

Hans Urs von Balthasar: A sketch of his life

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Balthasar's most important works,
at least in his own eyes, are not
his writings but his foundations.

According to Pascal, "it is a bad sign when you see a man and immediately think of his books." The danger of focusing on the writer and forgetting the human being is almost unavoidable in the case of someone like Hans Urs von Balthasar, who wrote more books than a normal person can be expected to read in his lifetime. He more than once found it necessary to provide a survey or "statement of account" of his literary work, and constantly emphasized that he regarded his writing as a "side-line." After the death of Adrienne von Speyr, he was increasingly ready to make autobiographical statements, and yet these are too scattered and fragmentary to give a proper picture of Hans Balthasar the man. What follows, therefore, is a preliminary and inadequate attempt to draw a picture of this person as we knew, admired, and loved him.

Gifts

For all of us, he was a little too great. In conversation with a group of friends, whether standing up or, as he preferred, walking up and down, he was literally head and shoulders above everyone else. In his knowledge and judgment, too, he towered over those with whom he spoke. You had to look up to him. Without putting himself on a pedestal, he could see far and wide. And yet he never let you feel his superiority. He never spoke condescendingly, never looked

down on anyone. Only occasionally did he seem to forget that others were not endowed with his own gifts and incredible capacity for work. His judgments of ideas and books could sometimes sound rash, harsh, even disparaging, yet, when this happened, he was simply expressing the high standards he demanded of himself, of his *milieu*, above all of everything connected with the Church. "Only the best is good enough for you," he once told a young confrère, "in people, in ideas, in demands on yourself."¹ He measured everything by his own great standards, and by those standards much fell short.

For all his greatness and towering knowledge, he was able to remain "uncomplicated," humble, indeed child-like. (I shall come back to this later.) But he did realize and acknowledge his gifts. He saw them as just that—pure gift, something bestowed on him, for which he had to be thankful, which he had simply to put into service. (He himself, though, did not fully appreciate the sheer magnitude of the gift.)

Looking back at his youth, we can single out three great gifts which he received, so to speak, in the cradle.

Origins

The first is his family. He came from an old patrician family in Lucerne which had given his hometown army officers, statesmen, scholars, and churchmen—abbots and abbesses, canons, and a Jesuit provincial in Mexico. The foundation of the city and canton library of Lucerne went back to his forefathers. His father, Oscar Ludwig Carl Balthasar (1872-1946), was the canton builder, responsible, among other things, for the St. Karli-Kirche, one of Switzerland's pioneering modern church buildings. Through his mother, Gabrielle Pietzcker (d. 1929), co-foundress and first general secretary of the Swiss League of Catholic Women, he was related to the Hungarian martyr-bishop, Apor von Györ, who was shot by Russian soldiers in 1944 for harboring some women refugees in his house. His younger brother Dieter served as an officer in the Swiss Guard. His sister Renée (1908-1986) was Superior-General, from 1971 to 1983, of the Franciscan Sisters of Sainte-Marie des Anges. At the Pension Felsberg, run by his grandmother, he spent a large part

¹Citations without footnotes come from private communications. All works cited without author are by Hans Urs von Balthasar.

of his childhood in the company of an aunt who was only a few years his senior. Here cosmopolitan attitudes and trilingualism (German, French, and English) were taken for granted. Here, too, he became familiar with the witty conversation and sophisticated life-style of the English visitors; later on, during the First World War, with wounded French soldiers; and finally, in 1918, with the Habsburg imperial family as they passed through. Balthasar had connections with Protestantism through his grandfather, the cavalry colonel Hermann Pietzcker—"We used occasionally to pay a shy visit to his smoky, weapon-filled room."² In fact, three of his great-grandparents, on his mother's side, were Protestant.

As Balthasar himself testified, his childhood and youth were pervaded by music, for which he had a quite extraordinary talent. He had perfect pitch, so that, after the death of Adrienne von Speyr, he was able to give away his stereo system on the grounds that he did not need it any more: he knew all the works of Mozart by heart; he could picture the score and hear the music in his mind. But let us hear his own words:

From those first tremendous impressions of music, Schubert's Mass in E-flat (when I was about five) and Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* (when I was about eight), I spent endless hours on the piano. At Engelberg College there was also the opportunity to take part in orchestral Masses and operas. However, when my friends and I transferred to Feldkirch for the last two and a half years of high school, we found the "music department" there to be so noisy that we lost our enjoyment in playing. My university semesters in poor, almost starving, post-war Vienna were compensated for by a superabundance of concerts, operas, orchestral masses. I had the privilege of lodging with Rudolf Allers—medical doctor, philosopher, theologian, translator of St. Anselm and St. Thomas. In the evenings, more often than not, we would play an entire Mahler symphony in piano transcription. . . . When I entered the Jesuits, music was automatically over and done with.³

Studies

Just a few things need to be added to this story of a musical youth. In point of fact, for a long time, Balthasar wavered between musical and literary studies. He once re-

²*Unser Auftrag. Bericht und Entwurf* (Einsiedeln, 1984), 30.

³*Ibid.*, 31.

minded the pugnacious editor of the *Schweizer Kirchenzeitung*, Alois Schenker, of their time together in high school at Engelberg. "At that time you were frightfully industrious, while I was spending all my time on music and Dante and standing on my bed in the dormitory at night trying to get enough light to read *Faust*."⁴ It is unclear why he prematurely left the Benedictine high school to go to the much less musical Jesuits in a neighboring but war-torn foreign country. He was probably looking for a more demanding curriculum. The transfer may also have contributed to the final decision to take literature (and philosophy) at the university rather than music. But in Feldkirch, too, Balthasar did not stay to the end. A year before graduating from high school, he and two fellow students from Switzerland decided that they had had enough of the classroom and secretly matriculated in Zurich. The course in German studies, leading to his doctorate in the fall of 1928, consisted of "nine university semesters, alternating between Vienna, Berlin, and Zurich."⁵ His stay in Vienna was especially long. What fascinated him there was Plotinus, whom he encountered in the lectures of Hans Eibl, and who gave him his first access to theology. Later on, Plotinus was to be the object of his polemic, as was Indian thought, which he came across in the Sanskrit and Indo-European courses which he was taking at the same time (among others, with Helmut von Glasenapp in Berlin). In Berlin he also heard Eduard Spranger and a course on Kierkegaard given by Romano Guardini, which profoundly impressed him. But the most lasting impression from his student days came from his Viennese friend, the convert and dissident disciple of Freud, Rudolf Allers, who had found his way from psychoanalysis to medieval philosophy and theology.

Opponent of Freud and free disciple of Alfred Adler, he possessed and imparted the feeling for interhuman love as the objective medium of human existence; in this turn from the "ego" to the reality of the full "Thou" lay for him philosophical truth and psychotherapeutic method.⁶

⁴"Über Amt und Liebe in der Kirche. Ein offener Brief an Alois Schenker," *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten*, supplement on "Christian Culture," no. 29 (July 17, 1953).

⁵*Geschichte des eschatologischen Problems in der modernen deutschen Literatur* (Dissertation, Zurich, 1930), 221.

⁶*Rechenschaft 1965* (Einsiedeln, 1965), 34.

One final yet first gift must be mentioned, a gift bestowed on him, so to speak, in the cradle: a simple and straightforward faith, unassailed by any doubts, a faith which, to the very end, remained childlike in the best sense. He owed this to his family, especially his mother, who "day by day went to Mass down the steep path from our house." He remembered "quiet, deeply moving early Masses on my own in the choir of the Franciscan church in Lucerne (where he was baptized and received his first Holy Communion) or ten o'clock Masses in the Jesuit church, a church for me of overwhelming splendor."⁷ This piety remained unbroken through his days at high school (just think what boarding-school piety, always rather rigid, must have meant for someone with a feel for the real thing!). Even more amazingly, it survived all the anti-Christian currents of his time at the university.

In Vienna, I was fascinated by Plotinus, but then, in another direction, there were inevitable contacts with psychological circles (including Freudians). Mahler's tortured pantheism moved me deeply. Nietzsche, Hofmannstahl, George came into view. Then there was the *fin de siècle* mood of Karl Kraus, the manifest corruption of a culture in decline.⁸

It was his undoubting faith which led the student Balthasar, in his doctoral dissertation, to examine modern German literature theologically, from the point of view of its attitude to the Last Things, to the soul's "final or eternal destiny"—a bold undertaking not only because of its wealth of material, but even more because the dissertation was submitted to, of all places, the Liberal Protestant University of Zurich. In the foreword to his *History of the Eschatological Problem in Modern German Literature* (1929) (he says it is really just "an extract from a larger treatise"), the author includes an apology:

The novelty, or perhaps one should say the rashness, of what I am attempting in this study perhaps explains the kind of trepidation I feel about submitting it for publication. It may seem strange, in an historical investigation, to use philosophy and theology to explain works of art, and *vice versa*, works of art, without much reference to

⁷Unser Auftrag, 30.

⁸Prüfet alles—das Gute behaltet (Ostfildern, 1986), 8.

their aesthetic qualities. The results of this method will be its only justification.⁹

These two hundred and nineteen dense pages were passed *summa cum laude*. It is hard to decide whether this proves the results of the method or the immensely wide reading of the author.

Sometime before the completion of his dissertation, Balthasar's faith led him to the thirty day retreat given by Father Friedrich Kronseder, S.J. in the summer of 1927 to a group of lay students at Whylen near Basel. This was to be the decisive turning-point of his life.

The Jesuit

Before this retreat Balthasar had not had the slightest thought of becoming a priest or entering a religious order. In the student circles he frequented—this is not long after the *Literaturstreit*—"it was seen as a real misfortune if someone changed courses and took up the study of theology." That is why the call of God struck him like lightning from a cloudless sky.

Even now, thirty years later, I could still go to that remote path in the Black Forest, not far from Basel, and find again the tree beneath which I was struck as by lightning. . . . And yet it was neither theology nor the priesthood which then came into my mind in a flash. It was simply this: you have nothing to choose, you have been called. You will not serve, you will be taken into service. You have no plans to make, you are just a little stone in a mosaic which has long been ready. All I needed to do was "leave everything and follow," without making plans, without wishes or insights. All I needed to do was to stand there and wait and see what I would be needed for.¹⁰

Like St. Ignatius when he is discussing "the first occasion of election" (*Spiritual Exercises*, n. 175), Balthasar compared this calling to that of Levi the tax-collector and Saul the persecutor of Christians, to whom Christ's call went out in a totally

⁹Geschichte des eschatologischen Problems, foreword.

¹⁰Pourquoi je me suis fait prêtre. Témoignages recueillis par Jorge et Ramón Sans Vila (Tournai, 1961), 21.

unmistakable way, not because of their merits but because of their ignorance.

At that stage it was just a matter of surrendering myself. If I had known then about the Secular Institutes' way of life, I might well have found the solution to my problem even in a secular profession, the problem, I mean, of how to put myself entirely at the disposal of God.¹¹

However, it was the path into the Society of Jesus which lay closest at hand. And so, after the completion of his doctorate, after his mother's premature and painful death, which she offered up for her son, after his younger sister's entry into a religious order, on 18 November 1929 Balthasar entered the novitiate of the South German province of the Jesuits.

There then followed the regular formation of a religious: two years of novitiate under the direction of Father Otto Danneffel (his fellow novices included Alois Grillmeier and Franz von Tattenbach); two (instead of three) years of philosophy at Pullach near Munich and four years of theology at Fourvière near Lyons. These studies concluded with the double license in philosophy and theology. Balthasar never acquired a doctorate in these subjects.

Entry to a religious order meant, first of all, renunciation, the abandonment not only of music but also of literary and cultural life. Balthasar's account of Hopkins' loss of his poetic power on becoming a Jesuit is undoubtedly colored by autobiographical reminiscences. As Hopkins saw it, the Society of Jesus did not lay stress on the aesthetic, and brilliance did not suit Jesuits.¹² The normal studies of a religious were bound to seem dry and pretty dull to a young man like Balthasar accustomed to a very different world. He saw his philosophical studies as a "languishing in the desert of neo-scholasticism."¹³ His teachers were the authors of the old Pullach *Institutiones Philosophiae Scholasticae*—Frank, Rast, Schuster, Wilwoll, solid neo-scholastics with a degree of openness to modern problems. Later he was to remember with particular gratitude the moralist, Johann Baptist Schuster, and proposed Maximilian Rast, by

¹¹Ibid., 22.

¹²Herrlichkeit. *Eine theologische Ästhetik*, Bd II: *Fächer der Stile* (Einsiedeln, 1962), 736-741. English translation under the title *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco, 1983-). Four volumes have appeared to date.

¹³Rechenschaft 1965, 34.

then spiritual director of the seminary at Sion, as the first investigator of the mission of Adrienne von Speyr.

Fourvière was not much more stimulating than Pullach.

Really nothing was heard of a *nouvelle théologie* in the lectures. (I am surprised by this myth dreamt up nowadays for poor old Fourvière!)¹⁴

And yet he found valued teachers like Henri Vignon and Henri Rondet (who was to carry out the second examination of Adrienne's mission) and fellow students and friends like Henri Bouillard and Donatien Mollat and younger men like Pierre Lyonnet, François Varillon, and Jean Daniélou. But the real problem was neither the teachers nor the students, but the theology itself. Looking back in 1946, still a Jesuit, he wrote:

My entire period of study in the Society was a grim struggle with the dreariness of theology, with what men had made out of the glory of revelation. I could not endure this presentation of the Word of God. I could have lashed out with the fury of a Samson. I felt like tearing down, with Samson's strength, the whole temple and burying myself beneath the rubble. But it was like this because, despite my sense of vocation, I wanted to carry out my own plans, and was living in a state of unbounded indignation. I told almost no one about this. Przywara understood everything; I did not have to say anything. Otherwise there was no one who could have understood me. I wrote the "Apocalypse" with a dogged determination, resolved, whatever the cost, to rebuild the world from its foundations. It really took Basel, especially the all-soothing goodness of the commentary on St. John, to lead my aggressive will into true indifference.¹⁵

Balthasar mentions there one of the great inspirers of his student days and indeed his entire work: Erich Przywara. He was never Balthasar's teacher (he lived in Munich, not Pullach), but he proved to be "an excellent if exacting mentor. He made you learn the scholastic philosophy with an attitude of serene detachment and then go on (as he did) and deal with all the modern philosophy, confronting Augustine and Thom-

¹⁴Prüfet alles, 9.

¹⁵Adrienne von Speyr, *Erde und Himmel. Ein Tagebuch: Zweiter Teil, Die Zeit der großen Diktate*, ed. and with an introduction by Hans Urs von Balthasar (Einsiedeln, 1975), 195ff.

as with Hegel, Scheler, and Heidegger."¹⁶ Balthasar was to meet Przywara again each year in the summer vacation, when he returned from Fourvière to Munich to finish a chapter of his *Apokalypse*. He then lived for two years with him when he was working on the *Stimmen der Zeit*. Out of gratitude he later published Przywara's early writings in three volumes—even though he had, in the meantime, expressed certain reservations about them.

With an even more undivided heart he paid the same debt of gratitude to his other great friend and inspirer (who likewise was never his teacher), Henri de Lubac. It was from him that he learnt what theology really was and could be.

Luckily and consolingly, Henri de Lubac lived in the house. He showed us the way beyond the scholastic stuff to the Fathers of the Church and generously lent us all his own notes and extracts. And so, while all the others went off to play football, Daniélou, Bouillard, and I and a few others (Fessard was no longer there) got down to Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus. I wrote a book on each of these.¹⁷

In addition to these, still under the influence of Przywara, came a translation of part of Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* and the preparation of a more comprehensive Augustine anthology, for which Balthasar read through Augustine's complete works while sitting through lectures with plugged ears.¹⁸

France introduced him not only to theology but to the great men of her literature—Péguy, Bernanos, and above all Claudel, with whom he had an unforgettable personal encounter. Balthasar was to translate Claudel's *Satin Slipper* "at least five times." He worked on the translation of Claudel's lyric poetry for twenty-five years before it could appear in 1963 in its definitive version.

His Lyons student days also left him with a susceptibility to bowel and throat infections which was to accompany him throughout his life and constantly gave him trouble. Nevertheless, the most important aspect of those years was his preparation for the priesthood, which he saw as total availability. On 26 July 1936 he was ordained to the priesthood, with twenty-one of his confrères, by Cardinal Faulhaber. At his first

¹⁶*Prüfet alles*, 9.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

Mass, celebrated for a small family group in a private chapel in Lucerne, he himself preached the sermon ("after all, you don't want to know how Father Gutzwiller preaches, but how I preach"). His text came from the words of consecration, which were also printed on his ordination card: "*Benedixit, fregit, deditque*. Because he blessed, he broke, and because he broke you, he could give you."¹⁹ He emphasized the breaking so forcefully that it remained in one's memory for life.

At the conclusion of his studies in 1937 he was sent first for two years to work on the *Stimmen der Zeit*, but above all to complete his own books. In 1939 he returned for a few months to Pullach for his tertianship under the direction of Father Albert Steger and again to make a thirty day retreat. Father Steger was one of the first people in the German-speaking world to interpret Ignatian spirituality mystically rather than just ascetically. At the beginning of the war his superiors gave Balthasar the choice of going either to Rome as a professor at the Gregorian University or to Basel as a student chaplain. In Rome he and three other fathers were to have established an institute for ecumenical theology—a plan which up to now has not materialized. Balthasar chose Basel—certainly not out of patriotism, but because pastoral work was closer to his heart than lecturing.

The student chaplain

To understand the next stage of Balthasar's life properly, we must remember the situation at that time. In Switzerland the Jesuits were no more than tolerated, certainly not officially accepted. The constitutional prohibition of any kind of work "in Church and school" and of the establishment of residences was still in force. So it was through prominent individuals that the Society of Jesus made its appearance in public. It would be rumored that these men were Jesuits (basically everyone knew that anyway), and it was by them that the Society as a whole was judged. There could be no institutional presence; it was just not permitted, whether in educational institutions or in Jesuit churches. The *Akademikerhäuser* of the student chaplains had the highest profile. The magazine

¹⁹*Das Weizenkorn. Aphorismen* (Einsiedeln, 1953), 99.

founded in these years by the Swiss Jesuits, the *Apologetischen Blätter* (later called *Orientierung*), came out first of all as a kind of underground newspaper. Juridicially, the Swiss Jesuits belonged to the South German province of the Society, though, because of wartime circumstances, they were largely independent. In 1947 a Swiss vice-province was set up. From the beginning of the war there was also a Swiss novitiate, first of all, modestly beyond the Swiss frontier at Balzers in Liechtenstein, and then, just as coyly, in the canton of Fribourg. Among the Swiss in this situation there were no professors, hardly any "intellectuals," but mostly competent pastors. A young confrère, who, at the commencement of his work, had already written more books than all the others put together must have seemed like a misfit or oddity.

Not that the Swiss Jesuits at this time lacked the intellectual and cultural dimension. Swiss Catholicism was undergoing a cultural awakening, and Jesuits like Richard Gutzwiller and Paul de Chastonay (to name just the two best known) were well to the fore. In the early forties student chaplaincy work meant, above all, cultural work. This new development was given further impetus by the war and the resulting cultural isolation, especially of German-speaking Switzerland. Publishing flourished—it was a case of having to resort to literary self-sufficiency. In reaction against Hitler's Germany, Catholics turned more and more to French Catholicism.

This is the context in which Balthasar's activities in Basel began. First and foremost was his activity as an editor and translator. He took over the editing of the "European Series" of the Klosterberg collection, a wartime attempt to save Europe's cultural heritage. The series was to comprise altogether fifty short anthologies. Balthasar himself was responsible for ten of them: Goethe, Novalis, Nietzsche (three volumes!), Brentano, and Borchardt. He translated Claudel, Péguy, the poetry of the French Resistance, later also Bernanos and Mauriac. In 1943 the Zurich Playhouse—at the time, with the exiled Horwitz, Ginsberg, Langhoff, Paryla, Becker and Giehse, probably the best German-speaking theatre in the world—staged the premiere of his translation of *The Satin Slipper*. Balthasar himself collaborated in the production in an advisory capacity. Other plays by Claudel followed. Finally, in 1951, there was the first performance of Bernanos's *Carmelites*, also in his version. Balthasar maintained friendly contacts with artists like Richard Seewald, Hans Stocker, Albert Schilling, and Hermann Baur, who pio-

neered the renewal of ecclesiastical art, undoubtedly the ripest fruit of the cultural renaissance in Swiss Catholicism.

His work with students was also largely cultural. The student chaplain gave lecture after lecture²⁰—the distraction of television was still in the distant future. In addition to an annual series of public lectures, he spent numerous evenings debating in the various student societies, in particular, the culturally orientated *Akademische Gesellschaft Renaissance*, of which he himself was a senior member. In Zurich, Bern, and Freiburg, too, he was a frequent and welcome guest at its meetings. The *Studentische Schulungsgemeinschaft* (SG), which he founded in 1941, was also, as the name suggests, primarily aimed at giving students a training in the philosophy of life. The list of those who conducted courses and conferences included some distinguished names: Hugo Rahner, Max Müller, Otto Karrer, Alois Dempf, Gustav Siewerth, Alfons Deissler, Gottlieb Söhngen, Oskar Bauhofer, Joseph Bernhart, Martin Buber, Karl Rahner, Adolf Portmann, Yves Congar, Walter Dirks, Eugen Biser, Henri de Lubac—the names, more or less, of Balthasar's friends and acquaintances.

But the *Schulungsgemeinschaft* was also an expression of Balthasar's pastoral activity, which was not confined to student liturgies (which, for the time, took quite a modern form), regular sermons in the *Marienkirche*, and countless conversations with individuals. The chaplain each year conducted several retreats for male students and eventually—an innovation—for female students as well. What is more, the retreats took the full Ignatian form of exercises aimed at helping people make a decision about their state of life. With many of these students and retreatants he established genuine, life-long friendships. Their conversations with him, detailed and often decisive for their lives, were unforgettable. He liked to begin by inviting them to go for a walk. Unforgettable, too, were the night-long discussions among small groups of friends. Unforgettable were the evenings on the training courses when he would sit down at the piano and play, from memory, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

One at least of the students of this period must be mentioned by name: Robert Rast (1920-1946), the person per-

²⁰A list of these series of lectures can be found in *Unser Auftrag*, 62.

haps closest to Balthasar. Like Balthasar, Rast was from an ancient Lucerne family, and also like him an old pupil of the Benedictine high school at Engelberg. Having been awarded top marks in his school-leaving examination, he went on to Basel and Freiburg to study cultural philosophy—because it was the only way he could think of bringing together his diverse cultural, musical, literary, and theological interests, and because he felt called to be a Christian cultural politician, involved in the “intellectual clash of contemporary Swiss Christian culture (the culture of the West) and National Socialism.”²¹ It was from Robert Rast that the idea came of establishing a *Schulungsgemeinschaft*. Rast took the initiative in setting it up and became its first leader. In addition to study, he devoted himself to literature. He wrote several articles, published a book, *On the Meaning of Culture*, and (in the Klosterberg Collection) a selection of texts from Herder. Having taken his doctorate, after only eight university semesters (his course was shortened because of military service), he decided to join the Society of Jesus, but then, after only a few weeks in the novitiate, he succumbed to a serious lung disease. He spent a year at the sanatorium in Leysin, where he completed another and newly arranged translation of Lallemand's *Spiritual Doctrine*. On 16 May 1946, having taken his religious vows, he died. His grave in the cloister of the Hofkirche in Lucerne is only a step away from Balthasar's.

Robert Rast was not the only one of Balthasar's Basel students to find his way into the novitiate of the Society of Jesus. Two of his friends had preceded him, others followed. The students in Basel talked of “Jesuititis.” Not all who entered the novitiate—some of them against Balthasar's advice—stayed the course. This led to personal tragedies, bitterness, and much gossip. Balthasar's style was not everyone's cup of tea. For many it seemed too aesthetic, too demanding. He was successful with students of literature and history, with architects, a few lawyers, and some medical students. With scientists and science he never found the right approach. So it was inevitable that the dedication of his 1945 book, *Herz der Welt—Electis dilectis*, was seen as utterly elitist, and that Balthasar himself

²¹Hans Urs von Balthasar (ed.), *Der Ruf des Herrn. Aus den Briefen von Robert Rast* (Lucerne, 1947), 21.

should be regarded by many people as inaccessible and arrogant. He saw things differently. What he wrote at this time about Mozart in the Renaissance yearbook without doubt represents his own feelings:

So exclusive is the nobility of this genius that it excludes the common and includes in itself everything in the world. . . . Like everything really great, it is unenvious of anything or anybody, because it knows that greatness is esoteric of its very nature and has no need of the false and artificial charm of a “circle.”²²

The student chaplain's third sphere of activity was the encounter with Protestantism. Basel, the ancient city of the humanists, was a stronghold of the Reformation. Karl Barth taught at its theological faculty. Balthasar had already discussed Barth in the *Apokalypse*. Now he tried to take up again the failed dialogue about the *analogia entis* between Barth and Przywara. The idea was to take de Lubac's theology of creation as its starting-point. It was the common love of Mozart which made their meetings easier and lay at the heart of their abiding friendship. In addition to numerous private conversations, Barth invited Balthasar to take part in his seminar, and in 1949-50 Balthasar gave a series of lectures on Barth in Barth's presence. The book on Barth of 1951, “joyfully welcomed and approved”²³ by Barth, shows how there could be a healthy rapprochement of the two points of view. Barth became the third great inspirer of Balthasar's theology. “Barth's doctrine of election, that brilliant overcoming of Calvin, powerfully and permanently attracted me.”²⁴ But it was Barth's radical Christocentrism which exercised the most lasting influence. By Balthasar's own admission, the essays in *Verbum Caro, Theologie der Geschichte*, and *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe* are the fruit and continuation of this ecumenical discussion.²⁵

What Balthasar was aiming at in these discussions, albeit in vain, was nothing less than Barth's conversion. At that time in Switzerland contact with Protestants almost invariably meant conversion. A quite exceptional wave of conversions

²²*Spiritus Creator. Skizzen zur Theologie III* (Einsiedeln, 1967), 470.

²³*Rechenschaft* 1965, 38.

²⁴*Unser Auftrag*, 85.

²⁵*Kleiner Lageplan zu meinen Büchern* (Einsiedeln, 1955), 7; *Rechenschaft* 1965, 16, 35.

was attracting notice, and in Basel Balthasar was notorious as a "convert-maker." In fact, he played only a small part in the two most sensational of his conversions, which took place at the very beginning of his time in Basel. He had been introduced by a mutual friend to Professor Albert Béguin and to a lady who wanted to be received into the Church—Adrienne Kaegi-von Speyr. Béguin, from western Switzerland, was a close friend of Georges Bernanos, a professor of French literature, and an authority on German romanticism. He had been driven out of Nazi Germany and was teaching at the University of Basel. Towards the end of the war, he returned to France to take up the direction of the journal *Esprit*. He was baptized by Balthasar on 15 November 1940. The friend of his youth, Adrienne von Speyr, whom Balthasar had received into the Catholic Church two weeks previously, was his godmother.

With Adrienne

The encounter with Adrienne von Speyr had a determining influence on the rest of Balthasar's life and work. This medical doctor, from an old Basel family, had been born at La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1902. In 1927 she had married a widower, the Basel historian Emil Dürr. After his accidental death, following seven happy years of marriage, she fell out with God and for years could no longer say the Our Father. In 1936 she married again, this time to Dürr's successor, Professor Werner Kaegi, with whom she lived until her death in the lovely house *Auf Burg* on the Münsterplatz in Basel. Later Balthasar would be welcomed there as a guest. She was a woman with a good sense of humor, a lively mind, and a sharp tongue, socially popular, and devoted to her patients, especially the poor ones and those with psychological problems. Her conversion (in the offing since her childhood) caused a considerable stir in Basel, especially among her family and Protestant friends. Soon there was gossip about miracles, which apparently took place in her surgery. There were rumors about the visions she was supposed to have had. The regular and lengthy meetings with her spiritual director aroused the mistrust of his confrères and gave rise, understandably, to more gossip.

Soon the first fruits of this collaboration between the student chaplain and Frau Professor Kaegi came to light. On 15 October 1945, after a retreat in Estavayer (5-12 August), in a house in Wettsteinallee, the women's branch of the

Community of St. John was founded with three postulants. At first, only a few people knew about the foundation. On its publication three years later, Balthasar's much discussed book *Der Laie und der Ordensstand* made the new foundation more widely known. In 1947, with the help of an Einsiedeln friend, Dr. Josef Fraefel, the Johannesverlag was set up for the publication of Adrienne's works, which were having difficulties over the imprimatur. In the same year, Johannesverlag published Adrienne's translation of *The Autobiography of a Soul*, with a preface by Balthasar. A year later the much discussed and appreciated book on Our Lady, *Magd des Herrn*, was published, as well as the third volume of the commentary on St. John's gospel, *Die Abschiedsreden*, again with a preface by Balthasar. The remaining three volumes, which had to be revised at the insistence of the censor, could not be published until 1949. The last of these "early works," which made Adrienne von Speyr well-known, was the two-volume commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John, published in 1950.

Leaving the Jesuits

Meanwhile, the problems of Adrienne's confessor were multiplying. In 1945 his already advertised Christmas sermon on German Swiss Radio was cancelled at short notice because of the law about the Jesuits. Public astonishment at the decision led to the first discussion of this article of the constitution. Odermatt, editor of the *Neuen Zürcher Nachrichten*, asked: Is Swiss Radio "school" or "church?" For the Swiss Jesuits, who in any case were having problems in Zurich, the incident was, to say the least, unpleasant. The years that then followed were to be a time of real crisis for Balthasar. All his human ties were placed in question. To begin with, there were family troubles. His father had been gravely ill for quite some time and eventually died in June, 1946. His godmother, the person to whom he most easily related in the family, who had always understood him, suffered her first stroke, was left paralyzed, and was given the last rites by him. On 16 May 1946 Robert Rast died in Leysin. Shortly before, Balthasar had received news that his friend and mentor Przywara was suffering from a serious nervous disorder, so he set about trying to obtain for him the entry permit into Switzerland. In August Balthasar was due in the normal way to make his solemn religious profession. However, at the same time, he was informed that the Society of Jesus could not take

responsibility for Frau Professor Kaegi and the Community of St. John. Balthasar asked for the genuineness of her visions to be investigated, and for the postponement until then of his vows. On 22 April 1947 (the Feast of the Mother of God, and foundation feast of the Society of Jesus), he spoke in Rome for the first time and unsuccessfully with Father General Johann Baptist Janssens.

Meanwhile, Balthasar's Lyons friends, and he himself with them, were coming under fire theologically. In the August issue of the *Revue Thomiste*, Michel Labourdette, O.P. had published a critical review of the two Lyons series *Théologie* and *Sources Chrétiennes*.²⁶ Critical remarks were made about de Lubac, Bouillard, Fessard, and Daniélou. The reviewer at first made a favorable mention of Balthasar's study of Gregory of Nyssa, *Présence et Pensée* (which had not appeared in the two series referred to above). But then, in his conclusion, he returned to it with a long quotation from Balthasar's foreword, introduced as follows:

Theology, no more than metaphysics, does not lend itself to be judged according to the categories of aesthetics. I do not mean in its expressions, but in the universal value and permanence of the truths it defines. That is what is wrong, to give an example, with a brilliant and superficial page written by a very distinguished author.²⁷

Then follows the quotation from Balthasar—from a text which, in later years, he would probably no longer have written in that form. In retrospect, it is noticeable how clearly Labourdette already recognized the aesthetic character of Balthasar's theology (with reference to Daniélou, again for the first time, he spoke of a "dramatic theology"). Admittedly, what he meant by this, not entirely incorrectly, was an aestheticizing theology. Balthasar himself had not yet found his way to the true "seeing of the form" of God's glory.

By contrast to the elegant and delicate piece by Labourdette, the article by his Dominican confrère Garrigou-Lagrange, in the December issue of the *Angelicum*, seemed like a bombardment. "Where is the new theology going?" he

²⁶M. Michel Labourdette, "La théologie et ses sources," *Revue Thomiste* 46 (1946): 353-371.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 370.

thundered in his title. He concluded with this succinct answer: "It is going back to Modernism."²⁸ Balthasar is not expressly mentioned in this second article, and so he did not take part in the controversy which eventually led to the suspension from teaching of de Lubac and Bouillard and to the encyclical *Humani Generis*. And yet the suspicion surrounding his friend de Lubac had a most profound effect on him and his theological work. In theology, too, he could no longer move about freely. The book on Barth (and the ensuing controversy with E. Gutwenger about the theological concept of nature) can only be understood in the context of this consternation.

In mid-September, 1947 Balthasar was able to travel to Germany to accompany Erich Przywara back to Basel, where his friend slowly recuperated. On 26 November he spoke for a second time with the Father General, who sent him to Lyons for a discussion with Father Rondet. Rondet was unable to recognize the genuineness of Adrienne von Speyr's visions and the divine mission entrusted to Balthasar. The Bishop of Basel, Franziskus von Streng, also had reservations about the Community of St. John, and even later would not withdraw them. In this hopeless situation, Father General told Balthasar to go on retreat under the direction of Father Donatien Mollat, the Johannine specialist, and during that retreat to make his final decision. The retreat took place at the end of June, 1948 at Barollières near Lyons. The decision, made with the agreement of the retreat father, was to leave the Society, if it was not otherwise seriously willing to test Balthasar's mission. Then followed a painful eighteen months of waiting, during which Balthasar tried in vain to find a bishop who would accept him, and his confrères tried in vain to make him change his mind. After a further exchange of letters with Father General, he left the Society on 11 February 1950.

How Balthasar himself saw this departure and how hard it was for him comes out in the short printed statement sent to his friends and acquaintances and the long farewell letter written to his confrères.

I took this step, for both sides a very grave one, after a long testing of the certainty I had reached through prayer that I was being called by

²⁸Reginald Garrigou-LaGrange, "La nouvelle théologie où va-t-elle?" *Angelicum* 23 (1946): 126-145 (p. 143 cited).

God to certain definite tasks in the Church. The Society felt it could not release me to give these tasks my undivided commitment. . . . So, for me, the step taken means an application of Christian obedience to God, who at any time has the right to call a man not only out of his physical home or his marriage, but also from his chosen spiritual home in a religious order, so that he can use him for his purposes within the Church. Any resulting advantages or disadvantages in the secular sphere were not under discussion and not taken into account.

For his confrères he goes into more detail. It was a question, he says, of the conflict between his "interior certainty, reached in prayer" and his obedience to the Society, in other words, the conflict between obedience to the Society and direct obedience to God. With references to St. Thomas and Cardinal de Lugo, Balthasar explains theologically that the resolution of this conflict is not to be found "absolutely and in every case in obedience to the order," and he concludes confidently:

Whether it be hard or easy, whether or not it be understood, whether the prospects be fair or gloomy, whichever be the darker night—the obedience of staying or the obedience of going: what is that to the person who seeks the will of the Lord? And if *Spiritual Exercises* n. 167 almost inevitably comes true, he will accept it with a grateful heart. And yet what does it matter to him? God ensures that such obedience, if practiced in a childlike way without "heroism" or arrogance, ends up, not at the edge, but at the very foundations of the Catholic Church.²⁹

This astonishing certainty contrasts greatly with what he constantly impressed upon his students with regard to Ignatian obedience, especially when he was directing the *Spiritual Exercises*. Only now, as a result of the documents published since the death of Adrienne von Speyr, can we understand it properly. From these it becomes clear that for years and years Balthasar had been confronted with a superabundance of charismatic attestation—multiple stigmatization, healings and other miracles, vision upon vision. The behavior of the seer herself never gave rise to any doubt about the authenticity of her experiences; on the contrary, it seemed to confirm them. But, above all, one realizes how much Adrienne, with her gift of knowing people's hearts, helped her confessor

²⁹Published in Italian translation in *Il Sabato* (23-29 July 1988): 28.

with his spiritual and pastoral work. One also sees how not only the common mission but also, even in the early days, the necessity of leaving the Jesuits emerged with such imperative clarity. Adrienne suffered the latter even more deeply, so it would seem, than Balthasar himself. Looking back at his decision, he wrote:

For me the Society was of course a beloved homeland; the thought that one might have to "leave all" more than once in a lifetime in order to follow the Lord, even an order, had never occurred to me, and struck me like a blow.³⁰

Towards the end of his life he asked for readmission to the Society of Jesus. It could not be granted him, however, because he attached to it the condition that future responsibility for the Community of St. John should also be taken over. On the occasion of his appointment as a cardinal, Father General wanted to offer him Sant'Ignazio as a titular church, but this too fell through because of canonical problems.

This is neither the time nor the place to subject Adrienne's charisms to a critical theological examination or to distinguish within them between divine gift and what was possibly natural endowment—if such a separation is ever really possible. Two things, though, can be said in retrospect. If Adrienne von Speyr had a mission in the Church (and ecclesiastical statements of recent years seem to point in that direction), then, to carry it out, she needed the mediation of a priest like Balthasar who could accept her visions with theological knowledge and a childlike simplicity of faith. Any encouragement of self-reflection (which he constantly avoided), any rash critical judgment, would have restricted the free flow of inspiration. On the other hand, the founding of the Community of St. John might possibly have worked out better if Balthasar had not left the Jesuits. (During the retreat leading to his decision, he saw the mass of difficulties awaiting him as the only argument against the divine source of his mission.) And yet, in the Society, Balthasar's theological work would scarcely have taken this form. In line with the "Gamaliel principle" (cf. Acts 5:34-39), the final judgment of Balthasar's decision must be left to the future and thus to God.

³⁰*Erster Blick auf Adrienne von Speyr* (Einsiedeln, 1968), 38.

The final years with Adrienne

After leaving the Society, Balthasar was literally on the street. He had, first of all, to look for somewhere to live, and that meant, since his presence there was not welcome to the bishop, outside of Basel. Through the good offices of his friends, he was offered a vacant apartment on the Zürichberg, Im Schilf 11, from which he moved later to Titlistrasse 51. On the ecclesiastical side, the Bishop of Chur, Christianus Caminada, gave him permission to say Mass and, somewhat later, to hear confessions, so that he was able once more to give retreats. Yet it was only on 2 February 1956 that, at the urging of some of his lay friends in Zurich on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, he was incardinated in the diocese of Chur. With this ecclesiastical home, he was at last able to move back to Basel and accept the hospitality of Professor Kaegi at Münsterplatz 4, where he had had a room since 1952.

A second, no less burdensome concern was his financial upkeep. To earn his living and to finance the publishing firm, which devoured rather than made money, he repeatedly undertook lecture tours of Germany. In February 1950 he went to Tübingen, Bonn, Bad Honnef, Maria Laach (where he renewed his religious vows in the hands of the abbot, for from this commitment he did not want in any way to be released), Andernach, Koblenz, Neuwied, Cologne, Essen, Munster, Paderborn, Stuttgart.³¹ The following winter there were lectures in Freiburg, Bonn, Walberberg, Cologne, Düsseldorf, Hannover, Hamburg, Kiel, Göttingen, Marburg, Heidelberg, Baden-Baden, and in the early summer of 1952, "in sweltering heat," at various German universities.

It is no fun, but it is attracting a considerable number of people. In Freiburg there must have been about a thousand. There is a real vacuum, and anyone who finds the right words has hearers who are thirsting for Christ.

The book *Die Gottesfrage des heutigen Menschen* gives an impression of the content of these lectures. Meanwhile, retreats were constantly being given; in 1950 four courses in Dussnang, Kerns, Colmar, and Mainz. Later the emphasis would be on

³¹Adrienne von Speyr, *Erde und Himmel. Eine Tagebuch*, Teil III: *Die späten Jahre* (Einsiedeln, 1976), 55.

retreats for theologians, and from 1958 onwards there were retreats for the *Cusanus-Werk*, each time with between forty and eighty retreatants.

Several university chairs were offered him: just before he left the Society, he was invited to succeed Guardini in Munich. When an offer came from Tübingen, the Congregation for Seminaries and Universities imposed a teaching ban on him because he had left a religious order. In any case, he turned down all offers. He had not been freed of one commitment in order to take on another which would remove him still further from his mission. The only chair which he might have accepted, at the philosophy faculty in Basel, was never offered him, though Karl Barth did invite him to come to the (Protestant) theology faculty. An entry in his diary, from the Spring of 1954, conveys the atmosphere of the period.

Many visitors. From time to time Reinhold Schneider, C. J. Burckhardt, Guardini, Heuss. I still have my room in Zurich. I am incardinated nowhere. Many courses—retreats or further education weeks—after Easter, at the Ascension, in June, end of July, beginning of August, in Spain, then in Louvain. I don't meet Adrienne until 17 August in Paris. From there we go to St. Quay. After the vacation more courses and conferences. So Adrienne is on her own a lot. This year she gave her last surgery in the Eisengasse. She was too ill to take it up again at home.³²

This sounds like a terribly fragmented existence. And yet, in these years of his middle age, Balthasar had found his own real center. It started with two little books, which on their publication caused quite a stir, and which even today are rightly regarded as milestones in the development of his thought: the already mentioned *Der Laie und der Ordensstand* of 1948 and *Die Schleifung der Bastionen* of 1952. In his fiftieth year, he focused his *Kleiner Lageplan zu meinen Büchern* on this central point, and then years later, *Rechenschaft*, more aggressive and concerned with himself, starts off from it. The issue is the Church in the world, not a radiating of the Church's holiness into the profane world, but the leavening of the world from within in order to make visible God's glory which still shines in this world. The center of the Church, says Balthasar, is where

³²*Ibid.*, 165.

usually people see the periphery: her secular mission. That is why the defensive bulwarks must be razed to the ground and spacious boulevards built from the rubble. This mission of the Church in the world must be carried out by the laity, who live completely in the world. But, to be able to fulfill that mission, they really must be "salt" and "leaven." They must live at the very heart of Christianity, in the shame of the Cross, in prayer, and renunciation. Here Balthasar sees the role of the secular institutes, as proposed in 1947 by *Provida Mater*, and as the Community of St. John tries to put into practice.

All of Balthasar's polemics revolve round this central point. They begin with the still quite peaceful exchanges of this period about the theological concept of nature and, with Karl Rahner, about the definition of the laity. Then, in a harsher tone, there is *Friedlichen Fragen an das Opus Dei*.³³ (In *Schleifung der Bastionen* he had cited *Opus Dei* as an example of what he meant. He later heard, with relief, that it no longer regarded itself as a secular institute). Finally, there were the furious attacks of the post-conciliar period, of which *Cordula* became the best known. This *zelos* of the controversialist is not only the reverse side of his theological *eros* (think how sarcastic Karl Barth could be!). He was also concerned that there should be no abandoning or obscuring of the indissoluble bond between the Christian's mission in the world and his imitation of Christ Crucified—the "decisive test," witnessing to Christ in one's life and suffering.

By leaving his religious order, Balthasar himself was again "in the world." His life was more the secular one of the ordinary Christian than that of a diocesan priest. Here, in retrospect, may lie the deeper significance, for his mission, of the decision to leave the Jesuits: life-style and mission came to coincide more closely. The center of his mission now also shed light for him on his earlier career, including his literary work.

It all may as well be literary gossip if it does not serve an ecclesial activity which is not self-chosen or self-appointed. That is the center: everything else—even if it came earlier—is arranged around it.³⁴

³³'Friedliche Fragen an das Opus Dei,' *Der christliche Sonntag* 16, no. 15 (1964): 117f.

³⁴*Kleiner Lageplan*, 19.

In the years of which we are speaking, being in the world meant above all concern for the return of men to God, as is shown by *Die Gottesfrage des heutigen Menschen*. But abiding at the Christian center meant above all prayer and contemplation. "The deeper that action is meant to penetrate, the deeper must be the contemplation that precedes and follows it."³⁵ That is why the chief obligation of the members of the *Schulungsgemeinschaft* was "a short time each day of recollection before God, of contemplative prayer." To help with this, in 1955 Balthasar started a series at Johannesverlag called *Adoratio*. He himself wrote the first volume in it, *Das betrachtende Gebet*. Significantly, the series petered out after four volumes: no collaborators could be found for it. And so Balthasar constantly tried new series: *Lectio Spiritualis* (from 1958), *Beten Heute* (from 1972), *Christliche Meister* (from 1979). As early as 1948, at the same time as the book on lay communities, an essay appeared which was to fix Balthasar's image for years to come: *Theologie und Heiligkeit*. The contrast drawn there between "sitting" and "kneeling" theology has become proverbial.

In his personal life, too, Balthasar at this time was taken deeper and deeper into the center of Christianity, into the Cross. First of all, there was the collaboration with Adrienne, which demanded more of him as the years went by. After the great dictated Biblical commentaries, there was much selfless secretarial work to be done. At the beginning of April, 1956 he reports:

Since January I have already copied one thousand manuscript pages: 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and a book about the states of Christian life. All seem excellent to me in their own way. I suppose this year I shall have to concentrate on this work if I am ever to see light at the end of the tunnel. There is also much I have to ponder before I can give my own opinion and get it ready for publication.

However quickly he thought he could do it at the time, the work never came to an end for him. Right up to the last years of his life, he had to sacrifice his vacations in order to complete more manuscripts. Being with Adrienne increasingly meant looking after a seriously ill woman. Again and again in his

³⁵*Ibid.*, 20.

letters he says: "Frau Kaegi is very seriously ill." Since 1940 she had been suffering from heart trouble, to which, as time went on, more and more sufferings were added. Several times she had to (or was allowed to) experience dying, and from 1954 she could no longer leave her house in the Münsterplatz.

But Balthasar's own health was also affected. Already in his early fifties he was constantly falling ill between the various journeys to give lectures or retreats. In the Fall of 1957—Albert Béguin had died in May—a state of exhaustion laid him low for six months. "I really thought I was cracking up, but it now looks as if I am getting back to normal again. It is good to get *avertissements* of this kind." In the early summer of 1958 he had phlebitis for several weeks, and six months later illness overtook him completely and brought him to death's door. Paralysis of the limbs was correctly diagnosed as a symptom of a form of leukemia. Months of convalescence in Montana-Ver-mala restored him to health, but for years after he would be dogged by the after-effects of that illness. His hands functioned very poorly, he had difficulty standing and walking.

And yet he never stopped working. In the years of illness he completed the translation of Claudel's lyric poetry, translated Calderón's *Great Theatre of the World* for performance in Einsiedeln (though in the end another text would be used), and above all he began to plan his trilogy, the first volume of which appeared in 1961. At the end of 1958 he wrote for the first time:

I am trying to bring aesthetics and theology face to face. This is my first attempt at the high peaks. A tremendous theme, but who would be up to it these days? Where has *eros* got to in theology, and the commentary on the Song of Songs, which belongs to the very center of theology?

And yet, hardly recovered from his illness, he was inundated with secondary work. We have reached the end of 1960, the period of feverish preparation for the Council.

So many small things on every side mean fragmented commitment. Radio, television. Much haste, so much churning out, and the one thing covering up the other. One would rather be in a Charterhouse.

He could not now withdraw to a Charterhouse. However, he was not invited to the Council, and so, next door to Adrienne's sick room, he was able to continue work undis-

turbed on his Aesthetic. The second volume in particular, with its twelve individual studies, gave him a great deal of joy, but also much work. Each had to be carefully worked on, though he was able to incorporate some which had been planned originally as separate pieces—the chapters on Denys, Dante, and Péguy. The first volumes of this theological *summa* (and also, I suppose, bad conscience about his absence from the Council) brought him many kinds of honors on his sixtieth birthday: the Golden Cross of Mount Athos, and honorary doctorates in theology from the universities of Edinburgh, Munster, and, after a suitable delay, Fribourg.

Before he could bring his Aesthetic to a conclusion, the year 1967, with the mortal illness of Adrienne, placed a second deep caesura in his life. For three years she had already been almost completely blind. Now, with cancer of the bowel, an infinitely slow, infinitely burdensome agony began—"dying with the drop counter, in slow motion,"³⁶ from June to September. She died in the night of 17 September 1967—on her own, like her heavenly mentor, Ignatius.

For Balthasar, a new phase of life began. He moved from the Münsterplatz to Arnold Böcklinstrasse 42, and from now on was able to move more freely. For the moment, he had his hands full with bringing out *Erster Blick auf Adrienne von Speyr* and preparing the first of the unpublished works for printing. The members of the Community of St. John were amazed, one might say stunned, by the superabundance of their foundress's charismatic gifts, of which, in her lifetime, they had had hardly an inkling. For the last twenty years of his life, Balthasar was to devote himself to getting Adrienne's mission recognized by the Church. The private printing of the unpublished works cost him a fortune; at a first estimate he reckoned on at least 300,000 DM/Fr.³⁷ As for theological honors and the growing trust of the Pope, these he diverted, time after time, to Adrienne. This was how he understood the cardinalate and the reason why, albeit reluctantly, he accepted it. Back in 1965 he wrote: "Her work and mine cannot be separated from one another either psychologically or theologically. They are two halves of one whole, with a single foundation at the

³⁶*Erde und Himmel* III: 349.

³⁷*Erster Blick*, 227.

center."³⁸ So, before turning to the last years of his life, we must have at least a short look at this common work.

The work

The foundations

From what has been said, at least one thing is clear. Balthasar's most important works, at least in his own eyes, are not his writings but his foundations. Even less than the books, these were not planned in advance, nor were they his own initiative, and so he never undertook them on his own. For the most part, he just gave support to a foundation which did not begin with him.

The first foundation, the *Studentische Schulungsgemeinschaft* (SG for short), sprang from an idea of Robert Rast's. Balthasar helped to put it into effect, and for more than twenty-five years carried on the work almost alone. He gave the annual introductory exercises, organized an annual conference and training course, alternating between philosophy and theology. Sometimes he himself led these, but he was in any case always there as a stimulating contributor to the discussion and a discreet focal point. When in 1947 the first members had passed through the scheduled four training courses and reached the end of their studies, they joined together in the *Akademische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* (AAG). Until 1979 Balthasar was involved in this as spiritual advisor, and each year, to the end of his life, he gave its Advent day of recollection in Einsiedeln.

Like all of Balthasar's foundations, these two fellowships are characterized by an absence of organization. They depend on friendship and the good will of their members. That is why, at the end of the sixties, with the interests of the generation of '68 lying elsewhere, the SG died out only to rise again to new life a short time later. The AAG was also affected, many of the "sixty-eighters" being friends of Balthasar. In 1970 he decided to write a Christmas letter of energetic admonition. I shall quote just the central passage:

³⁸Rechenchaft 1965, 35.

In Christianity it is senseless to play off past, present, and future against each other, because the Christ event is eschatological and so transcends the boundaries of time. Early Christianity was in its own way extremely future-orientated precisely because of its constant pondering of the "past perfect" of the Cross and Resurrection, from which came the "indicative" and "imperative" of the present. All the great renewals in the history of the Church have had this "temporal form." Only a Christian who ponders the sources (contemplation) stands a chance of attaining a genuine forward-looking attitude and the right kind of commitment (action). As we all know, the whole plan and purpose of the Spiritual Exercises is to provide preparation and training for apostolic, world-transforming action.

Of the next foundation, the Community of St. John, less needs to be said. We have already seen that Balthasar regarded it as the center of his work. Its foundress and first superior was, nevertheless, Adrienne von Speyr, whereas Balthasar was responsible for spiritual direction and formation. What can be said of the community has been already explained elsewhere by Balthasar himself and by one of the community.³⁹

It was disappointing for Balthasar—perhaps the greatest disappointment of his life—that, like the branch of Tantalus, the foundation of the men's community, whenever it seemed to be in his grasp, time after time eluded him. The foundation of the priests' branch has its own history. No theology students were accepted into the SG, and yet, as early as 1944, Balthasar was explaining to his future successor as spiritual advisor of the AAG the idea of "getting together a group of interested theology students and younger priests in parallel to the existing *Schulungsgemeinschaft*."⁴⁰ This eventually happened the year after. Balthasar's spiritual and pastoral care also extended to priests and theology students. Indeed, this was his predilection. This can be seen above all in the countless retreats, but also in the tireless, friendly patience with which he constantly made himself available to doctoral students and other inquirers. Letters were answered by return, and invitations to come and talk with him in Basel were warmly extended. In 1968, with the help of friends (and apparently

³⁹"Kurze Darstellung der Johannesgemeinschaft" (by a member of the community) in *Adrienne von Speyr und ihre kirchliche Sendung*. Proceedings of the Roman Symposium, 27-29 September 1985 (Einsiedeln, 1986), 49-57.

⁴⁰Anton Cadotsch, "Dank an den Seelsorger," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar 1905-1988* (Basel, 1989), 25.

through Adrienne's heavenly mediation—she had given him advance notice of this in 1952), he was able to acquire a holiday home for the community at Rigi-Kaltbad. As a result of this, his contacts with a group of younger confrères were to a certain extent institutionalized. Each year the "Rigianer" spent a few days of vacation with him. Yet it was only in 1983 that the priests' branch of the Community of St. John could be established. In the final years of his life Balthasar was much concerned to build it up.

The Johannesverlag ought to be mentioned as a third foundation. Again this came about with the help of friends who formed the legal trustees. At first, it was intended for the publication of Adrienne's writings, but soon it was used to publish Balthasar's own works as well. It also stood for a far-sighted publishing policy with regard to Church and culture that was independent of market forces and, in the best sense, had an alternative emphasis: *opportune, importune*. The publications of the company gradually developed in ten series or collections, which went from spiritual reading and the rediscovery of forgotten masters, via scholarly contributions to theology, to books of a topical kind, indeed real pamphlets. The history of this publishing venture, in which Balthasar invested a good part of his working energy, still waits to be written. What can at least be said, without exaggeration, is that, without this publishing firm at his disposal, Balthasar's own work would have been neither written nor published. Once again Balthasar applied his working principle of a minimum of organization. He was often translator, editor, and publisher in one person, and the authors came mainly from his circle of friends.

The same is true of Balthasar's last joint foundation, *Communio: International Catholic Review*. Let us hear what he himself has to say on the subject:

In 1945 a request was made several times [through Adrienne] that "I should start a review." How I was to do this as a student chaplain was completely baffling to me. I saw no possibility of it at all. Then the answer came: "Not now. But still make plans and keep people in mind with whom it will be written." A year later again: "Don't forget the review!" I did not think of it seriously again. Then, one evening in a restaurant in the Via Aurelia in Rome, a few of us from the International Theological Commission decided to start the international review *Communio*. It was supposed to be launched first of all in Paris, but that fell through, and so it made its first appearance in

Germany in 1973. It would never have occurred to me to link this journal, which today comes out in eleven languages, with what had been asked of me almost forty years earlier. When the founding group began to break up, I was left on my own, having been pushed, against my will, into a kind of coordinating role. Only then did it dawn on me that there might be a connection with that request in the past from Heaven. The blessing that rests on this fragile network linking different countries and continents confirms me in this supposition, which slowly but surely became a sure conviction.⁴¹

Something else needs to be said here. Balthasar inconspicuously put a tremendous amount of work into this journal—correspondence, translation, revision. His friend, Franz Greiner, the executive editor of the German edition, knew this better than anyone. He died one year before Balthasar.

The writings

Balthasar is without doubt one of the most prolific writers of our times. His bibliography includes eighty-five separate volumes, over five hundred articles and contributions to collected works, and nearly a hundred translations, not to mention numerous smaller pieces and the sixty volumes of the works of Adrienne von Speyr. This is not the place to draw even a general outline of this immense achievement. But a few biographical pointers may help the reader to order its individual parts more clearly.

Balthasar insisted time after time that his work was absolutely inseparable from Adrienne von Speyr's. Nevertheless, the earliest works came into being independently. To some extent one can see in them how much Balthasar put of what was truly his own into his later work, and how much that work remains truly his very own, even if much is deepened or has a different emphasis. It never occurred to anyone to speak of Balthasar I and II, though he himself once said that he "once thought, when approaching the end of the first stage, that a change of direction would be necessary."⁴²

In addition to his dissertation and the *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*, the monographs on Origen, Gregory of

⁴¹Unser Auftrag, 68f.

⁴²Address in Innsbruck, May 22, 1987, on the occasion of the award of the Mozart Prize by the Goethe Foundation (MS, p. 1).

Nyssa, and Maximus belong to this early work, not to mention the even more specialized Patristic studies. Then there are the two books which come closest to university philosophy and theology. *Warheit* (1947) and *Karl Barth* still predominantly bear the mark of his studies and of the man himself, although Adrienne's influence is beginning to shine through in the idea of truth as revelation and in the doctrine of universal election. The same is more or less true of the collection of aphorisms *Das Weizenkorn* (1944), which in large part probably goes back to his student days.

This inconspicuous little book, together with the first thing to be written entirely under the influence of Adrienne's visions (*Das Herz der Welt*—1945), was Balthasar's real breakthrough work. Both books—initially, only in Switzerland—addressed a wide readership and were several times reprinted, while the *Apokalypse* was regarded from the outset as unreadable. *Das Herz der Welt*, his book about Christ, was written by Balthasar in a very short time during the summer vacation of 1943 “on a rock in Lake Lucerne.” The fact that sometimes the linguistic form is there for form's sake is a pointer to its origins. Adrienne was suitably critical:

You know, there are certain passages at the beginning that I find a little tepid. In other words, your enjoyment of wordplay, the sound of words, their analysis, their “cognates,” seems here and there to leave the spiritual aspect in the shade. I'll . . . gladly show you the passages if it will help.⁴³

Then followed the writings revolving around Adrienne's mission: the already mentioned *Der Laie und der Ordensstand* and *Theologie und Heiligkeit* (both of 1948) and *Die Schleifung der Bastionen* (1952). Then there were the two monographs on *Thérèse von Lisieux, Geschichte einer Sendung* (1950) and *Elisabeth von Dijon und ihre geistliche Sendung* (1952), which explore a kind of *a posteriori* theology of mission. The two were later combined as *Schwestern im Geist. Der Christ und die Angst* (1951) and the commentary on the questions on charisms in the *Summa Theologiae* (Thomas von Aquin, *Besondere Gnadengaben und die zwei Wege des menschlichen Lebens*, 1954) provide a theological grounding for

⁴³*Unser Auftrag*, 80.

Adrienne's special graces. Finally, Balthasar ventures to the heart of mission with the already mentioned *Das betrachtende Gebet* (1955) and the *Adoratio* series to which it belonged. Two monographs dating from this period helped to give Adrienne's mission an orchestration in the Church and the world. The first was about *Reinhold Schneider* (1953), “a dear friend, the only man in Germany (apart from a few Jesuits) who knows who Ignatius is, what his fundamental presuppositions were. Through him I made a bridge between my *Apokalypse* and *Der Laie und der Ordensstand*.” The second was a study of *Bernanos*, who utterly fascinated Balthasar because “his focal point was not the intuition of God but the knowledge of hearts: the gaze of God on sinful man, who can and should be brought to fulfillment by the ministerial and mystical (confession and judgment). Bernanos here seriously presents descent as a way to God in imitation of the God who came down to us.” The *Theologie der drei Tage* can be considered as the late-born child of this group of writings. Although it was written for a specific occasion (Balthasar took the place of a contributor who had dropped out of the *Mysterium Salutis* handbook), it offers a theological exposition of Adrienne's Good Friday and Holy Saturday experiences.

Theologie der Geschichte (1950), several times reprinted and revised and finally taken up into *Das Ganze im Fragment* (1963) and the *Theodramatik*, is an early expression of the very heart of Balthasar's theology. Here the streams flowing from his own studies merge with the waters of inspiration received from Adrienne. The collected “Sketches in Theology” of 1960, *Verbum Caro* and *Sponsa Verbi*, revolve around this same central point. A first creative period comes to a close with these collections. It must be said, though, that they by no means give a very detailed or sharply focused picture of Balthasar's main preoccupations as a theologian and pastor during the first years. Had one asked his Basel students for a description of his thought, they would undoubtedly have cited the key words “mission,” “obedience,” “contemplation,” and the themes of marriage in Paradise and the empty Hell, which were previously regarded as theological oddities. *Christlicher Stand*, though planned in about 1945, only appeared in 1977. Until then he had not published very much about obedience and marriage in Paradise. The controversy about Hell was left entirely to the final years of Balthasar's life. At the time no one could have known how much these themes owed to the inspiration of Adrienne von Speyr.

Balthasar's second creative period, following his major illness, though considerably richer, is more easily surveyed. Its backbone is the great trilogy with its fifteen volumes (1961-1987). Then there is the multitude of occasional pieces, written as demanded by the current state of the Church. We have already seen how the Aesthetic began to take shape for the first time in 1958; here it should be added that in its origins it goes back much further. It can be found already *in nuce* in an essay of 1943 on the farewell trio in Mozart's *Magic Flute*, then, more explicitly, in *Wahrheit*, where the beautiful comes before the true. It would not be wrong to look for its first glimmerings in his disagreement with the ideas of Kierkegaard, whom he discovered through Guardini in Berlin. Balthasar could never forgive Kierkegaard for condemning Don Giovanni, and with it everything aesthetic, as unethical and anti-religious. Nevertheless, an aesthetic of God's glory blazing forth in the world only became really possible when Balthasar came to see the descent of Christ, "the economic *id quo majus cogitari nequit*," as the form in which God reveals himself in the world. All the volumes of *Herrlichkeit* circle round this central point, perhaps most beautifully in the chapters on the holy fools and the steps of prophetic obedience.⁴⁴

The *Theodramatik* was conceived before the Aesthetic, and, in its origins, it perhaps goes back still further; it was certainly even closer to Balthasar's heart. Leaving on one side his doctoral research and the *Apokalypse* (where there is at least a preliminary outline of the *Prolegomena* and *Das Endspiel*), the first approaches to the subject are to be found in lectures on the drama of Christianity which Balthasar gave repeatedly from 1946/7 onwards.⁴⁵ Then in 1950 he spoke of "his long envisaged philosophy and theology of the dramatic (of *actio*, of event—this ultimately comes down again to the old problem of action and contemplation)." Two years later he was able to report: "After that [the commentary on St. Thomas] comes, at long last, the subject I have been longing to write about for years: *Theatrum Dei* (the theology of the theatre)." As with the Aesthetic, the beginning of his work on this second part of the trilogy was marked by illness. From January to March 1973 he

⁴⁴*Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*. Bd. III/I: *Im Raum der Metaphysik* (Einsiedeln, 1965), 492-551; Bd. III/2,1: *Alter Bund* (Einsiedeln, 1966), 199-282.

⁴⁵*Unser Auftrag*, 62, n. 3.

was "more or less completely ill, with high fevers, which leave one completely exhausted. All I could do was read a pile of plays in bed for the Prolegomena to the Dramatic. If possible, I would like to have finished with the Prolegomena by the autumn, because I ought to be getting back to the theology." In volume 2/2, he was able to bring in his theology of mission, and in volume 3, another favorite theme, which accompanied him throughout his life: eschatology. He was supposed at one stage to take over the eschatology volume in the Herder *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*. As it turned out, however, he was only able to publish short essays on this fascinating subject.⁴⁶ In 1954 he wrote: "Everything here is tied together as in a knot, but the knot is so tight that it is hard to disentangle."

The *Theologik* mattered to him less; indeed, he originally thought of not writing it at all. For the first volume, he fell back on a book which he had already produced in 1946: *Wahrheit*. That "First Book: Truth of the World," as it was subtitled, was supposed at that time to have been followed by a second, "The Truth of God." In the *Theologik*, this followed, in two volumes, the reprint of the 1946 book. What, at the beginning of his labors, Balthasar had not dared to hope for had become a reality: the trilogy was complete, with substantially more volumes than originally envisaged. The only volume which he had to abandon was the advertised concluding volume of the Aesthetic, *Ökumene*. This was so he could push ahead with the *Theodramatik*. At the urging of friends, he agreed to follow the trilogy with a summarizing *Epilog* (1987). In his will he laid down that manuscripts left unpublished at his death should be destroyed: he had published everything that was to be published (a sensible instruction, when one thinks of how posthumous works are treated!).

Although he published everything that was to be published, a few works that had been planned for years remained unwritten. "The book on obedience," which he had constantly talked about since the forties, was never written in that form. Its parts can be assembled from the *Theologie der Geschichte* (the obedience of the Son), the Old Testament volume of the Aesthetic (the steps of prophetic obedience), and

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 81f.

the *Christlicher Stand* (the obedience of the Christian), with orchestration coming from the numerous passages about obedience in other writings. It is less easy to form an idea of "Encounter with Asia." From 1957 onwards the plan for this book, foreshadowed by the translation of Jacques Cuttat's *Begegnung der Religionen*, kept coming up. Balthasar, who in the past had studied Indo-European philology and Sanskrit, knew more about Indian thought than was imagined by those struck by his criticism of eastern meditation techniques. The last issue of *Communio* which he planned and saw through to printing turned out to be on the subject of "Buddhism and Christianity." That was more than chance. In his final years, he had constantly pressed for work to be done on precisely this theme.

Many things were left undone, probably most of his publishing plans. The *Lectio Spiritualis* and *Christliche Meister* were closest to his heart. Two things in particular concerned him here: once again, the spiritual tradition of the Fathers of the Church, and then the idea of "a continuous German spirituality."

This was what preoccupied Goerres and Schlegel and the Romantics, but they knew too little. The role of the Jesuits from 1570 to 1770 is chiefly that of a foreign supremacy and a break in tradition. They have left almost *nothing*, in contrast to Luther, who was moved to the center, while Rhineland mysticism appears devalued and debilitated. What a scene of devastation! What an insoluble task! If only Wagner had been a Christian!

Expansion and simplification

Honors

In the last two decades of his life Balthasar became what he was already publicly regarded to be. After Adrienne's death, already close to retirement age, he did not for a moment entertain the thought of an *otium cum dignitate*. The publishing business was making more and more demands of him, and the last volume of *Herrlichkeit* was lying on his desk, unfinished. Translated into French, Italian, English, and Spanish, this work has determined the theological image which people have of Balthasar. But it has another feature too. Since its establishment in 1969 to the end of his life, Balthasar was a member of the Pope's International Theological Commission—although he

asked to be discharged from it. At the second Synod of Bishops in 1971, on the ministerial priesthood, he worked as one of the theological secretaries and drafted the document on priestly spirituality. Now he began to accumulate honor after honor. In the same year he received the Romano Guardini Prize of the Catholic Academy of Bavaria. Two years later he was made a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, and on his seventieth birthday the French Academy made him an *associé étranger*. He received the translation prize of the Foundation Hautviller in Paris, and the Gottfried Keller Prize of the Martin Bodmer Foundation in Zurich. In the fall of 1977, the first Balthasar symposium took place at the Catholic University of America in Washington, and from then on he was constantly being invited to the U.S.A., in 1980 to receive an honorary doctorate from the same university. In 1984 he was allowed to receive his highest honor, the International Paul VI Prize, from the hands of the Pope, and a year later, in honor of his eightieth birthday, a symposium was organized in Rome on "Adrienne von Speyr and her Ecclesial Mission." The nighttime celebration of his birthday at the Castel Sant'Angelo was overshadowed by the tragic death of his youngest nephew.

In 1987, in Innsbruck, he received his final honor: the Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Prize, the rounding off of a life whose secret passion had been music. In his speech of thanks he reminisced.

My youth was defined by music. My piano teacher was an old lady who had been a pupil of Clara Schumann. She introduced me to Romanticism. As a student in Vienna I delighted in the last of the Romantics—Wagner, Strauss, and especially Mahler. That all came to an end once I had Mozart in my ears. To this day he has never left those ears. In later life Bach and Schubert remained precious to me, but it was Mozart who was the immovable Pole Star, round which the other two circled (the Great and Little Bears).⁴⁷

But his public passion was something quite different. It shines through the dignified and measured progress of the trilogy—there cannot and must not be an unpassionate theology. And it breaks through, unrestrained, in the smaller works of Balthasar's final years. Constantly reprinted and translated into seven languages, these little books have carried

⁴⁷Innsbruck Address, 1.

Balthasar's theology out into the world—even more than the trilogy, before which many people stand back in reverence and amazement. The first of the little books came out when Adrienne was still alive. It began in 1963 with *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, a short flaring up of the fundamental idea of the trilogy, the positive counterpart to *Schleifung der Bastionen*. After the Council, the same passion breaks through in a less serene way. For twenty years Balthasar had committed himself to the idea that the center of the Church was to be found where most see her periphery: in her committed action on behalf of the world. Now Balthasar was to see openness to the world being misunderstood to mean adaptation to the world, catching up with the times. The center, the real heart of Christianity, was being forgotten, being lost altogether.

The Church, they say, to appear credible, must be in tune with the times. If taken seriously, that would mean that Christ was in tune with the times when he carried out his mission and died on the Cross, a scandal to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles. Of course, the scandal took place in tune with the times—at the favorable time of the Father, in the fullness of time, just when Israel was ripe, like fruit ready to burst, and the Gentiles were ready to receive it on their open soil. Modern is something Christ never was, and, God willing, never will be.⁴⁸

The former student chaplain dedicated the little book *Wer ist ein Christ?*, from which this passage is taken, to his friends from the Akademische Verbindung Renaissance. The tone is still sympathetic and conciliatory:

Thorough spring cleaning rarely succeeds unless the janitor or housewife takes a certain hectic pleasure in it. So we can make allowances for the emotional uplift affecting Christians today.⁴⁹

But the demands are uncompromising:

Failures, disappointments, set-backs, calumnies, contempt, and finally, as life's quintessence, major bankruptcy. This was Christ's daily bread and will always be the Church's fate in this world. Any man who wants to be a member of the Church must be prepared for such things, for no process of evolution will ever remove them.

⁴⁸*Wer ist ein Christ?* (Einsiedeln, 1965), 30f.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 29.

So all Christian engagement in the world leads to prayer. This is true for the laity as well as for secular institutes.

[The Church's] most essential forces—prayer, suffering, faithful obedience, readiness (perhaps unexploited), humility—elude all statistical analysis. So the correct approach is that of those secular communities (*instituta saecularia*) which reject a direct (statistically measurable) apostolate in favor of a simple presence in the dechristianized world (*présence au monde*). Other communities which use all available means to attain positions of secular and cultural power in order (so they claim) to help the Church merely injure it; they make themselves and the Church, not unjustifiably, odious in the eyes of others.⁵⁰

These last few sentences capture Balthasar's basic tone in his polemical writings. They were little understood. Those who thought superficially in the categories of right and left, conservative and progressive, saw in them an about-turn, a judgment which he, according to taste, either rejected or warmly accepted. Those who were in his line of fire put it down to the bitterness and insufficient information of a lonely and outdated man. But bitterness is never apparent in the texts, just sometimes a grim humor that comes close to sarcasm. The fact that these controversial books were put down on paper with such a sharp pen and with such visible delight in writing perhaps made them more hurtful than was necessary. Balthasar confined his most pointed polemic, though, to articles and book reviews, which he never allowed to be reprinted: "polemics ought not to be made eternal." Behind it all is background knowledge of every kind, as well as perhaps a too negative, injured view of the Church's situation, like that of his friend de Lubac, in addition to insufficient information about positive developments. Nevertheless, the unprejudiced reader of the polemical writings will find more balance in them than was visible to those who looked through the sieve of the media.

The "horn blast" of the *Bastionen* was followed by the "drum beat" of *Cordula*. To all intellectual experiments in theology it opposes the "decisive test" of the love which goes as far as martyrdom. Just as Kierkegaard's *Either-Or* became well-known through its "Diary of a Seducer," so *Cordula* became famous because of the dialogue between a Christian

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 105f.

and a well-intentioned commissar—a biting, post-conciliar satire. The whole thing was seen as polemic directed against Karl Rahner. In fact, it can be argued that Rahner's "anonymous Christians" (not invented by him) are merely a peg on which Balthasar hangs a more general critique of what, at least at the time, was a widespread attitude. Here we should say something about Balthasar's relations with Karl Rahner. They were never students together, though in the summer of 1939 they did collaborate on the outline of a dogmatics, which Rahner published in the first volume of his *Theological Investigations*. Then they had various kinds of literary quarrels. Each reproached the other for being humorless, and yet the mutual esteem was just as great. At the time of their sixtieth birthdays, which fell quite close, they expressed their mutual admiration and respect in a way that went far beyond mere politeness. Years before, when the first volume of the *Investigations* came out, Balthasar expressed this opinion:

This is surely the only book to justify today any kind of hope in this field. Seldom has the flame of theological *eros* climbed so high or so steeply. The closer he comes to finding himself, the more necessary it is for us to take him seriously and listen reverently to what he is saying. I am already looking forward to the volumes to come. I just hope that the Roman scalp-hunters don't finish him off first.

In 1969, three years after *Cordula*, he said again: "Rouquette's death has upset me. I hope Rahner lasts out. What would be next?" A few months later they began their occasionally controversial collaboration on the International Theological Commission. For all their mutual esteem, they never understood each other at a really deep level. Rahner's starting-point was Kant and Scholasticism, while Balthasar's was Goethe and the Fathers. They remain a contemporary monument to the diversity of theology.

Cordula was followed five years later by *Klarstellungen* (1971), with its eloquent subtitle, "On the Discernment of Spirits." It was published in paperback by Herder in order to reach a larger readership. *Der antirömische Affekt* was published in 1974, again as a Herder paperback. This was a "two months child": "Including reading, it was written between 15 October and 25 December. You can tell that." And yet this book contains Balthasar's ecclesiology *in nuce*. As is clear from its ironic subtitle ("How can the Papacy be integrated in the

Church as a whole?"), this must not be read in a simplistic way. In *Neue Klarstellungen* (1979) and *Kleine Fibel für verunsicherte Laien* (1980), Balthasar adopts a gentler tone. These are books of help and encouragement rather than polemics.

Parallel to these books of controversial theology, Balthasar published another series intended to lead the reader to the heart of Christianity. In the controversial books, he thundered against the *terribles simplificateurs*. In this other series he wanted to guide people to simplicity of faith—in and despite all the inevitable complexity of theology. Here too the starting-point was a controversy, and again predominantly with Rahner. It surfaced first of all, in a peaceful way, at the meetings of the International Theological Commission. The issue was pluralism. Does one have to find some kind of consensus from the diversity of theologies, a diversity already evident in the New Testament? Or has the unity already been given, from the beginning, in Christ, a unity which can be unfolded into diversity? *Einfaltungen. Auf Wegen Aspekte christlicher Einigung* (1969) and *Die Wahrheit ist symphonisch. Aspekte des christlichen Pluralismus* (1972) give examples of how from the Christian center "a tremendous panorama of freedom opens up! 'All things are yours' . . . the plurality of all the forms in the world and in history, including death and the future, is accessible to the Christian's thinking and acting, if indeed he surrenders himself with Christ to God."⁵¹ The next book, *Katholisch. Aspekte des Mysteriums* (1975), in a way takes the place of the missing ecumenism volume of the *Aesthetic* in the sense that it shows how the distinctively Catholic doctrines belong to the heart of Christianity. Finally, with *Christen sind einfältig* (1983), everything leads to a simplicity of faith which does not exclude the fullness.

At the end, there was one last controversy, with the left, but mainly with the right. It was a last controversy about the things which are truly last: hope beyond judgment and possible damnation. Here Balthasar's thought comes full circle. *Was dürfen wir hoffen?* (1986) and *Kleine Diskurs über die Hölle* (1987) not only go back to Origen's *apocatastasis* and Barth's doctrine of universal election and give them an interpretation which is defensible from a Catholic point of view,

⁵¹*Die Wahrheit ist symphonisch. Aspekte des christlichen Pluralismus* (Einsiedeln, 1972), 75.

they also take up again the concern of the *Apokalypse* to incorporate everything possible in redemption in Christ. Looking back in middle age at this first book of his, Balthasar wrote: "What a tricky job the angels will have on the last day? They will have to pick up God's truth in farflung places and surgically remove it from hearts where previously it had lived alongside darkness!"⁵²

So now everything was rounded off. His life's work was finished. Everything, or almost everything, he had wanted to write and publish had been published. He was able to look towards death with confidence: in fact, after his sister's death, he was happy that he too would "soon be allowed to go home."

The final years

Despite his apparently undiminished creative energy, Balthasar's final years were more and more difficult. Back in 1962 he wrote on one occasion: "I am often tempted to weariness, because the goal is so far off, but then I pull myself together and get going again." In the seventies the complaints become more specific:

Some help with the publishing would make everything easier. Without such help, the most basic things, time after time, just do not get done. But this is now the form of my life. How can I change it? (1971). With all the secondary chores (radio, lectures, endless mail), I scarcely get to read and work. And yet I would like to make progress with this "necessary Dramatic" (1974). I am not making much progress with my work. Too many odd jobs on all sides. The review on top of the publishing work is the last straw (1976). I'm free in principle, yet in practice less and less free for myself, because I am at everyone's beck and call—and you can't say No to everything (1976).

Then, in 1977, came a longer illness, and in 1978 he says again:

Work here is becoming increasingly difficult. Mail is growing immeasurably, visitors and so on too. And there is no point in getting away if you don't have any books. So I crawl along very slowly with the Dramatic.

⁵²Kleiner Lageplan, 18.

And again in 1979:

Nothing new here. I am almost completely tied up with lectures and articles of every kind. This prevents me from steering a straight course and getting on with my Dramatic. *Tant pis et tant mieux*—it probably won't be much good.

In 1980/81 came an operation for cataracts on both eyes, after which he had to learn "new sight." In 1983 he says again: "The number of what, for an old man like me, are very taxing retreats and other courses is increasing, and the mountains of mail have hardly subsided."

The size of his mail and the number of his visitors are an indication of how, in these final years, Balthasar's sphere of life had widened. Three new circles of friends were being built up. First, there was his friendship with Don Luigi Giussani and his *Communione e Liberazione* movement, in which Balthasar saw something similar to what he had been striving for with his own communities. He dedicated his 1971 book *In Gottes Einsatz leben* to them. It was also meant to be a word of warning, along the lines of what he had already set out in *Wer ist ein Christ*.

After the humbling of hierarchical triumphalism, there still remains a more subtle, spiritual triumphalism, the triumphalism found in the ideology of communities or groups. . . . The humility of small groups is the Church's greatest need today, but it is also a great danger. On the one hand, there is the temptation to be too involved in the world; on the other hand, there is the temptation of an enclosed autonomy. The only solution is openness to God's revelation in its unabbreviated Catholicity.⁵³

The second circle of friends consisted of the doctoral students and young priests who from the sixties onwards had been working on Balthasar's theology. Now more than forty dissertations have been written. The first two were submitted in 1970 in Rome and Milan. Gladly and tirelessly, Balthasar always gave them every conceivable kind of information. He was somewhat surprised that so much academic research could be extracted from his totally unacademic work (and somewhat saddened that no one dared to give his ideas

⁵³*In Gottes Einsatz leben* (Einsiedeln, 1971), 104.

further development). He praised the finished work with perhaps excessive selflessness and did all he could to help them into print. Many of these doctoral students remained his lasting friends.

The third circle of friends, the widest in scope, came to him through the journal *Communio*. Year after year he organized the small meeting of the various editions in Basel. Year after year it was he who was the undisputed central reference-point of the larger international meeting. He made stimulating suggestions about each of the themes proposed, pointed out difficulties, and was able to name suitable authors—whether living or from the past. Only the friends themselves know of the trouble he took to build up and hold together this “fellowship” (*communio!*) of the twelve editorial teams from very different cultural backgrounds. Only they too can tell of the countless conversations on the fringe of the meetings.

It was after his return from the 1988 international editorial meeting in Madrid, which was preceded by a symposium on his theology, that news reached Balthasar of his appointment as a cardinal. Though tired and ill again, he this time accepted, out of obedience to the Pope, what to him was an embarrassing honor. He also undertook the journey to Rome to be measured for his cardinal's robes (which, as previously with his theologian's soutane, he would have left in Rome). But he knew in his heart that Heaven had other plans. “Those above,” he wrote to a friend, “seem to have a different plan.” Death came gently upon him. He more than once had to see those closest to him suffer an agony lasting months—“a death with the drop counter.” But he himself was allowed to pass away in a moment and while he was still fully active. It happened as he was preparing to celebrate morning Mass. Like his father St. Ignatius, he was alone and unnoticed. The date was 26 June 1988, just two days before his elevation as a cardinal. In his study of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, he had once remarked: “Who can die? The person who finds it hardest is perhaps the one whose consciousness is alert, whose self-control has penetrated the deepest fibers of his soul. . . .”⁵⁴ Death came gently to him. On his desk lay, completed, the

⁵⁴*Schwestern im Geist. Thérèse von Lisieux und Elisabeth von Dijon* (Einsiedeln, 1970), 105.

manuscript of his annual Christmas gift to his friends: *unless you become like this child*. That is his true legacy.

John

How can one sum up in a few words a life so rich, work so abundant? Balthasar gave the name “John” to his most important foundations, to the “center of his work”: the Community of St. John and the Johannesverlag. It was not the name of his patron saint. That was St. John the Baptist, “the friend of the Bridegroom” (John 3:29), together with the valiant martyr-soldier Ursus (the bear!). No, by “John” he meant the beloved disciple. At the end of the retreats he gave to students in the forties, he would also give an exposition of the last chapter of St. John's Gospel—with such an expressive tone of voice that it still rings in one's ears today: “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” Twenty years later he put it down on paper:

The two of them run “together.” That is the first thing to say. It is an indispensable truth which is not invalidated by the second point, namely, that love, in its more unrestrained way, “runs ahead,” while office, which has many things to consider, reaches its destination later. Love sees what can be seen (from outside), but lets office go in first. Office looks closely at everything (including what is not visible from outside) and, from the position of the napkin which had been on his head, reaches a kind of *nihil obstat*. Office lets love go in, so that love (by seeing the signs, by seeing what Peter has discovered?) may reach faith . . . Peter has his task as servant, the rest is not his affair. It is not his business to know exactly where the boundaries between the official Church and the Church of love are to be found. The Church of love will “remain” until the Lord comes again, but how and where, only the Lord knows. . . . The last thing said to the servant Peter, the last word of the Lord in the Gospel, is the watchword for the Church and theology in every age: “What is that to you?”⁵⁵

Balthasar saw his mission to be the Johannine Church, which both runs ahead of the Petrine and gives it precedence. The fact that running ahead and giving precedence may each be prominent at different times just shows the unity of the mission. Both are only possible with the attitude of the beloved disciple. Of love not much can be said, though

⁵⁵*Theologie der drei Tage* (Einsiedeln, 1969), 190-192.

Balthasar included it in the title of his best known book. In human terms, love showed itself in the way he preferred "fellowship" (*communio*), indeed friendship, to structures and organization. It shone through his theological *eros*, in his wonder at *id quo majus cogitari nequit*, but also in his jealous protection of the prerogatives of God. And it constantly fed itself, unnoticed by the world and even by friends, on the "silence of the Word."⁵⁶—*Translated by John Saward* □

⁵⁶*Die Stille des Wortes. Dürers Weg mit Hieronymus* (Einsiedeln, 1979).