

THE CHURCH AS PERSON IN THE THEOLOGY OF HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

• Stephan Ackermann •

“Within the space of the Church, persons do not exist as unrelated atoms, but they mutually pervade each other, analogously to the *perichoresis* of the Persons of the Trinity.”

It is quite common to hear the Church spoken of as an acting subject or person. For example, it is said that *the* Church should denounce more forcefully the dangers of genetic engineering; that *she* should catch up with the times; that *she* should reach out more to the people; that *she* should not conform to the *Zeitgeist*, and so forth. Nor is this personal conception foreign to ecclesial documents. Take, for example, the documents of Vatican II, which emphasize that *the* Church has a right to freedom, champions the dignity of man’s calling, and exhorts her sons and daughters to purification and renewal, so that the sign of Christ may shine more brightly over the face of the Church.¹ In the context of the Great Jubilee of 2000, Pope John Paul II spoke of the Church’s need for a “serious examination of conscience” and “purification of memory”² with respect to the sins committed during her history.

¹See *Dignitatis Humanae*, 13; *Gaudium et Spes*, 21; *Lumen Gentium*, 15.

²See the Apostolic Encyclical *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 36, and the Bull of Indiction *Incamationis Mysterium*, 11.

But the person of the Church is present above all in the language of the liturgy: there she is *Mother Church*, whom the “Exsultet” calls to rejoice, for the darkness of death has vanished. In the *Preface* for the Dedication of a Church, the Church is praised as the one chosen by the heavenly Father as the *bride* of his Son. To take a further example, in the third Eucharistic prayer the community gathered together for the Eucharist prays to become increasingly “*one Body and one Spirit*,” that is, *one person*, in Christ.

The personal conception of the Church does not play as central a role in today’s ecclesiology as it did in that of the first half of the twentieth century. The manifold reasons that have contributed to this state of affairs will not be examined in detail here. Instead, the present article will attempt to sketch an outline of the personal understanding of the Church found in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. He is, without a doubt, one of contemporary theology’s most eloquent spokesmen for the conviction that the Church is not simply a “something,” but rather a “someone.”

1. Balthasar’s understanding of person

According to Balthasar, the forging of the Western concept of person was essentially theological. To be sure, the Greek and Latin concepts of *prosopon*, *hypostasis*, and *persona* already existed at the time of the trinitarian and christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. Nevertheless, the concept of person carries the indelible stamp of the theological discussion from which it emerged. Balthasar’s concern is to “trace the concept of ‘person’ back to its origins,”³ that is, to Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity.

As is well known, the concept of person figures in opposite ways in Christology and trinitarian theology, respectively. On the one hand, it designates the unity of the two natures in Christ, while on the other, it points to the trinitarian, personal distinction of the one divine essence. If, therefore, the christological and trinitarian

³Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ (=Persons in Christ)* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 202; see also 149–250, as well as *Homo creatus est*: vol. 5 of *Skizzen zur Theologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1986), 93–102.

concepts of person are not to be juxtaposed, but meaningfully related, they will require a mediating principle. Balthasar finds this principle in the notion of the divine *mission* [Sendung]. The context of this mission is that “God addresses a conscious subject, tells him *who* he is and what he means to the eternal God of truth,” and, at the same time, “shows him the *purpose* of his existence.”⁴

For *Christology* this means that the personal identity of Jesus is identical with his consciousness of being the Son-sent-from-the-Father. This “absolute” and “universal mission-consciousness”⁵ gives rise to the unheard-of claim that Jesus makes in the Gospel. In Jesus’ divine mission the theodramatic category of “role” finds its ultimate fulfillment: the role that the Son accepts, the role of exegete of God and Redeemer of mankind, is not interchangeable with any other. This role encompasses his entire person. In Christ, role, mission, and person are one.

Balthasar’s conception finds its *trinitarian* anchor in the fact that, as St. Thomas explains, the “mission” (*missio*) extends the inner-trinitarian *processio*, that is, the Son’s divine procession from the Father, into the economy of salvation.⁶ The *missio* of the Son is a “modality”⁷ of his eternal *processio*. If we add to this the idea that the processions constitute the Persons of the Trinity (as relations), the concept of mission offers itself as a mediation between the christological and trinitarian concepts of person.

In order to arrive now at the *anthropological* implications of this concept of person, we must first consider the temporal dimension of Christ’s mission. Of course, Jesus enjoys complete identity between his self-knowledge and his knowledge of his mission, “or (what comes to the same thing), Jesus’ consent to the Father’s wish to send him,” in “the unanimous salvific decision on the part of the Trinity.”⁸ Nevertheless, the reality of the Incarnation requires that Jesus grow in his understanding both of himself and of his mission by way of an interior learning. “A paradoxical unity of *being* (a *being* that

⁴*Persons in Christ*, 207.

⁵Cf. *ibid.*, 165f.

⁶Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 43 ad 3, as well as *Persons in Christ*, 154, 157, 511; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4: *The Action* (= *The Action*) (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 319f.

⁷*Persons in Christ*, 201, 226.

⁸*Ibid.*, 187.

has always been) and becoming”⁹ therefore subsists within Jesus’ existence-in-mission. It is essential for Balthasar’s understanding of the Trinity that the mission “is not open to [Jesus’] gaze in its entirety; it is to be implemented step by step according to the Father’s instructions (in the Holy Spirit). The decisive final stage is not within the Son’s power at all.”¹⁰ The “economic” form in which Jesus must receive his mission is *obedience*. The privileged “place” where the Son encounters anew the will of the Father is his prayer in the Holy Spirit.¹¹ The cross, finally, is the “hour” (cf. Jn 2:4; 12:23, 27; 13:1, 17:1) in which Jesus’ entire life is concentrated, and his mission comes to its fulfillment (cf. Jn 19:30). This “hour” is at one and the same time “both disaster [Untergang] and the new dawn [Aufgang].”¹²

The anthropological implications that emerge from this christological and trinitarian grounding of the concept of person are now evident: if being a person coincides essentially with a mission to be accepted from God, and if this has happened “archetypically”¹³ and completely in Jesus Christ, then anyone else can be called “person” only in terms of Christ, by virtue of some relationship to, and derivation from, him. The total identity between consciousness of self and consciousness of mission in Jesus opens up “room . . . for others to have analogous, unique, personal missions. These missions do not, as in Christ’s case, constitute an *a priori synthesis* with [one’s] person, but are synthesized *a posteriori* along with the created, chosen persons [*Geistpersonen*].”¹⁴ The freedom of the spiritual subject plays a decisive role here: the mission can be embraced or rejected. Where it is embraced in freedom, it is followed by an increasing “personalization” of the subject, an “innermost awakening to oneself” inasmuch as the subject receives the ultimate meaning of his existence from God: “Person is the ‘new name’ by which God addresses me (Rv 2:17).”¹⁵

⁹Ibid., 157.

¹⁰Ibid., 170.

¹¹Cf. *ibid.*, 165-173, 183-191.

¹²*The Action*, 237.

¹³*Persons in Christ*, 207.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 208.

Balthasar formulates this concept in the following theodramatic terms: “As far as all of us are concerned, however, . . . our ‘acting’ in the acting area, that is, Christ, consists in bringing our innate nonidentity into an ever-closer approximation to perfect identity. This is the purpose of our following of Christ, in whom identity reigns. In other words, we are to assimilate our own “I” more and more completely to our God-given mission and to discover in this mission our own identity, which is both personal and social.”¹⁶

By embracing his mission, man is enabled to pass from a spirit-given *individuum* to a unique, immutable *person*. Man is not *eo ipso* a person (in Balthasar’s full, theological sense), but instead *becomes* a person to the degree that he accepts his God-given mission (within the universal mission and personality of Christ).

2. Realsymbolic persons

Persons in this sense are above all the saints. Figuring prominently among the saints are in turn the persons who were close to Jesus: the forerunner, John the Baptist; the Twelve, in particular Peter and John; and also Paul who, called only after the Resurrection, was nonetheless counted as an Apostle along with the Twelve. First among all the saints is Mary, the obedient handmaid and mother of the Lord.

What binds together all of these people around Jesus is the fact that each embraced and carried out the personal mission that fell to him within the context of Christ’s mission. They were thus able to move from being isolated individuals to being persons, each with his own distinctive human and theological profile. Another point of significance: because these persons share in a particularly close way in Christ’s universal mission, they are to a certain extent themselves universalized.¹⁷ Not only do they receive an individual profile, they also experience a simultaneous opening and broadening of their person. Increasing personalization is accompanied by progressive “socialization.” In embracing his mission, each person becomes ever

¹⁶Ibid., 270.

¹⁷Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2: *Spouse of the Word* (= *Spouse of the Word*) (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 182-183.

more himself, though not simply for his own sake. Balthasar speaks of a veritable “deprivatization”: “If the mission is accepted and carried out, it de-privatizes the ‘I,’ causing the latter’s fruitful influence (through grace) to expand into the whole ‘Mystical Body’ of Christ. In this way, there is a mutual interpenetration of the diverse missions and the persons who identify themselves with them: this is what is meant by the *communio sanctorum*.”¹⁸ These persons are not, however, either “functionalized” or “depersonalized” in the process. The (seeming) paradox emerges that persons, while growing increasingly less private, are all the while becoming more deeply personal. Indeed, in a certain way they become super-personal, paradigmatic, prototypical, or archetypical¹⁹ for all who, in faith, recognize and embrace their mission from God.

The origin of the Church, then, does not lie in abstract ideas or principles to which people somehow adapt themselves after the fact, but rather in concrete persons whose lived-out, divine missions have allowed them to become ecclesial principles themselves—*realsymbols* in and for the Church.²⁰

Balthasar refers repeatedly to four fundamental missions or experiences of the Church: 1. The *marian* mission of handmaidently being-at-the-disposal-of-the-other [Über-sich-verfügen-Lassen]; 2. The *petrine* mission as the embodiment of the objective and official dimension of the Church; 3. The *johannine* mission of a love for Christ that mediates between the marian and the petrine dimensions; and finally, 4. the *pauline* mission, which presents in its purity the experience of “Catholic unity in the midst of diversity”²¹ (between sinners and the righteous, between office and personal discipleship,

¹⁸*Persons in Christ*, 349.

¹⁹Cf. *Spouse of the Word*, 186, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press: 1982), 350f, 564.

²⁰Cf. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Maria—Kirche im Ursprung* (=Kirche im Ursprung) (Freiburg, 1997), 158. In the realm of the Church “[t]here are no abstractions . . . for everything is based on the actions of the tri-personal God and on the answers of men that are brought about by grace, and the sphere that is formed and opened up through the encounter in love between the Word of God and faith is the Church as communion of saints” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit* (=Creator Spirit) [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993], 380).

²¹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 295.

between Jews and Gentiles, wisdom and the foolishness of the cross, etc.). These four fundamental missions cannot be reduced to a single category (although, as we will see, the Marian encompasses the others), nor are they separated by any neat boundaries. Rather, Balthasar understands the relationship among the four after the manner of “a mutual osmosis,” analogously to the *circumincessio* (*perichoresis*) among the Persons of the Trinity, in their relative opposition. Insofar as persons participate in Christ’s mission, they are taken up into the inner-trinitarian processions themselves.²² Through this participation they become *realsymbols* of the unity within difference of the ecclesial *communio*.

These great figures within the christological constellation have a super-personality that opens up the possibility for a host of additional personal missions, which take their place within the space marked out by the four primary missions (which, in turn, exist within the “playing field” opened up by Christ). The effective range of these further missions can vary greatly: there can be extraordinary missions, whose uniqueness and distinctive stamp are plain to see for the Church and world. There can be missions that remain hidden, but nonetheless have far-reaching effects. There can be ordinary, less grandiose Christian missions, the more so since the efficacy of one’s life task is always dependent upon the readiness with which one accepts it.²³

We see here the perfection of what the Bible calls “discipleship”: When a man is obedient to the call to follow, when he gives his “‘Yes’ of faith,”²⁴ he is lifted out of his human (and sinful) narrowness and is enlarged to the dimensions of the mission of Christ and the Church. For Balthasar, there is no system for explaining how man’s expropriation of himself and his appropriation by God is simultaneous with a discovery of his own personal self. This can be grasped only as a theological paradox.²⁵ The result is what, since the time of Origen and Ambrose, has traditionally been called the *anima ecclesiastica*. In the “soul conformed to the Church,”

²²Cf. *Spouse of the Word*, 171f; *The Office of Peter*, 136f; *Kirche im Ursprung*, 158; *Spirit and Institution*, 203.

²³Cf. *Persons in Christ*, 280.

²⁴Hans Urs von Balthasar, *In the Fullness of the Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 81.

²⁵Cf. *Spouse of the Word*, 168f.

consciousness of the divine mission takes precedence over the private I:

[T]he more selflessly and un-egotistically a Christian serves and commits himself to God's work in the world in Christ, the more he is at the disposal of God, the Church, and his neighbor, the more his heart is open to the needs of others, the more Christ's desire to save all becomes important to him, even outweighing his own personal salvation and well-being, the more universally his prayer to God includes all humanity, even the most 'reprobate,' the more he presents himself to God and places his life, and perhaps his death, if necessary, at the disposal of the saving will of God, by that much more will he be fruitful in the kingdom of grace . . . by that much more will his existence become universal and accessible to all; by that much more will he grow to the dimensions of the Church and identify himself with her intentions, becoming, as the Fathers say, a "man of the Church," an "*anima ecclesiastica*."²⁶

With respect to the consciousness of the individual, this means that there is a point where a "thinking *with* the Church" [*sentire cum ecclesia*] becomes the "thinking *of* the Church" [*sentire ecclesiae*], and "love *for* the Church" becomes the "love *of* the Church." The consciousness of the individual and the consciousness of the Church interpenetrate, even though they are not confused, just as the individual is not dissolved into a greater whole. The dynamic of growing socialization in no way eliminates the point where the individual is alone with himself. On the contrary: to the degree that acceptance of one's personal mission involves a "decision from the depths" regarding one's life, it can be born only from the solitude of the I.²⁷

²⁶*Kirche im Ursprung*, 121. Adrienne von Speyr writes on the ecclesialization of the individual: "The personal, in the path of discipleship, takes on increasingly objective and ecclesial features." It is as if "he who loves the Lord . . . had to manifest features which are no longer his own, but rather recall the Lord from afar and somehow allow the Father to recognize the Son in the face of his disciples. This given countenance, the face of discipleship, is the objective countenance of the Church" (Adrienne von Speyr, *Kostet und Seht: Ein theologisches Lesebuch*, selected and edited by Hans Urs von Balthasar [Einsiedeln and Trier, 1988], 327; see also 338).

²⁷*Spirit and Institution*, 253, 294.

If, in the soul conformed to the Church, there exists not only a *sentire cum ecclesia*, but indeed a *sentire ecclesiae*, then it becomes clear that there can be individual persons whose inward attitude enables them to act as the Church, *in persona ecclesiae*, as Augustine and the Fathers say.²⁸ Peter, for example, stands *in persona ecclesiae* when, despite his horror, he allows Jesus to wash his feet, thus turning all worldly hierarchy (master/slave, God/man, saint/sinner) (Jn 13:6-10) on its head. Mary of Bethany, who in her “contemplative” attitude listens to the Lord and anoints his feet “against the day of his burial” (Jn 12:1-8), embodies the faithful, loving Church in her “Yes” to the way of Jesus—a “Yes” that is “fundamentally open *a priori*, disposing itself of nothing but holding itself ready in all things and allowing itself to be formed.”²⁹ *Personam ecclesiae gerens*, Mary Magdalene is prepared to let the Resurrected Lord ascend to the Father (Jn 20:11-18) instead of holding him to herself; ready, too, to announce to the brethren the good news of Easter and to experience the joy it contains.

3. *Mary: the personal Church's origin*

Particular attention is reserved for Mary: she is, according to Balthasar, the “Church in origin” [*Kirche im Ursprung*] and its intact personal core. Building on what has gone before, it is easy to see why this is so.

In her unconditional “Yes” to the Incarnation of the Son of God in her womb, Mary embraced her personal mission perfectly, and so became a unique theological person. Obviously, Mary pronounces this “Yes” only analogously to, and derivatively from, that of the Son (in whom mission and person are eternally one). Her unqualified “Yes” is made possible by the fact that she is conceived without original sin (*immaculata conceptio*): in other words, due to her (christologically and soteriologically) unique grace of “pre-redemption” and preservation through the cross of Christ, her readiness for faith in, and obedience to, the will of God is not diminished through sin. Because Mary is thus equal to her vocation as *Theotokos*, she

²⁸See *Creator Spirit*, 220-226.

²⁹*Creator Spirit*, 225.

becomes the “personal center” of the Church, the “fulfillment of the idea of the Church,”³⁰ the “realsymbol”³¹ of the Church.

According to Balthasar, then, the Church (naturally not in the institutional sense) first arises not from the calling of the apostles, but rather already from the Incarnation of God in the Virgin’s womb. The “primordial cell” of the Church is the chamber in Nazareth, indeed, is Mary herself. In her acceptance of the divine task, Mary becomes not only the primordial image of the Church as a whole, but the type of each individual *anima ecclesiastica* as well.

4. “Who is the Church?”

Who, then, is the Church? Balthasar himself explicitly asks this question in *Sponsa Verbi*, the second volume of his *Skizzen zur Theologie* [Explorations in Theology],³² and he addresses it again and again throughout his work with a breathtaking inner consistency. The most succinct answer is the response Balthasar gives to the question in his 1965 overview of his work. The question *Who is the Church?* is answered there in a single sentence:

the Church in her deepest reality is the unity of those who, gathered and formed by the immaculate and therefore limitless assent of Mary, which through grace has the form of Christ, are prepared to let the saving will of God take place in themselves and for all their brothers.³³

At another point Balthasar employs for the same discussion the striking image of “widening, interpenetrating ripples,” that appear in the water

when, for example, someone throws in a handful of pebbles. If there is a larger stone, it sends its ripples through the others without destroying them, even as it is also affected by the other smaller stones in its own sphere How far the effect of the

³⁰*Spouse of the Word*, 176–177. Also see *Kirche im Ursprung*, 107.

³¹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions. On the Church in This Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 40; *Spouse of the Word*, 310; *Persons in Christ*, 333.

³²See *Spouse of the Word*, 143–191.

³³Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 63.

ripples spreads in each case . . . depends on two factors: the “size” of each mission and the quality of the answering reception . . . among all the circles the greatest is Mary’s, whose radius extends through all the others and encloses them in itself; she is, in other words, co-extensive with the Church, insofar as the Church is the “Bride without spot or wrinkle.”³⁴

What this means is that within the space of the Church, persons do not exist as unrelated atoms, but mutually pervade each other, analogously to the *perichoresis* of the Persons of the Trinity. This becomes possible to the degree that persons in the Church open themselves to Christ and, in him, to the whole triune life, and thus also to each other. In their openness to God, persons are transformed at their deepest level by the trinitarian mode of life, which is proexistent through and through, as we see in the *pro nobis* that characterizes the mission of Jesus on behalf of man. This being-for-another in grace can expand so far (e.g., in the saints) that it becomes “mutual osmosis” or “circumincersion” in faith and good works (culminating in the “exchange of merits”).³⁵

In sum: Balthasar’s theological understanding of the Church as person does not involve some kind of “ecclesial hypostasis,” located somewhere next to or above the concrete community of believers, nor mere pure theological or spiritual poetry. On the contrary: to speak of the Church in personal terms is to capture the reality of ecclesiology. This reality is the particular unity of the Church, which is not a unity of monism, but of “perichoresis.” It is thus inconceivable without personal distinction. Balthasar’s personal understanding of the Church weaves together the unity and distinction, identity and difference of ecclesial *communio* in the closest possible way.³⁶

At its most profound level, the personal understanding of the Church is nothing other than the ecclesiological concretization of

³⁴*Kirche im Ursprung*, 122, 125.

³⁵See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Communio: A Programme,” *Communio* 1 (1972): 3–12; *Spirit and Institution*, 203; *Kirche im Ursprung*, 158; Speyr, *Kostet und Seht*, 352f; and the related material in Henri de Lubac: *Glauben aus der Liebe*, trans. from French to German by Hans Urs von Balthasar (Einsiedeln, 1992), 289–311.

³⁶Further confirmation is found in the biblical and patristic use of Church symbolism. For a detailed treatment see Stephan Ackermann, *Kirche als Person. Zur ekklesiologischen Relevanz des personal-symbolischen Verständnisses der Kirche* (Würzburg, 2001), esp. 11–45, 213–290.

the words of Jesus: “that they may all be one even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world might believe that thou hast sent me” (Jn 17:21).—*Translated by Emily Rielley.* □

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