

HOMILY AT THE FUNERAL LITURGY FOR HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

We are gathered here in order to entrust our departed brother, Hans Urs von Balthasar, to the mercy of God. Mourning and consolation touch one another at the death of a believer. We mourn because he is no longer among us. Never again shall we be able to hold a conversation with him, never again obtain his advice. We shall need him so often, but shall seek for him in vain. But there is also consolation in this sorrow: his life has taught us how to believe. His witness is hope for him and for us: "I know that my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25). We know that the souls of those who have died are alive in the resurrected body of the Lord. The Lord's body shelters and carries them toward the common resurrection. In this body, which we are permitted to receive, we remain close to one another, and we touch each other.

On this occasion, we are not interested in paying honor to the life's work of our departed friend. What we want is to receive the consolation of the Word of God in the community of the body of Christ, and to allow this consolation to come to us precisely from his life. Henri de Lubac has called Balthasar possibly the most cultured person of our time.¹ Actually, the arc of his

works spans from the predecessors of Socrates to Freud, Nietzsche, and Berthold Brecht; it embraces the entire Western heritage of philosophy, literature, art, and theology. But in this vast adventure of the spirit, his interest was not the curiosity to know a great deal, nor the power that comes from having many skills. If he wished to gather the treasures of Egypt into the storehouse of our Faith (to speak in the language of the Church Fathers), he also knew that such treasures can bear fruit only in a converted heart,² while on the shoulders of the unconverted they become a destructive burden. He knew that fullness of knowledge turns to unhappiness in the face of the extent of the still unknown and to despair over our impotence to achieve the essential: being a person, life itself. What Balthasar wanted may well be encapsulated in a single phrase of St. Augustine: "Our entire task in this life, dear brothers, consists in healing the eyes of the heart so they may be able to see God."³

That is what mattered to him, healing the eyes of the heart so they would be able to see the essential, the reason and goal of the world and of our lives: God, the living God. In this quotation from Augustine, the Johannine aspect of Balthasar's soul is revealed in the sense of the words

²Ibid., p. 240.

³Sermo 88.6 PL 38.542; this text is found in the fine selection which Balthasar first published, with Benziger in 1942, under the title *Augustine. Das Antlitz der Kirche*, Text 290, p. 351 (new ed. 1955).

of the Gospel which we have just heard: "This then is eternal life: to know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (Jn. 17:3).

Eternal life is not a life which comes hereafter—sometime later; for then it would not be eternal. It is the one true life. We live if we acknowledge Him. Balthasar was concerned with that knowledge which is life, life itself. He was one who was alive, and so he was one who continually gave, for life is always creative and giving.

"This is eternal life, to know you." All the reaching out of his soul is a search for truth, a search for life. He sought the traces of the Holy Spirit everywhere, the radiation from his truth, the windows that will open up to allow access to him. Everywhere, Balthasar sought to discover ways which would lead out of the prison of finitude into the whole, into truth itself. But just because he did that, he knew the limits of our ability, knew that the living God will rise only out of the helpless collapse of our concepts, for we cannot invent him.⁴ Finally, it is always God himself who manifests himself to us and gives us what exceeds all of our thinking. That is why Balthasar coined the expression: theology on

its knees. He knew that theology is suspended between the abysses of adoring obedience and of humble love. He knew that theology can come into action only at the touch of the living God, which happens in prayer. Precisely because he knew that God is greater than all our thoughts and our hearts, he submitted himself to the concreteness of God, who, in the human face of Jesus Christ, looks at us in greater and more infinite measure than in all the negations of an unformed mysticism which remains, finally, within the person alone.

This obedience of thought, which allows itself to be led away even from the highest peaks of mysticism by the true God, was very concretely part of Balthasar's life. He himself had not wished to become a priest, far less had he thought of a career in theology or as a man of the Church. He studied *Germanistik*, and his choice alternated between music and literature, until he found his "fig tree." It was under a tree in a remote woods on the outskirts of Basel that certitude struck him like lightning: you must become a priest, you must be an Ignatian one.⁵ The tie to obedience was what was Ignatian in his whole life. He did not follow the path of his own will; he went the way along which he was led against his own wishes, until, in this manner, his will and his being came to be increasingly free and pure. Because he lived out of obedience, it was at once obvious to him that theology does not live from what

⁴Gregory of Nyssa, "The Sealed Fountain. Commentary on the Song of Songs." A shortened version was translated and introduced by Hans Urs von Balthasar, in *Christliche Meister* 23 (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1984); p. 17 in the introduction. See also Werner Löser, *Im Geiste des Origenes. Hans Urs von Balthasar als Interpret der Theologie der Kirchenväter* (Frankfurt, 1976), p. 109.

⁵Löser, *Im Geiste des Origenes*, p. 7, no. 6.

¹Henri de Lubac, "A Witness to Christ in the Church: Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Communio* 2:3 (Fall, 1975), pp. 228-249, Cf. p. 230.

one thinks but from what one receives. Therefore, in the deepest sense of the word, he was a man of the Church.

He knew the Church's weaknesses and her misery, not only theoretically. He had hard and painful experience of it throughout his lifetime. He knew Augustine's phrase: "Our winter is the hiddenness of Christ." What he wrote about Holy Saturday certainly depended somewhat on his contact with the mystical experiences of Adrienne von Speyr, but at the same time it was nourished as well by his own painful experience of the apparent absence of God within his Church. But Balthasar knew, with Augustine, that even "in wintertime, the root lives on,"⁶ and that we live if we live from that root.

He therefore had little regard for a theology which tries to make itself interesting through the options it can devise, and which thereby, for all that, grasps at what is incongruent, unproven, and empty. He thought little of a pluralism which in reality resembles the disintegration of decomposed matter. He knew that only a pluralism which is living and manifold in the unity of the one who is alive will bear any weight. He knew how indigent was that progress which Gregory of Nyssa compared to an ascent of the sand dunes of the desert in which one makes no headway at all.⁷ Here, too,

⁶Augustine, *Sermo* 36.4, *PL* 38.216; in the collection of texts mentioned above, *Text* 278, p. 342ff.

⁷Gregory of Nyssa, in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Christliche Meister* 23, p. 14: "What is terrestrially-unending is similar

the concreteness of dogma was for him the guarantee of the eternal and inexhaustible Truth which is never lessened by a new expression, but rather imposes greater tasks and opens perspectives which enable us, slowly, to surmise the immensity of the whole in what lies fragmentarily before us.

Balthasar had a great reverence for the Petrine, for the hierarchical structure of the Church. But he knew, too, that this is not her entire nor her deepest aspect. Balthasar spoke of the Church as bride, as person. The Church is herself totally in persons, and exists most purely and entirely in her, out of whose "Yes" she was formed; in Mary, the Mother of the Lord. Balthasar, the Johannine and Ignatian Christian, was above all a Marian person. He knew about the charismatic element of the Church, about the ever-new movement and working of the Spirit, which creates new life precisely where we would not seek it, and where, frequently, it does not please us at all. He knew of the significance of the feminine in the Church, of the great symbolism of the virginal and the maternal. From Mary, he learned the humility of obedience, but also

to 'child's play in the sand. The pleasure in what has been built is extinguished at the same time as the joy in building, . . . the sand collapses and leaves no trace of what was erected with so much care.' The soul resembles, then, 'those who climb up a dune: even when their feet seem to cut through long stretches, they struggle in vain; repeatedly the sand runs down, so that, although there is strenuous movement, there is no progress of any kind.'"

the responsibility of putting into action an embodied, effective love. He allowed her to tell him, and he told us in turn, that Christianity is spiritual only insofar as it is an ever new incarnation of the Spirit. In his commentary on the Marian encyclical of the Pope, he coined the phrase that Mary—who was assumed bodily into heaven—may not be elevated by us into someone "too heavenly." Rather, we must learn precisely from her how our faith is to be enfolded and how it is to be responsible in temporal matters.

From Mary, finally and foremost, he learned that the origin of all fruitfulness in the Church is contemplation, without which action becomes empty activity. He learned that God's Word dwells in silence and in waiting, and only in these can it grow to its greatest fertility.

Balthasar was a contemplative, but he was not, as many probably imagined him to be, a Jerome in his hut, in the way depicted in Dürer's portrait which Balthasar has so lovingly described. Out of his contemplation grew action in a wholly Marian and Ignatian spirit: in obedience and without any outward show, hidden and without seeking to make a name for himself. After the Council, he began to collect friends in order to build up with them a powerful source for correct renewal as opposed to its counterfeit forms. That is how he came to be the actual father of the large *Communio*-family, which is at work, today, on all the continents, and which, despite its still being a tiny seed, represents a force for community, for life, for change and renewal. His activity as a publisher was also animated by the same will: producing books was not

the important issue, much less did he labor for a commercial interest—for that he had no aptitude at all. It was because he wanted to set the energy of the best sources in opposition to the flood of empty talk, to offer living water and good bread which nourishes in the time of drought. And increasingly he travelled back and forth, giving retreats in order to open persons for the living bread, to heal the eyes of their hearts so that they might see God. It was this same care that led him to collect, as his living legacy, the Community of St. John, the women and men, lay persons and priests, who, living out of this same spirit which was at once Johannine, Ignatian, and Marian, should be cells for renewal in the Church and the world.

Balthasar was hesitant in opening himself for the honor intended for him by his being named to the Cardinalate. This was not motivated by a coquettish desire to act the great one, but by the Ignatian spirit which characterized his life. In some way, his being called into the next life on the very eve of being so honored seems to show he was right about it. He was allowed to remain himself, fully. But what the Pope intended to express by this mark of distinction, and of honor, remains valid: no longer only private individuals but the Church itself, in its official responsibility, tells us that he is right in what he teaches of the faith, that he points the way to the sources of living water—a witness to the Word which teaches us Christ and which teaches us how to live.

"Christ is my life." This word taken from today's reading from the Letter to the Philippians (1:21) sums

up the whole course of his life. And since it is the truth of his interior biography, we may be certain that the sentence that follows, "For me to die is gain," also counts for him; and that his death is not a leave-taking from the community of the living, for whom he was ever available, but is rather a new way of his being close in the strength of the presence of God's Love, in unity with all the members of Christ's body. Let us ask

the Lord to enable us to keep the great witness of this, his servant, ever alive and to carry it on. We beg the Lord to reward him for all he did and suffered out of the humility of his hope-filled love. Amen.

*In the Hofkirche, Lucerne,
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Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

*Translated by Josephine Koepffel,
O.C.D.*