continuation of expiation and it is a continuation of suffering ... Hence Christ's suffering in Sheol is incomparably greater than that of the Cross and immeasurably greater than the *poena damni* of any and all other sinners. His agony in Sheol was the definitive experience of hell."

⁸ Ibid., 190-203: "The Son abandons His divine attribute in 'depositing' them with the Father through the Incarnation, and he abandons His human attributes in His descent, abandoning Himself as hypostasis to the *visio mortis* of sin-in-itself ... In other words, what is revealed in Sheol is the 'naked' Son of God, the relation without any nature except the act of kenosis" (203).

⁹ Anne Hunt, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery: A Development in Recent Catholic Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1997), 57-89, gives the most accessible account of this theo-drama.

¹⁰ Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 119-29. On p.128-29, Pitstick quotes Hans Urs von Balthasar *The Action* Vol.4, *Theo-Drama*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 362: "The Son's eternal, holy distance from the Father, in the Spirit, forms the basis on which the unholy distance of the world's sin can be transposed into it, can be transcended and overcome by it."

¹¹ Ibid., 124-25.

¹² Ibid., 128.

¹³ See Hunt, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery*, 62-63. Pitstick excludes discussion of this topic as beyond the scope of her work. Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 263.

¹⁴ Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 3, 333.

Catholic position on the descent which he felt required further development. The other major sources are the writings of selected mystics, including those of Adrienne von Speyr, for whom he provided spiritual direction.¹⁵

At first glance one might feel some sympathy for the position developed by Pitstick. The doctrine of the descent is at best a minor element in Catholic and Christian teaching. It is present in the Apostle's Creed, but not the Nicene. Prior to the Reformation itself there had been no theological disputes as to its significance and it has not been subject of a major doctrinal statement. Also it is not a significant liturgical element, playing no major role in the Easter Triduum, for example. The focus there is clearly on the cross and resurrection, not the descent, and if one is guided by the rule, *lex ordandi, lex credendi*, then this focus on the descent as *the* saving event would seem misplaced. In fact there is currently no liturgical Eucharist on Easter Saturday at all, which if Balthasar is correct would amount to a major oversight in the Church's liturgical tradition.¹⁶ Nonetheless a number of reviews that have appeared since the publication of her book indicate significant support for Balthasar despite her criticisms.

The other point of some friction is Balthasar's deployment of a penal substitutionary model for the atonement. This model, more common in the Reformed tradition than the Catholic one, has been subjected to stinging criticisms of late from a variety of quarters, often drawing on the work of Girard, but from other circles as well.¹⁷ What is distinctly odd is that this model operates with an almost mechanical understanding of divine justice and mercy. Jesus must suffer the exact amount of punishment and suffering due for ever sin for divine justice to be satisfied. This seems to have more in common with eastern notions of karma than Christian notions of divine mercy. There is no weighting given to the meaning and significance of events and actions, just a balancing out of suffering. And so Balthasar dismisses the teaching of Pope Clement VI, that "a drop of His blood ... would have sufficed for the redemption of the whole world because of the union with the Word", as "free-wheeling speculation in empty space."¹⁸ In comparison, for example, Pitstick notes the position of Aquinas, where suffering may be the material principle of redemption, but it is made meritorious through its endurance in divine love.¹⁹ This focus

¹⁵ Ibid., 273-74. See John J. O'Donnell, *Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (London: Chapman, 1992), 1-3, for the influence of her spirituality on Balthasar.

¹⁶ Balthasar speaks of the "Great Silence" of Easter Saturday, but it is possible to read that silence in many ways. Pitstick reviews the liturgical material from Easter Saturday, Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 62-74.

¹⁷ Indeed there has been a virtual explosion of interest in a criticism of traditional soteriology over the past ten to fifteen years. For example Alan Mann, *Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society: Engaging with an Emerging Culture*, ed. Pete Ward, Faith in an Emerging Culture Series (Bletchley: Paternoster Press, 2005); S. Mark Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999); Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001); John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, Radical Orthodoxy Series (London: Routledge, 2003); J. Denney Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001); Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

¹⁸ Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 340. Pitstick is quoting Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1990), 137.

¹⁹ Ibid., 97. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III q19 a3, 4.

on the suffering of Jesus as appeasing God has been the point of much recent criticism of penal substitution models of atonement.

PITSTICK'S CRITICS

Pitstick's critics seem to fall into two camps. One relatively smaller group, mainly Protestant, defend Balthasar's position because of its resonances with themes in reformed theological positions, as expounded most recently by Karl Barth. For these critics Balthasar's work is a bridgehead for dialogue between Catholics and Reformed theology on the theology of the Cross. This is an interesting point and worth exploring, but such criticism hardly touches Pitstick's concerns. Her argument is not that Balthasar is not a great theologian, but that his theology is not Catholic.²⁰ If anything these critics provide support for her argument, since they emphasise the commonalities of Balthasar's theology with that of Barth. A second and larger group of critics can be put broadly within the *Communio* school of thought, supportive of the teachings and theologies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, a group whose Catholic orientation can hardly be called into doubt.

These critics tend to focus on what might be called Pitstick's "flat" reading of both the tradition and Balthasar. They tend to admit that the book is "well written, thoroughly researched and clearly argued"²¹; indeed it is "serenely written, meticulously researched and formidably argued", states Mark McIntosh, a significant Balthasarian scholar.²² Nonetheless some describe it as a "hatchet job" (which other critics deny)²³ and having an "inquisitorial agenda."²⁴ However, they all claim that there is a serious misreading, not necessarily through a deliberate misrepresentation of Balthasar's work, but through a failure to read the literary and aesthetic style of his theology. As Tracey Rowland notes, "it might actually help to read Goethe and Hamann (in contrast to Aristotle and Aquinas) more deeply to appreciate Balthasar's idiom." She goes on to quote Louis Dupré in his defence of Balthasar:

Von Balthasar writes with the flair of an artist ... [his essays] are brilliant exercises in theological aesthetics ... they obey the more adventurous order of the creative imagination, shaping each intellectual profile into an aesthetic construction in its own right, fiercely independent of established norms and opinion and free to follow the meandering course of its subjective inspiration. This approach yields marvellous results ... To be sure, the method also creates a logical elusiveness potentially discomfiting to the philosophically exacting reader.²⁵

²⁰ One might find parallels with the assessment of Pius XII that Karl Barth was the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas. One might doubt that Barth was the greatest Catholic theologian since Aquinas.

²¹ Rodney Howsare, "Review of Light in Darkness: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell," *Thomist* (2008): 161-64, at 164.

²² Mark Allen McIntosh, "Light in Darkness: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell," *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 137-39, at 137.

²³ Tracey Rowland, "Light in Darkness: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10 (2008): 479-82, at 482. Stephen Bullivant denies this, Bullivant, "Light in Darkness", 425.

²⁴ Bullivant, "Light in Darkness", 426.

²⁵ Quoted in Rowland, "Light in Darkness", 481. Rowland is quoting Louis Dupré, "The Glory of the Lord: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetic" in David Schindler, ed. *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 205-6.

In a similar vein McIntosh defends Balthasar's theological approach though noting that:

Unhappily Balthasar's theology appears rather wild, even outrageous, when it is prodded towards these formal expectations [of normative dogmatic language and neo-scholastic rigour] ... his writing rarely functions like the text of an encyclical: it is, rather, imaginative, dramatic, iconic, evocative; it works not by declaring in a positive fashion some settled truth but by stirring its readers to live ever more deeply into the mysteries of faith.²⁶

Pitstick's work suffers then from a "sort of genre mistake."²⁷ Almost uniformly Pitstick's critics accuse her of attempting to force Balthasar's theological aesthetics through a scholastic sieve. Balthasar's theology is an attempt to break through the strictures of the neo-scholasticism that dominated Catholic theology and left it unable to address the demands or needs of the modern era.

The other thing these critics are united in is that Pitstick must be wrong, simply because of the official approbation that Balthasar has received from both John Paul II and Benedict XVI. They adduce the "unreserved endorsements of Balthasar by both John Paul II and Benedict XVI"²⁸; they note that John Paul II attempted three times to make Balthasar a cardinal and that then Cardinal Ratzinger eulogised eloquently at this funeral.²⁹ Rowland notes the impact of Balthasar's work on John Paul II's theology of marriage.³⁰ All agree that "the pope's recent acclamation of him as a 'most authoritative guide' to the Catholic faith also implies that talk of a suffering descent, even if not correct in all its details, is not heretical."³¹

Many of these criticisms of Pitstick's work strike me as a bit odd. Many of the greatest Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, Lonergan, Rahner, Congar, Schillebeeckx and de Lubac, rejected the constricting bounds of neo-scholasticism, and pushed the limits on normative dogmatic language and scholastic categories, but none felt free to depart from the demands of philosophical rigour and intellectual coherence. As stated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [CDF] document, *The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*:

The theologian must therefore be attentive to the epistemological requirements of his discipline, to the demands of rigorous critical standards, and thus to a rational verification of each stage of his research. ... Theology's proper task is to understand the meaning of revelation and this, therefore, requires the utilization of philosophical

²⁶ McIntosh, "Light in Darkness", 138.

²⁷ Ibid., 138.

²⁸ Bullivant, "Light in Darkness", 426

²⁹ McIntosh, "Light in Darkness", 137.

³⁰ Rowland, "Light in Darkness", 480.

³¹ Bullivant, "Light in Darkness", 426.

concepts which provide 'a solid and correct understanding of man, the world, and God' and can be employed in a reflection upon revealed doctrine.³²

Many of those who challenged neo-scholastic hegemony suffered at the hands of neo-scholastic censors, pre-Vatican II, only to then go on to be major influences at the Council itself. With both John Paul II and Benedict XVI stressing the importance of the conjunction of faith and reason, to defend Balthasar's "logical elusiveness" seems incongruent.³³ Further to defend a Catholic theologian on the basis that he is "fiercely independent of established norms and opinion", that he follow his "subjective inspiration",³⁴ while acknowledging the difficulty of aligning his work with "normative dogmatic language",³⁵ sounds more like a defence of expressive individualism than of the virtues of a Catholic theologian: "The freedom proper to theological research is exercised within the Church's faith. Thus while the theologian might often feel the urge to be daring in his work, this will not bear fruit or 'edify' unless it is accompanied by that patience which permits maturation to occur."³⁶ One might ask whether such maturity is present in work which even his supporters claim appears as "wild, even outrageous."³⁷

I shall now turn my attention to three areas where Balthasar's work sits uncomfortably with that of more standard Catholic teachings, areas which other scholars as well as Pitstick have identified and called into question. These concern divine immutability, the issue of tritheism in his theology of the Trinity and his approach to the beatific vision. In this final case it will be a matter of a theologian who adopted a position congruent with that of Balthasar only to incur the wrath of the CDF.

BALTHASAR, MANSINI AND DIVINE IMMUTABILITY

Guy Mansini has given us an account of Balthasar's Trinitarian theology with a particular focus on the question of divine mutability.³⁸ He locates Balthasar's work within a trajectory of modern thought which seeks to address the question of divine suffering.³⁹ This involves a shift from considering the suffering of Jesus as a function of his humanity to attempts to locate that suffering within divinity itself. But to make such a shift is to raise questions about the nature of divine immutability as taught within the Christian tradition.⁴⁰

³² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *The ecclesial vocation of the theologian*, n.9, 10. Available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html.

³³ This is not to reduce reason to logic; but lack of logical coherence is hardly a sign of good reasoning.

³⁴ See n.25 above.

³⁵ See n.26 above.

³⁶ *The ecclesial vocation*, n.11.

³⁷ McIntosh, "Light in Darkness", 138.

³⁸ Guy Mansini, "Balthasar and the Theodramatic Enrichment of the Trinity," *Thomist* 64 (2000): 499-519.

³⁹ A good source for documenting this trajectory is Alister E. McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology, 1750-1990*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994). Significantly all the authors McGrath considers are Protestant.

⁴⁰ For a thorough treatment of the issue see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1999).

Balthasar's critique of traditional teaching on divine immutability is that it undermines the value of human freedom:

Balthasar expresses the issue ... as a question regarding finite freedom in a world created by absolute freedom. In such a world, is finite freedom really free? And does it count for anything if it has no impact on absolute freedom?⁴¹

The solution proposed by Balthasar to this question is to locate creation itself within the dynamics of the Trinity. Creation occurs within the Trinitarian distance between the Father and the Son, and is thus included in the Trinitarian relations. Even human sin is "contained" within this distance:

The greatest imaginable distance, that between sin and the holy God, is discovered to be out-distanced, and encompassed, by the distinction between Father and Son ... the distance between sinful creature and holy God can be "contained" and so rendered neutral by the greater distinction within the unity of Father and Son.⁴²

In this way creation and the Cross in particular "enrich" the Trinity. God is somehow different because of the existence of the world, so that finite freedom really matters to God. Yet in another sense this difference is already "contained" within eternal decisions of the Trinity to gratuitously enrich one another:

It is so to speak a contingent means by which the persons glorify one another, a means enfolded in an eternal conversation, glorification, and enrichment that takes place among the persons, and would take place, whether the world existed or not, and whether the world was redeemed in that way it in fact is or not.⁴³

Thus Balthasar seeks to allow for both immutability and change, but change which is eternally and hence "immutably" willed by God.

In arguing his position Mansini documents various texts which are expressive of this paradox, of a God who is immutably changing and growing through a mutual enrichment of the persons, through the divine missions of the Son and Spirit. And so he notes Balthasar's quotes from von Speyr, "the Trinity is more perfected in love after the incarnation than before", and more fully Balthasar writes:

We need not be shocked at the suggestion that there can be "economic" events in God's eternal life. When the Father hands over all judgment to the Son, "something happens in God". When the risen Son returns to the Father, "a new joy arises after the renunciation involved in the separation. This joy ... perfects the Trinity in the sense that the grace that is to be bestowed becomes ever richer, both in the world into which it pours forth and in God himself, who is willing to bestow it."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Mansini, "Balthasar and the Theodramatic Enrichment of the Trinity", 502. This pitting of finite versus infinite freedom has more in common with a nominalist and voluntarist tradition of theologising than with a Thomistic tradition. For an account of the impact of nominalism in western thought, particularly on Luther, see Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁴² Mansini, "Balthasar and the Theodramatic Enrichment of the Trinity", 504-5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 506-7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 511. Mansini is quoting Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Final Act*, Vol.5 *Theo-Drama*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 513.

Mansini concludes his presentation with a brief summary of Balthasar's position: "Does God really depend on the world? Yes. Does God depend on the world in such a way that he would really be different did he not? No."⁴⁵

After pages of patient exposition Mansini engages in stinging criticism of Balthasar's theology of Trinitarian enrichment. He is particularly savage towards Balthasar's notion of an "ever-growing God". "Whether the world contributes to God's increase or not, still, there is increase. But from what? With what? ... growth is a kind of becoming or change ... it requires time, which is nothing but a measure of becoming. Therefore if there is growth in God, the divinity is potential, non-simple and not eternal."⁴⁶ Balthasar's evocation of some type of "supratime" within the Trinity is dismissed, "It is hard to see how the invocation of a change in God unlike that which we find in our earthly experience, therefore, can be anything more than words."⁴⁷ In particular Mansini defends Aristotle's analysis of change in terms of potency and act as well grounded in reason itself. He concludes with the damning assessment:

To say revelation, as read by Balthasar, trumps Aristotle here is not to preserve revelation and therefore the autonomy of theology; it is to say that grace does not complete but rather destroys nature, that faith kills and does not perfect reason.⁴⁸

It is difficult to read such criticisms without recalling the efforts of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI to maintain and foster the dialogical relationship between faith and reason.⁴⁹ This relationship is central to the Catholic theological tradition. It is also clear that in apparently seeking to "trump" reason with revelation, Balthasar stands closer to Karl Barth who famously declared, "Faith takes reason by the throat and strangles the beast."⁵⁰ Is it sufficient to respond with the words of Dupré, that "the method also creates a logical elusiveness potentially discomfiting to the philosophically exacting reader"?⁵¹ Balthasar's method in fact raises serious questions about the Catholic identity of his theological enterprise.

BALTHASAR, DE MARGERIE AND TRITHEISM

A much brief article by Bertrand de Margerie takes issue with aspects of Balthasar's theology of the Trinity.⁵² De Margerie draws attention to parallels between Balthasar's theology and the position adopted by Joachim de Fiore, a position condemned by the Fourth Lateran Council. He quotes Balthasar's position on the Father's supposed

⁴⁵ Ibid., 513.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 516-17.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 518.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 518.

⁴⁹ In particular the encyclicals, *Fides et ratio*, *Deus caritas est* and the most recent *Caritas in veritate*.

⁵⁰ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn Clement Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 143.

⁵¹ Quoted in Rowland, "Light in Darkness", 481. See n.25 above for details of Dupuis' work.

⁵² Bertrand de Margerie, "Note on Balthasar's Trinitarian Theology," *Thomist* 64 (2000): 127-30. De Margerie is best known for his major study of the Trinity, Bertrand de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History* (Still River, Mass.: St. Bede's Publications, 1982).

dispossession of his divinity to the Son: "Inherent in the Father's love is an absolute renunciation: he will not be God for himself alone. He lets go of his divinity and, in this sense, manifests a (divine) God-lessness (of love, of course);"⁵³ and then refers to the statement of the Council, "No one can say that the Father has transferred his substance to the Son in begetting him, as if he had given it to the Son without keeping it himself."⁵⁴ Still de Margerie excuses such "excesses" arguing that "it is preferable to interpret them benignly, understanding them within a fundamental intention of orthodoxy."⁵⁵

However, there are other aspects which are treated less favourably. He notes Balthasar's claims that "The Father, too, owes his Fatherhood to the Son who allows himself to be generated."⁵⁶ De Margerie finds such a statement simply unacceptable:

The will of the Father and of the Son is one. One cannot say that the Son voluntarily consents to a will the Father had to beget him and which would be different from his own will. A kind of human psychologism risks drawing the readers of the Swiss theologian in the direction of tritheism.⁵⁷

Tritheistic tendencies have also been identified by Pitstick and it is puzzling that these have not been met with more official concern. Tritheism is not some minor issue, as might be suggested in relation to Balthasar's theology of descent, but touches on a central Christian dogma. Yet as Pitstick argues, his Trinitarian thought is shaped by his desire to integrate the Trinity into his account of the descent.

Pitstick also identifies strongly tritheistic tendencies in Balthasar's work. She notes repeated ways in which Balthasar's theo-drama requires distinct wills in the Father, Son, and Spirit for his position to be coherent. This is evident in the use of such terms as "unanimous decision", a "request" from one Person to another, an "integration of intentions", and "consensus" between the Persons.⁵⁸ As she notes:

The number of natures is revealed by the number of wills. If then each Person has an individual intention, but an intention is only the will determined to a specific object, then each Hypostasis has an individual will. Moreover, since the divine will is to be identical with the divine nature, this position implies that each Hypostasis is a god ... one must conclude here that the hypostases of which Balthasar speaks are not the God of Catholic faith.⁵⁹

Interestingly, as an indication of the instability of Balthasar's theology on this point, one could equally argue that his insistence on the identity of divine Person and divine

⁵³ Margerie, "Note on Balthasar's Trinitarian Theology.", 127. De Margerie is quoting Balthasar, *The Action*, 323-24.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 128. De Margerie is quoting Balthasar, *The Final Act*, 245.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁸ Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 290-93.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 292.

mission would lead to the conclusion of modalism, since if there is no creation and hence no mission there would be no distinct Person.⁶⁰

In contrast to the apparent lack of concern shown by authorities to Balthasar's Trinitarian theology, we might note the response of the CDF to the work of Jacques Dupuis, particularly his trailblazing *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*.⁶¹ This rigorous, carefully argued, and nuanced work was brought to the attention of the CDF who felt impelled to issue a notification which made the following judgment on his work:

The present *Notification* is not meant as a judgment on the author's subjective thought, but rather as a statement of the Church's teaching on certain aspects of the above-mentioned doctrinal truths, and as a refutation of erroneous or harmful opinions, which, prescind from the author's intentions, could be derived from reading the ambiguous statements and insufficient explanations found in certain sections of the text. In this way, Catholic readers will be given solid criteria for judgment, consistent with the doctrine of the Church, in order to avoid the serious confusion and misunderstanding which could result from reading this book.⁶²

Certainly tritheism is an "erroneous or harmful" opinion, and even "prescind from the author's intentions" there is "serious confusion and misunderstanding which could result from reading" Balthasar's work on the Trinity.

BALTHASAR, SOBRINO AND JESUS' BEATIFIC VISION

It has been pointed out that much of the criticism of Balthasar's work has come from people with a Neo-Scholastic orientation. In a sense this should not be surprising. Of all the different theological orientations present in contemporary theology none are more concerned with preserving and guarding Catholic doctrinal teaching than they are. Our final example is different in that it involves the work of someone who actually agrees with some of Balthasar's conclusion, but was subject to scrutiny and criticism by the CDF. I am referring to the works of Jon Sobrino, in particular his *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*,⁶³ and *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*.⁶⁴

The CDF notification on Sobrino identifies a number of deficiencies in his work, but the area I want to focus on is their response to his treatment of Jesus' beatific vision and whether Jesus had faith or not. I am not directly concerned as to the accuracy of the assessment of the CDF in its analysis of Sobrino's work but in the conclusions they draw in regard to it:

The filial and messianic consciousness of Jesus is the direct consequence of his ontology as Son of God made man. If Jesus were a believer like ourselves, albeit in an exemplary

⁶⁰ Hunt, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery*, 66-68.

⁶¹ Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999).

⁶² "Notification on the book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York 1997) by Father Jacques Dupuis, S.J.," available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010124_dupuis_en.html.

⁶³ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁶⁴ Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001).

manner, he would not be able to be the true Revealer showing us the face of the Father. ... For Father Sobrino, in fact, the unique character of the mediation and revelation of Jesus disappears: he is thus reduced to the condition of “revealer” that we can attribute to the prophets and mystics ... Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, enjoys an intimate and immediate knowledge of his Father, a “vision” that certainly goes beyond the vision of faith. The hypostatic union and Jesus’ mission of revelation and redemption require the vision of the Father and the knowledge of his plan of salvation.⁶⁵

The CDF supports this position with various scriptural references and magisterial warrants which affirm the existence and constancy of Jesus’ beatific vision.

What is significant here is that the position of Balthasar on Jesus’ beatific vision and whether Jesus had faith or not is similar if not identical to that of Sobrino. Indeed Pitstick documents in detail Balthasar’s position on these topics, identifying seven arguments he puts in support of his position.⁶⁶ They follow the general structure of the divine kenosis through which the Son “deposits” his divine attributes during the Incarnation. Here this implies depositing divine Wisdom so that Jesus no longer enjoys the beatific vision during his human existence. In fact Jesus’ ignorance of aspects of his mission is necessary for him to express his humility and obedience to the Father, so that he becomes a true example of faith for believers. Further some denial of the beatific vision is necessary within the penal substitutory soteriology Balthasar adopts. Jesus must suffer the full extent of all human sinfulness, the abandonment by God in the depths of Hell. Such an abandonment is incompatible with the beatific vision, since the sufferings of Hell are constituted by the deprivation of that vision. As he states, “Jesus willed out of love to experience only the judicial character [of the redemption], and therefore to renounce everything that would have comforted and strengthened him.”⁶⁷ As Pitstick comments:

In His passion and descent, Jesus experienced, and knew, only the punitive wrath of God. As suggested by His experience of the Father’s wrath and the futility of His own death, he did not have any sense of the Father’s love for Him or of the triumph that would be His and, through Him, available to mankind.⁶⁸

Two comments readily flow from this brief exposition. The first is again to note the way in which the descent is operating as a controlling idea in the development of Balthasar’s theology. His position on the beatific vision is required by his account of the descent. The second is that once again it seems that he can present such an account without any official censure or even concern being raised.

⁶⁵ “Notification on the works of Father Jon Sobrino, SJ: *Jesucristo liberador. Lectura histórico-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret* (Madrid, 1991) and *La fe en Jesucristo. Ensayo desde las víctimas* (San Salvador, 1999)”, available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20061126_notificat_ion-sobrino_en.html.

⁶⁶ Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 162-64.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 169. Pitstick is quoting Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The New Covenant, Vol.7, The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Brian McNeil, ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 223.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 169.

PAPAL SUPPORT

Above I noted the constant assertion of Pitstick's critics that almost *a priori* she must be wrong because of the approbation Balthasar has received from both John Paul II and from Cardinal Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. How could two popes get it as wrong as she would seem to indicate? The first response to make to this question is that clearly she is not alone in the concerns she has raised. Others have done so and undoubtedly will continue to do so. There are objective concerns based on the text itself which cannot just be brushed aside by putting his work into a separate category from everyone else. His work is not immune from criticism, nor should it be.

Still there is a question over the support given by two recent popes. Could they have been misled? Here I would like to offer a suggestion as to how this might have come about. Lonergan often draws a distinction between classicist and empirical understandings of culture. The classicist views culture as a normative and permanent achievement, a pinnacle to which others must aspire. An empirical understanding views culture as a given set of meanings and values which informs a way of life, something to be studied and then perhaps evaluated.⁶⁹ By all accounts Balthasar was considered one of the most cultured persons of his age. He was steeped in the literature, art and music of high European culture, almost an embodiment of the classicist idea, so to speak. These are, I would suggest, cultural ideals largely shared by both John Paul II and Benedict XVI, implicitly if not explicitly. Embedded in that culture is a belief in the intrinsic connection between truth and beauty.⁷⁰ Beauty is then a criterion for truth. As his supporters often note, Balthasar's work is a theological aesthetics wherein beauty plays a pivotal role. Still the criteria for beauty are those of classicist culture, which is presumed to then be universal. Such presumption must break down with the shift to an empirical account of culture. And with it the connection between truth and beauty becomes more problematic. It is possible that both John Paul II and Benedict XVI were caught so caught up in the beauty of Balthasar's theology that they simply did not pay enough attention to the question of its meaning and truthfulness.

CONCLUSION

There should be no doubt that Hans Urs von Balthasar is a great theologian. The question posed by Pitstick's work is whether he is a great Catholic theologian. Though various magisterial documents and the actions of the CDF, the Catholic Church regularly polices the boundaries, identifying what it considers appropriate, and where various theologians have apparently stepped over the line. Often these interventions are a fairly blunt instrument and have had deleterious effects on those so subjected, particularly prior to Vatican II, but is still the case.⁷¹ As I have argued there are a number of concerns that can be raised about his work, and have been raised by various authors, concerns which can be

⁶⁹ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1971). For a similar analysis of shifting understandings of culture see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

⁷⁰ See Louis K. Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), particularly Chap.4.

⁷¹ See for example, Bradford Hinze, "A Decade of Disciplining Theologians," *Horizons* 37 (2010): 92-126, for an account of such actions in recent years.

measured against the standards proclaimed and actions taken by Catholic authorities themselves. Still he appears to be in a class of his own, his work *sui generis*, not to be judged by the same standards which apply to everyone else.

Of course one may object that the category of “Catholic theologian” is itself ill-conceived. Certainly for those theologians within the Reformed tradition who are currently taking an active interest in Balthasar’s theology, the question of his Catholicity is moot. His work deserves due scholarly attention whatever its provenance. But such a stance goes against the grain of Balthasar’s whole project and of those within Catholic circles who promote him. Their claim is that he is a Catholic theologian *par excellence*. If Pitstick and other critics are right, then there has been a significant blind-spot within his promoters that needs to be identified and dealt with. If they are wrong, then a major defence of his position needs to be mounted based upon a close reading of his text, rather than through global assertions that his theology cannot be judged by the same standards as everyone else.

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