

INTRODUCTION:
BEING AS AN IMAGE OF DIVINE
LOVE: A SYMPOSIUM ON
HOMO ABYSSUS



In April 2019, The John Paul II Institute in Washington D.C. hosted a symposium to celebrate the long-awaited translation into English of *Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being*, by Ferdinand Ulrich, a Catholic philosopher whose principal work was written from the 1960s to the 1980s, and who had a significant influence on the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Ulrich's thought is best appreciated as a speculative development of Aquinas's metaphysics of creation, illuminated in a distinctive way by the central mysteries of the faith, and worked out in deep dialogue with modern philosophy, especially Hegel and Heidegger. Because of the special difficulty of Ulrich's thought and challenge of his language, the speakers at the symposium sought to introduce some of the fundamental ideas of his work and to help make that work available to a wider audience; and because of the importance of Ulrich's metaphysics to the intellectual tradition represented by this journal, *Communio* decided to gather in the present issue a selection of the texts from the symposium and to supplement them with other reflections on Ulrich's work.

In "Receiving the Gift of Being: Ferdinand Ulrich and the Work of the John Paul II Institute," **Antonio López** presents an overview of Ulrich's contribution to a metaphysics of the person that is tacitly informed by Christ's revelation of the

Father. “In *Homo Abyssus* Ulrich unfolds how love belongs to the structure of the gift of being—both in its creative coming to be from nothing and in the ongoing existence of each finite creature—and presents man as the one who is tasked with recollecting and co-achieving this gift in loving answer to its divine Giver.” López situates Ulrich among his fellow Thomists and points to the relevance of Ulrich’s thought for the work of the John Paul II Institute.

Stefan Oster examines Ulrich’s understanding and practice of pedagogy as fruitful dialogue between an I and Thou in “Freely to Give: Ferdinand Ulrich as Teacher and Spiritual Father.” The good teacher, according to Ulrich, both presupposes the student’s own given capacity to attain truth and fosters this through giving *himself* in the word he offers his student. “The goal of all communication, all teaching, is thus either explicitly or implicitly not only to convey information to the student, but always also at the same time to enable the recipient’s ability freely to think through for himself what has been communicated.”

Marine de la Tour, in “The Light of the Gift in *Homo Abyssus*,” considers how a logic of gift stands behind the whole of Ulrich’s philosophical undertaking. This comes to expression already in his metaphysics of creation, according to which the finite substance is sufficiently granted to itself and affirmed in its integrity by God with the definitive bestowal of being. Arguing that this logic of gift presents a radical alternative to dialectical thinking, de la Tour demonstrates how openness to the gift’s radiance empowers reason to embrace reality. “What liberates from this dialectical ontotheology is the humility of reason that recognizes the determination of the concreteness of what is.”

In “Ferdinand Ulrich’s ‘Metaphysics as Reenactment,’” **Martin Bieler** inquires into Ulrich’s approach to any philosophical interlocutor whose thought exhibits a failure to receive being as the gift it is. How is the philosopher to respond to one whose worldview obstructs the human vocation to give thanks? Bieler shows how Ulrich confronts philosophical aberrations dramatically—that is, by striving in hope to lead error back to the truth it distorts but can never utterly eclipse, and thus by representatively sharing from below in God’s liberation of those who have closed themselves off to being’s gift-character. “The metaphysics of reenactment, which wants to go back to the roots of love in

this realm of estrangement and brokenness, can only be a kind of philosophical discipleship in substitutionary atonement.”

D. C. Schindler, in “The Word as the Center of Man’s Onto-Dramatic Task,” reflects on the bearing that human naming and conversation have on the cosmos as a whole. Drawing on what Augustine and Aquinas taught concerning the word as the seal of understanding, Ulrich brings to light how speech not only expresses, but even co-creatively effects, the meaning of all things. “In our speech, we allow the world, as it were, to show forth and achieve its truth, its goodness, and its beauty.” As Schindler demonstrates, conversation is thus essential to man’s calling to be the steward of creation.

William Desmond enters into Ulrich’s critical engagement with Hegel in “Being as Image of Divine Love: Between Ferdinand Ulrich and G. W. F. Hegel.” Desmond explores how Ulrich accounts for many of the truths Hegel recognizes—the kenotic pattern of creation, for instance—while utterly resituating Hegel’s insights by beginning from an understanding of being as love, or as the plenitude of actuality given away by God for nothing. “The divine movement of creation in terms of the hyperbole of the agapeic suggests a movement, not from lack to fulfillment, but from the full, the overfull, into the gift of endowed being qua finite, and to fullness, overfullness again.”

In “The *Analogia Entis* in Erich Przywara and Ferdinand Ulrich: Toward a More Catholic Metaphysics,” **John Betz** compares two of the twentieth-century philosophers who had the most decisive influence on Hans Urs von Balthasar. Betz illustrates the philosophical emphasis of each thinker by examining how Przywara and Ulrich differently interpreted Thomas Aquinas on the real distinction between being and essence as this bears on the relation between God and the world. In his judgment, “Przywara gives us a greater sense of divine transcendence; Ulrich gives us a profounder sense of divine immanence.” Far from opposing Przywara’s sense of reverence before God and Ulrich’s sense of intimacy with God, however, Betz argues that the tension between these is positively fruitful, and that the two thinkers should be read as companions.

Erik van Versendaal, in “*Plenitudo Fontalis*: Love’s Groundless Yes and the Grateful Originality of Nature,” explores the genuine sense in which the caused, finite substance

originates from within itself. The creature's absolute grounding-in-itself is, as Ulrich gives us to see, the very expression of God's perfect responsibility as Giver of being and of the gratuity of his creative act. "God dwells at the heart of the creature through the kenotic likeness of his abyssal goodness in such a way that he thereby positively elevates and releases the creature into its own self-standing."

In "Thinking the 'Nothing' of Being: Ferdinand Ulrich on Transnihilation," **Rachel M. Coleman** elucidates one of the most fundamental principles of Ulrich's metaphysics, the nonsubsistence of being. As Coleman argues, only if being is nothing can God grant the world the gift of its own wholeness. "Love desires that another be, which means it is love's nature to give itself away so that another may be freely." □

—The Editors