

# ETERNAL HAPPENING: GOD AS AN EVENT OF LOVE

• Antonio López •

“God is an *event* of love.”

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## *Introduction*

In order to ponder anew the mystery of love, without which man’s “life remains senseless” and “incomprehensible,”<sup>1</sup> I would like to appeal in this essay to Balthasar’s understanding of God as an “eternal happening.” This insight attempts to bring together what the Triune God reveals of himself in Jesus Christ: he reveals himself as love (1 Jn 4:16), and as a love that is both an eternal being (*esse*) and an eternal event (*Ereignis, Geschehen*).<sup>2</sup> In Christ, man has come to learn that love is not a transient emotion, but rather the mystery that encompasses all of being: from the moment when there was nothing but God (Gn 1:1) to the present instant in which man lives out his existence (2 Cor 5:14–15). The essence of being is love. Everything and everyone finds its proper place within this eternal mystery. At the same time, the Incarnate Word has disclosed that the mystery of love that constitutes us (Jn 1:3; Col 1:15–20) is pure gift of himself. Divine love is an ever-new gift of himself to himself (*Hingabe*) and an undeserved gift of himself to us (Eph 2:4; Rom 8:32). God is an *event* of love.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, no. 10.

<sup>2</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory (=TD)*, vol. 5: *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 67.

<sup>3</sup>The centrality of this concept in Balthasar’s thought is indicated by, among others, Gerard F. O’Hanlon, S.J., *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs*

To better perceive the richness of Balthasar's proposal, this article has been divided into five parts. After an introductory philosophical analysis of the term "event," which indicates the main characteristics of this complex term, attention shifts to the person of Christ in order to delineate what he reveals of the "eventful nature" of God.<sup>4</sup> The third part of the paper attempts to elucidate a notion of person that is fitting for the portrayal of the divine love Christ revealed as an agapic threefold donation. This understanding of the divine hypostases will then enable us in the fourth part to approach the richness indicated by the mysterious unity of *esse* and event. This section shows in what sense the divine being is "ever-greater." The final section offers some remarks on the implications for human existence that emerge from this understanding of God as event.

### *1. A preliminary approximation*

In our common parlance, the term "event" stands for "the possible or factual happening of anything."<sup>5</sup> The association of

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von Balthasar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Karl J. Wallner, "Ein trinitarisches Strukturprinzip in der Trilogie Hans Urs von Balthasars?" *Theologie und Philosophie* 71 (1996): 532–546; Guy Mansini, "Balthasar and the Theodramatic Enrichment of the Trinity," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 499–519; Stephen Fields, S.J., "The Singular as Event: Postmodernism, Rahner, and Balthasar," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (2003): 93–111; Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar. A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 53–64.

<sup>4</sup>On the importance of the category of event see, among others, Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); id., "Postscript to 'What is Metaphysics?'" in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 231–238. Jean-Luc Marion offers an interesting analysis of the meaning of "event," which, in contrast to the one presented here, is geared towards illustrating how the given phenomenon, and givenness as such, needs to be considered apart from any logic of causality. See Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given. Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002); Luigi Giussani, *He is if he changes*, Supplement no. 7/8 to *30 Days* (Rome), 1994; Luigi Giussani, Stefano Alberto, and Javier Prades, *Generare tracce nella storia del mondo* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1998); Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ. Meditations on God in the Trinity*, trans. Robert J. Cunningham (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup>Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "event."

“event” with “happening” indicates that an event is the presentation of a phenomenon to someone as a living “pro-vocation,” which, without predetermining his answer, requires man to acknowledge it, that is to say, not simply to take notice of it, but rather to welcome it. In comparison to what took place before it, the event is unforeseeable and unpredictable; its unexpected occurrence does not seem to respect the chain of cause and effects that was previously in place. In this regard, although the event is never completely alien to what came before it, its appearance can seem remarkably close to chance.<sup>6</sup> The ostensible indeterminacy of its origins undergirds the event’s incomprehensibility. Although no one can ever give a full account of the entire event, this incomprehensibility does not leave an interlocutor facing an absolute void of meaning. On the contrary, the incomprehensibility itself places its addressee in relation to the whole because through its form, the event introduces him into a deeper, richer dimension of the landscape of being. This is why the “ungraspability” of the event should not be perceived as an objection to or jettisoning of reason, but rather as the possibility for reason to discover truth. It is its connection to the whole that enables the event, by its sheer appearing, to reshape and enrich the present and to sharpen human expectations. Once it has come to pass, the event cannot be either undone or called back. What the event bears in itself makes wonder and gratitude its most fitting reception.<sup>7</sup>

Although some events have a greater subjective and objective significance, all events, even those that have fallen under the shadow of what is (always regrettably) written off as “obvious,” have this eventful character. In fact, the most important events in life—like encountering the beloved, the birth of a child, or being granted an undeserved forgiveness—always refresh one’s own gaze and allow human memory to rediscover the depth of every being

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<sup>6</sup>Severinus Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae*, V, 1.

<sup>7</sup>To ascribe this importance to “wonder” distances our reflection from the negative Heideggerian question, “why are there essents rather than nothingness?” (Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975], 1). Wonder originates within the surprise that the other *is*, and not that that which is could *not* be. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b, 11–19. To answer Heidegger’s question Balthasar writes that “only a philosophy of freedom and love can account for our existence, though not unless it also interprets the essence of finite being in terms of love” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible* (=LA), trans. D. C. Schindler [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004], 143).

(one's very self included) and its surprising and permanent coming-to-be, coming-to-itself.<sup>8</sup> As Guardini states, "in the experience of great love . . . all of what takes place becomes an event within it."<sup>9</sup>

The Latin root of the term, *ex-venio*, reminds us that event means "that which comes out from." Unless one wishes to maintain the Heraclitean reduction of what appears to sheer phenomenality, it is necessary to recognize that in every e-vent there is a distinction between an appearance and a "whence"—what Balthasar calls "form" (*Gestalt*). The event brings into the present both its contingent manifestation and, in it, its grounding depth. This depth, however, should not be identified with another particular being, but rather with the transcendent ground (being itself) that freely discloses itself without losing itself in the process. To say that beings do not "come from" themselves requires the recognition of a mysterious and real distinction between the essence and existence of every being, "between the unity of all existing beings that share in being and the unity of each individual being in the uniqueness and incommunicability of its particular being," and, ultimately, between beings and a transcendent being, which philosophy calls the absolute, and theology, God.<sup>10</sup> It is this final distinction that both prevents us from

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<sup>8</sup>Although for obvious reasons we cannot delve into this matter, we need to indicate that *memory* is neither a simple "looking back" nor an attempt to bring into the present that which has already come to pass. Without denying the understanding of memory as "recollection," we would like to highlight a eucharistic conception of memory as the retrieval of interiority. Memory is then the capacity of the human gaze to rest on the dual movement of being and appearance, which, beginning with the form, is led on to the ground of the form, a ground that is older than the one who remembers. It is in this sense that "recollection" is included in memory.

<sup>9</sup>Romano Guardini, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Würzburg: Werkbund Verlag, 1949), 12: "In der Erfahrung der grossen Liebe sammelt sich die ganze Welt in das Ich-Du, und alles Geschehende wird zu einem Begebnis innerhalb dieses Bezuges."

<sup>10</sup>*TD* 5, 67–68. Cf. Aquinas, *De Ver.* q. 27, a. 1, ad 8, for his understanding of "*compositio realis*." For Balthasar the ontological difference can be unfolded into four parts: the first between the I and the Thou; the second between being and that which exists; the third between essence and existence; the last one, a "theological difference," between beings and being itself, which freely and gratuitously puts everything into existence. Cf. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 429–450. See also Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002); John D. Caputo,

conceiving the transcendent ground as another being among beings—thus collapsing metaphysics into onto-theology—and allows us to discover the coextensiveness of being and freedom without, on the one hand, welding being to history, or, on the other, abandoning beings to a capricious, undetermined, absolute freedom.<sup>11</sup> Beings, then, can be considered events inasmuch as they appear proceeding from being itself, the ever-greater ground that does not have a “beyond itself.”

If the “coming-from” of the event brings to light a distinction between the phenomenon and its origin, it also indicates that being is an event of inexhaustible disclosure. The self-manifestation of being is always richer, not only in the sense that there is always something new (this would reduce the infinity of the ground to a quantifiable dimension and reduce being to beings), but, more deeply, in the sense that it is a gratuitous, absolutely free manifestation.<sup>12</sup> If this self-presentation were simply mechanical or haphazard,

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“Heidegger’s ‘Dif-ference’ and the Distinction Between *Esse* and *Ens* in St. Thomas,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1980): 161–181.

<sup>11</sup>To think of the theological difference in these terms implies rooting the ontological difference in a theological difference, i.e., a difference in God. In order to preserve the difference between God and beings, however, the difference in God needs to be thought in terms of positivity and not, as is the case of Hegel, in terms of negativity. This positive differentiation is not adequately conceived unless it is posed in personal terms, i.e., to talk about difference in the absolute requires talking about personal difference. We shall return to this argument later.

<sup>12</sup>This is why Balthasar considers truth as both *aletheia* and *emeth*: see *Theo-Logic* (=TL), vol. 1: *Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000). See David C. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth. A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004). Studies on Balthasar’s use of analogy and his speech about God should bear in mind that for the Swiss theologian, the propositional understanding of truth, and of truth as correspondence (*adequatio*), needs to be viewed within the perception of being as unveiling (*aletheia*)—although this term shares some resonances with Heidegger’s, their elucidations cannot be (simply) equated. Any attempt to characterize Balthasar’s style as “allegorical,” “metaphorical,” “poetic,” and thus “imprecise,” should simultaneously take account of his ontological understanding of truth to avoid any hasty conclusions. Cyril O’Regan clarifies that Balthasar, like Heidegger, sees that the overcoming of onto-theology is also a matter of language. Nevertheless, unlike Heidegger, Balthasar tries to find “forms of theological language that let Being be, that allow for and celebrate the gratuitousness and mystery of disclosure.” Cf. Cyril O’Regan, “Von Balthasar’s Critique of Heidegger’s Genealogy of Morality,” in *Christian Spirituality and the*

then being would never surprise the way it in fact does, nor would this be an act of being's entrusting itself to finite freedom.<sup>13</sup> At the risk of being rejected or cast into oblivion, being, through the phenomenon, gives itself and waits for the addressee to let itself be introduced by the hand of beauty into an unexpected, unforeseen new region of being. In order to grasp the nature of the freedom proper to the event's "coming-to-be" from a luminous and mysterious ground, it is necessary to see that the event's occurrence owes its appearance to its very ground. The freedom that characterizes this manifestation does not only entail that whatever has come or is coming to be could have not taken place. It also indicates that what comes to be is, radically and totally, given. In this respect one could say that gift and e-vent are coextensive. This perichoresis, therefore, resists the interpretation of event as simply a "gift" for the person to which it happens. Rather, it suggests a real identification between the being-given of every phenomenon and its ontological structure.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the e-vent does more than demand acknowledgment of its unknown origin, and of its difference from and unity with that origin and with all other beings. Since this "coming-from" is understood not in terms of necessity or emanation, but rather of gratuitous freedom, the coming-to-be of the event also discloses its own constitutive givenness.

Events, whose historical singularity can have either a positive or a negative meaning, bear a greater or lesser importance, and involve a single phenomenon or a great many of them, are the free and ever-

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*Culture of Modernity*, ed. Peter J. Casarella and George P. Schner, S.J. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 47.

<sup>13</sup>This seems to be the limit of Plotinus, for whom the One generates without freely willing it, and of every pantheistic understanding of the relation between God and the world. See Plotinus, *The Enneads* V, 1, 6; VI, 8. It is worth noting that Balthasar entitles the section dedicated to the ontological difference in *Glory* 5 as "The Miracle of Being and the Fourfold Distinction" (*GL* 5, 613–627).

<sup>14</sup>For the relation between being and gift, see Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1982); Claude Bruaire, *L'être et l'esprit* (Paris: PUF, 1986); Klaus Hemmerle, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1976); Gisbert Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott* (Freiburg: Herder, 1997); *La Trinità e il pensare. Figure, percorsi, prospettive*, ed. Piero Coda and Andreas Tapken (Rome: Città Nuova, 1997); *Abitando la Trinità. Per un rinnovamento dell'ontologia*, ed. Piero Coda and L'ubomír Zák (Rome: Città Nuova, 1998); and Jean-Luc Marion, *De surcroît* (Paris: PUF, 2001), in addition to the work already mentioned.

fruitful manifestations of being. The event, unexpectedly coming out from something other than itself, is that phenomenon in which being shows itself, gives itself, and speaks itself in order to call the human being into its own infinite beauty.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the infinitely rich variety of the phenomena indicates both an “exuberance” and a certain disclosure of the nature of their origin. As every musical composition evokes its composer in the concreteness of his or her existence, phenomena also bear traces of their own unfathomable, transcendent ground. Their “e-ventful” dimension, always within a *maior dissimilitudo*, resembles in a certain way the nature of that being, that ultimate source, God, who is always infinitely interior and infinitely transcendent.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. A unique presence

The challenge facing any discourse on God that attempts to go beyond the simple affirmation of his existence is to avoid either, on one side, ascribing to human logic the capacity to express adequately the divine logic—as Hegel tried to do—or, on the other, upholding an extreme apophatic theology, which, in striving to free God from the clumsy web of human concepts, ends up not in the Gregorian “radiant darkness,” but in the Plotinian opacity within

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<sup>15</sup>Balthasar, *Epilog* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1987), 45–66. The ontological difference briefly mentioned in the preceding pages precludes any pantheistic interpretation of being’s showing, giving, and saying itself.

<sup>16</sup>Augustine, *Confessions* III, 6, 11: “*Tu autem eras interior intimo meo et superior summo meo.*” Augustine expressed the existential and pedagogical implications of this statement in another equally famous aphorism: “*noli foras ire, in te ipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas*” (*De vera religione*, XXXIX, 72). The principle of similitude, as Kenneth L. Schmitz suggests, needs to be thought of as the communication of being for what being is, act. Undoubtedly, one needs to recognize that “the co-presence of agent and recipient (determined by the axiom of agency) need not require the same isomorphic formality in both, as when an organism reproduces another of its own kind and likeness” (Schmitz, *The Gift*, 124). Bearing this in mind, the daunting and ever-present task of thinking what the *actus essendi* proper to the absolute is and how it can be conjugated with the *act of being* proper to finite beings could benefit significantly if also approached from a theological standpoint. See *TD 5*, 61–109; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic. Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 2: *Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 81–85.

which nothing can be said about the One because the One is not.<sup>17</sup> To be able to say something about God's eventful nature without claiming first to hollow out its mystery and then to explain it away, all by the sole means of the fragile tool of human logic, it is necessary to approach the divine mystery by way of the access the divine mystery itself grants: that is, by way of the only mediator between God and humankind, Jesus Christ (1 Tm 2:5–6).<sup>18</sup> There can be no speech about God apart from what the person of Christ reveals of God. What theology manages to express about the godhead, then, will be adequate only if it is rooted in his self-manifestation and not in conceptual logic.<sup>19</sup> Although God remains always greater, if he has

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<sup>17</sup>Plotinus, *The Enneads* V, 3, 13; V, 4, 1; VI, 9, 6; Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), II, 163, 10; *TL* I, 34. Jean-Luc Marion, *L'idole et la distance: cinq études* (Paris: Grasset, 1977). It is worth noting that the main philosophical systems of Schelling and Hegel are secularized philosophical reflections on the triune mystery, as some have already illustrated. See Claude Bruaire, *Logique et religion chrétienne dans la philosophie de Hegel* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1964); Albert Chapelle, *Hegel et la religion*, 3 vols. (Paris: Éditions universitaires, 1964–1967); Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).

<sup>18</sup>See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics (=GL)*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 463–525; id., *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 250–258.

<sup>19</sup>Rahner's *Grundaxiom*, "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity," has been thoroughly discussed in recent theology. With L. Ladaria, it is important to notice, however, that although most of the critiques agree with the first part of the axiom but reject the second because it jeopardizes God's transcendence, it is important not to discard the second part altogether. In fact, in order for the economic Trinity to be the immanent Trinity, there has to be an (analogical) sense in which the immanent Trinity "is" the economic Trinity. If, in the wholly correct attempt to avoid confusing God with the historical process, a distinction is required between the economy and the theology (and thus there is a sense in which the theology is much "more" than the economy), this distinction cannot be affirmed to the extent of severing any relation between the immanent and the economic Trinity. See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 22; Luis F. Ladaria, *La Trinità: misterio di comunione*, trans. Marco Zappella (Milan: Paoline, 2004): 13–86; Javier Prades, "'From the Economic to the Immanent Trinity': Remarks on a Principle of Renewal in Trinitarian Theology (part 1)," *Communio* 27, no. 2 (2000): 240–261; id., "'From the Economic to the Immanent Trinity': Remarks on a Principle of Renewal in Trinitarian Theology



truly revealed himself in history, what the eyes of faith contemplate in Christ refers both to God's salvific action and to his very being. We can now turn to the person of Christ in order to see what he reveals of the eventful nature of God.

If we consider St. Paul's experience, in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the mystery of Jesus Christ's divine personality, it is possible to realize that the very person of Christ presents himself as an event, i.e., as the unexpected, overabundant gift of himself to us (Rom 5:15; Heb 1:1–2; 9:14). The man Christ Jesus is the one who, while we still were enemies of God (Rom 5:10), “has given himself for our sins” (Gal 1:4) “as a ransom for all” to purify for himself a people of his own, to form the Church (Ti 2:14; Eph 5:25). His death and resurrection are the sign that he “loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). Jesus' self-gift (Phil 2:7) is, at the same time, also the consoling gift of the Father, who “did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” in order to give to us, with him, “all things” (Rom 8:32, 39; Phil 2:8). Christ's gift of himself is contemporaneous with man's present time because Christ, the Lord of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17), gives man his own spirit (Rom 5:5) so that he, the Spirit, may expose the whole truth (1 Cor 2:5–13) and introduce the human being into the eternal life whose fruits are already experienced (Gal 5:22). It is the presence of the crucified, risen Lord that sets Paul—and every Christian—in motion because it is the presence that gives life. The dynamic force that governs (*súneko*) his spirit, holding it in unity by orienting all of his person towards one end, is the insurmountable fact that Christ has given himself and died for all (2 Cor 5:14–15).<sup>20</sup>

Paul's description of the mystery of Christ's person as the one who gives himself “for me” finds a correlate in John, who illustrates Christ's self-perception as the lucid awareness that he, while remaining with God (Jn 15:10), is the sent one (Jn 5–7).<sup>21</sup> The

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(part 2),” *Communio* 27, no. 3 (2000): 562–593.

<sup>20</sup>See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik. Dritter Band. Der Geist der Wahrheit* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1987), 76–80 (=TL III); id., “The Unknown Lying Beyond the Word,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 105–116; id., “The Holy Spirit as Love,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit*, 117–134.

<sup>21</sup>As is well known, Balthasar's Christology is built upon the concept of mission. See *TD* 3, 149–259. On Christ's awareness see also “The consciousness of Christ concerning himself and his mission,” in *International Theological Commission. Texts*

understanding of this “sending” is fleshed out by Christ in terms of an eternal life which is an absolute loving relation between him and God. We cannot get at what this love means, however, by measuring it against the human concept of love. We can only understand the latter from within and by means of divine love (Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 4:10).<sup>22</sup> The divine love that is disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth pertains first and foremost to his very being, and then to an action towards us. Looking at the mystery of Christ’s divine personhood, we see that he himself expresses it in terms of a unique filial relationship with God whom he calls Father (Mk 14:36; Lk 3:22).<sup>23</sup> The Father is at the very center of his person because he is the Father’s total self-bestowal. In this generation, however, the Father does not cease being himself (Jn 3:35; Mt 11:27). Christ knows himself to be sheer gift who has been given to himself, and who would not exist without the Father who remains himself while giving himself completely. The Father has loved the Son from the beginning and has given him everything, his own glory (Jn 17:24–26). Their unity (Jn 10:30) can be seen in the fact that Jesus does and says only what he sees the Father doing (Jn 5:19–20); moreover, he wishes only to affirm the Father, to do what pleases him (Jn 12:27; 8:29; 14:31), and to receive all and only what the Father gives him (Jn 2:4; 12:23). Their relation of love is one of absolute, mutual immanence; Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in him (Jn 14:10–11; 10:38). In this sense, their being in each other is a relation of sheer love: the Father loves Christ without measure (Lk 3:22; Jn 10:17) and Christ loves the Father (Jn 14:31) within and above everything (Mk 12:30; Mt 6:30).

To grasp the nature of divine love requires seeing that this love between the Father and Christ cannot be conceived as involving only two: one who gives and another who receives and gives in

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and Documents 1969–1985, ed. Michael Sharkey (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 305–316; Marcello Bordon, *Gesù di Nazaret. Signore e Cristo*, vol. 2, *Gesù al fondamento della cristologia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Rome: Herder; PUL, 1985); Herman Schell, *Katholische Dogmatik* (Munich: F. Schöningh, 1968), 3 vols; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), nn. 471–473.

<sup>22</sup>“If God wishes to reveal the love that he harbors for the world, this love has to be something that the world can recognize, in spite of, or in fact *in*, its being wholly other. The inner reality of love can be recognized only by love” (LA, 75).

<sup>23</sup>Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

return. It suffices to look at Christ's mission—to love man to the extent of giving himself up to death on the Cross (Jn 12:27; 13:1)—to perceive that the *pro nobis* of Christ's sacrificial death is also the offer of the eternal “we.” Christ's gift of himself on the Cross, which overturns the meaning and the reality of death and finds its fulfillment in the Resurrection (Jn 10:17), and the breathing forth of the Spirit are also the communication in history of the divine loving communion.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the overabundant nature of the love uniting the Father and the Son, which in history can also be seen in the universality and the absolute unlimitedness of Jesus' mission, is not just a “quality” of his mission; it is Another.<sup>25</sup> The Holy Spirit is the one of whom Christ speaks in his promise that, “we will come to them who love me and keep my word” (Jn 14:23, 26; 17:21). Christ promises the Spirit of truth (Jn 16:12–13), the Spirit of the Father (Jn 15:26), his own Spirit (Jn 19:28–30), the one who is asked to guide man to the fullness of truth. He breathes it forth (Jn 20:19–23) and gives it without measure (Jn 3:34), so that his disciples may remain in his love (Jn 15:9) and thus be able to experience an unheard-of fruitfulness (Jn 15:1–17; Mk 4:20), which is not so much a measure of something that the human being can possess, as, for example, he owns the fruit of his labor, but is rather communion with God. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of the unity that God is (Jn 17:21), a unity which is also the incorporation into his own risen body (Rom 6:4), the Church (Eph 5:25).<sup>26</sup> It is the friendship with God, originally given to Moses (Ex 33:11), which, in Christ, is offered to every human being (Jn 14:2; 15:14–15).

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<sup>24</sup>Bernard Sesboüé, *Jésus-Christ dans la tradition de l'église: Pour une actualisation de la christologie de Chalcédoine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris: Desclée, 2000).

<sup>25</sup>It is relevant to note that Christ, who acts in the power of the Holy Spirit, always enters into relation with the Father through the Holy Spirit (Lk 10:21).

<sup>26</sup>For the relation between Christ and the Holy Spirit see Heribert Mühlen, *Der Heilige Geist als Person. In der Trinität bei der Inkarnation und im Gnadenbund. Ich-Du-Wir* (Münster: Aschendorff Münster, 1963); Yves Congar, *Je crois en l'Esprit Saint* (Paris: Du cerf, 1995); François-Xavier Durrwell, *Holy Spirit of God*, trans. Sr. Benedict Davies, OSU (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986); id., *Jésus fils de Dieu dans l'esprit Saint* (Paris: Desclée, 1997); Marcello Bordoni, *La cristologia nell'orizzonte dello Spirito*, Biblioteca di teologia contemporanea, vol. 82 (Brescia: Queriniana, 1995); Sergej K. Bulgakov, *Il Paraclito* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1987); John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1986).

As witnessed to by Paul's and John's perceptions of Christ's divine personality, Jesus' historical life reveals that the divine "I am" is an absolute love, a "communion of persons," which can be neither anticipated nor explained. This eternal life is so fruitful that it is offered to us "from the beginning" and, when rejected by man, moved by pity for man's condition, it gives itself to him again overabundantly (for-gives). Through the person of Jesus Christ, God presents himself as an astonishing gift (Jn 5:20) of himself to himself, in which one wishes only that the other be, and wishes to respond to what pleases the other. In the unique presence of Christ, God discloses himself in history as an infinitely rich and mysterious communion of love in which one exists only for and in the other (Jn 10:30; 14:26). He reveals himself as one who carries out his decision to make the human being a full and free participant in his eternal life.

### *3. An unforeseeable love*

The relation of love between the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit just described compels us, Balthasar contends, to perceive God as a triune mystery of love, a love that is both an eternal being (*esse*) and an eternal event (*Geschehen, Ereignis*) of absolute donation.<sup>27</sup> To qualify the divine essence in terms of event may seem a little too daring if we insist on including all the various connotations this term can have. As the first section of this article clarified, "event" refers to the unpredictable taking place of something, whose historical coming-to-be out of a transcendent ground that is different from itself first causes wonder and then sets in motion a process of expectation and fulfilment. Moreover, events appear and come to pass: this temporal finitude is yet another sign of the ontological difference that both separates them from and unites them to their source. The concept of event is broad enough to include also that which is not necessarily positive: in fact, since it appears legitimate to think of event from the point of view of real donation, it seems difficult to exclude the possibilities of risk, loss, and even rejection.

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<sup>27</sup>*TD* 5, 66–98; *TL* 2, 81–85, 125–149; also see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2: *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 243–284; *TD* 3, 505–535; *Epilog*, 69ff; *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990).

As we have seen, on the one hand, one could describe creation, historical occurrences, and phenomena as such as events; on the other hand, one could rightly claim that Christianity itself is most adequately understood as an event (Jn 1:14). Can this term also refer to divine love itself? After a painstaking passage from the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit to the immanent Trinity, Balthasar contends not only that it can, but, even more radically, that every other event is to be understood in light of the trinitarian event, i.e., the absolute mystery whose life is an agapic threefold donation in which each one wants the other to be, lets the other be, consents to its generation or inspiration, prays to the other and lives with the other an eternal conversation of expectation and fulfilment, unfathomable gratitude and surprise.<sup>28</sup> For Balthasar, it is precisely this agape that is not only the home from which creation has come and to which it longs to be brought back, but it is also what is able to provide a coherent account of how the world is the way it is.<sup>29</sup>

By characterizing the Trinity as an “event,” Balthasar claims to go beyond a simplistic, romantic emphasis on the liveliness proper to the trinitarian processions. At the same time, it is not true to say that Balthasar envisions God as an undetermined love which tends toward another, gives itself to another equal to itself, and thus determines itself. Balthasar rejects thinking of God in terms of one abstract essence, e.g., “pure love” or “absolute being,” from which the divine persons gush forth (DS 804).<sup>30</sup> This position could easily lead to representing the three moments of the donation of love not as distinct persons but, as Sabellius did, as different manifestations of the same essence.<sup>31</sup> Like Barth, Balthasar claims that to think of the

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<sup>28</sup>In his *TD* 5, Balthasar follows Adrienne von Speyr very closely. See Adrienne von Speyr, *The World of Prayer* (=WP), trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 28–74.

<sup>29</sup>*LA*, 143–145.

<sup>30</sup>Balthasar does not critique Gregory the Great’s elucidation of the nature of love. He rejects the idea of conceiving love as an undetermined reality that must subsequently determine itself by means of itself. Gregory the Great’s explanation of the nature of love, which later became the fundamental intuition undergirding Richard of Saint Victor’s *De Trinitate*, is also important for Balthasar’s understanding of love. “Minus quam inter duos caritas haberi non potest. Nemo enim proprie ad semetipsum habere caritatem dicitur, sed dilectio in alterum tendit, ut caritas esse possit” (Gregory the Great, *In Evangelia hom.* 17 [76, 1139]).

<sup>31</sup>Aquinas also rejected this abstraction very forcefully. See Thomas Aquinas, *I*

agapic donation as taking place out of an undetermined absolute would be nominalistic.<sup>32</sup> In order, then, to give an account of the divine event of threefold donation, Balthasar must articulate his own approach to the delicate issue of the relation between the essence and the three persons.

Without ever confusing “happening” (*Geschehen*) with becoming, he contends that it does not do justice to the exchange of gifts in God to think, with Anselm, that the one absolute spirit produces the Son, and thus becomes Father, when it knows itself, and the Holy Spirit when it loves itself.<sup>33</sup> Although Aquinas, like Augustine and Anselm, also proposes an elucidation of the triune mystery starting from the one God, Aquinas wishes to correct Anselm’s position by clarifying that the hypostases are to be understood in terms of relation. Thus, he illustrates that the first procession

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*Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 2; id., *Quaestiones disputate de Potentia Dei* (=QDDPD) (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1965), q. 8, a. 4. This need to hold in unity the divine essence and the persons is not unaware of the teaching of the Council of Florence, which, inspired by Anselm’s doctrine, decreed that in God everything is one where relations of opposition do not stand in the way (DS 1330). For a discussion on personalism and essentialism in Aquinas see, among others, A. Malet, *Personne et amour dans la théologie trinitaire de Saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1956); Gilles Emery, O.P., *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilanti, Mich.: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria College, 2003).

<sup>32</sup>TL 2, 138. This affirmation should not lead the reader to conclude that Balthasar upholds the same understanding of “person” as Barth does. Barth, who in this regard is followed very closely by Rahner, regards the concept of person with suspicion and, in order to bypass what seems to him the unacceptable and insurmountable modern understanding of person, proposes interpreting the hypostases as “ways of being.” Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, Part 1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 400–441; Rahner, *The Trinity*. For Balthasar’s concept of person, see “On the Concept of Person,” *Communio* 13, no. 1 (1986): 18–26; TD 3, 149–230; TL 2, 128–134; TL III, 99–150.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Anselm, *Monologion* 63, in *Anselm, Monologion and Proslogion: with the replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub. Co., 1996). Although attracted more by the trinitarian doctrine of Richard of Saint Victor, Balthasar also distances himself from it. Balthasar, in fact, critiques Richard because, in his attempt to give an account of the existence of three persons beginning from the one essence conceived in terms of *summa caritas*, Richard seems to add the *condilectus* from “outside,” thus disregarding the movement from the economy to the theology. This is also evident by the lack of any reference to the economy and the *ordo expositionis* of the argument.

does not stand for God's self-understanding, but for God's speaking (*dicere*), and that the second does not mean self-love, but rather that in God the act of love (*diligere, amare*) stands for "to spirate love proceeding."<sup>34</sup> In this way, while stating that the processions of the Son and the Holy Spirit are thus an interior action, the difference between the three hypostases can be adequately understood in terms of relation of opposition. Balthasar accurately points out that Aquinas determines that the relations are "subsisting" by distinguishing between the *esse* and the *ratio* in the concept of "relation." Since the *esse* is that of the divine essence, relations are nothing but God himself. What makes the hypostases distinct, then, is their referentiality, their being *ad aliquid*, and what constitutes them as real persons is their identity with the divine essence.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, as in Augustine, given that the processions that ground the relation, and thus the persons, are still explained in terms of the spiritual faculties, Balthasar still wonders whether it might be possible to find a way in which the "personhood" of the hypostases could be better elucidated.

Following Aquinas, Balthasar reminds us that "processions" are not really distinct from the relations in God, only notionally so. Relation, claims Aquinas, is "notionally multiple," and thus can be understood both in itself and insofar as it constitutes the person. Relation "as such" (*ratio*) refers to that orientation *ad aliquid* of the hypostases (relation of opposition). Formally, relation thus means the "bond between the termini." At the same time, thanks to the fact that relation's *esse* is one with the divine essence, it constitutes a divine hypostasis.<sup>36</sup> If we take relation as such, then "procession" is presupposed. If relation is the positing of the hypostasis, then "the relation that constitutes the producing person is logically prior to the procession." Bearing in mind that "the proceeding person is the goal at which the procession aims," the relation that, instead, constitutes

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<sup>34</sup>ST I, q. 34, a. 1, ad 3; q. 37, a. 1.

<sup>35</sup>In this way Aquinas manages to unravel Augustine's perplexities regarding the term "person." See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V, 9, 10; ST I, q. 29; QDDPD, q. 10, aa. 1–2. For an interesting presentation and critique of Aquinas' understanding of person see Ghislain Lafont, *Peut-on connaître Dieu en Jésus-Christ? Problématique* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1969).

<sup>36</sup>Gilles Emery, O.P., makes a very lucid presentation of this issue in his *Trinity and Aquinas*, 165–208.

the person produced, “is logically posterior to the procession”; in this sense “sonship is logically posterior to being born.” Thus, without forgetting that these two senses of relation cannot be separated, it is possible to say that the procession of the Son is (also) the positing of the Son.<sup>37</sup> While accepting Aquinas’ understanding of person as subsisting relation, Balthasar, by contrast, prefers to emphasize the second sense of relation clarified by Aquinas, and thus to conceive “hypostasis” as that which is posited by a relation.<sup>38</sup> With this Balthasar not only hopes to show that the divine persons “are” in relation, but he also wishes to incorporate within this concept what the Triune God has revealed of himself in Jesus Christ, without, all the while, either blurring the distinction between the economy and the theology or forgetting that the “*ad se*” of the hypostases does not fracture the divine unity. “The Father,” says Balthasar, “generates the Son as God, that is, out of his substance, but precisely as Father, not as substance.”<sup>39</sup> Hence, since, according to him, the one divine essence cannot be the agent of the processions, and the exposition of the latter in terms of spiritual faculties “cannot give an adequate picture of the real and abiding face-to-face encounter of the hypostases,” it is necessary to refer to the mystery of the Father. Turning to the Father, the primal source, allows us, according to Balthasar, to give an account of the triune event without leaving behind what the immanent Trinity has revealed of itself in the economy and to steer clear of the problems that emerge when setting out from the one essence.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>QDDPD, q. 10, a. 3; TL 2, 133ff.

<sup>38</sup>In this regard, Balthasar will say, e.g., that “he in God whom we call ‘Father’ is the ‘fruit’ of his self-giving to the one we call ‘Son’; he exists as this self-giving, and the Son exists as receptivity, gratitude, and giving-in-return. Again, this giving-in-return does not close the Two in on themselves but opens them to the fullness of the ‘with’ (the ‘co-’ of ‘communion’), which is made absolute in the Spirit who is common to both” (“God Is Being With,” in *You Crown the Year With Your Goodness*, trans. Graham Harrison [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989], 144).

<sup>39</sup>TL 2, 130.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 38. Balthasar is obviously aware that Augustine’s *De Trinitate* concedes this limit. Balthasar is also aware of the limits of his own position and tries to keep the impenetrable unity of “the one God” together with “the three hypostases.” This is why we think that Balthasar’s model should be seen as complementary to rather than in opposition to the intrapersonal model.



Divine revelation has a fundamental claim in our representation of the immanent Trinity: it enables us to perceive that, as we delineated, the Father's identity, from all eternity, is that of giving himself to the beloved Son, and, along with and through the Son, to the Holy Spirit. For Balthasar, then, both processions are to be understood in terms of love, and not only the second procession, as for Aquinas and Augustine. While not losing sight for one instant of the equal rank of the hypostases, one must hold firm to the fact that the origin of all of the divinity is not a divine abstract essence, but the Father, who generates the Son, and who, in union with him and through him, spirates the Holy Spirit.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the Father's divinity is possessed by him only as completely given away (DS 528). His divinity is seen precisely in the fact that, in the total gift of himself, he remains himself (DS 805).

Drawing from Bulgakov's Christology, while avoiding, at the same time, any grafting of Good Friday onto the immanent Trinity, Balthasar describes the totality of the self-donation in terms of handing-over (*Hingabe; Übereignung*) and an agapic emptying out of oneself for and in the other.<sup>42</sup> Thus, for Balthasar, the omnipotence of the Father implies, first and foremost, a power of self-donation (which is also that of self-expression), an original kenosis.<sup>43</sup> The

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<sup>41</sup>Augustine, *De Trinitate* XV, 17, 29 (DS 490).

<sup>42</sup>For studies on the relation between Balthasar's and Hegel's thought, see Ben J. Quash, "Between the Brutely Given, and the Brutally, Banally Free: von Balthasar's Theology of Drama in Dialogue with Hegel," *Modern Theology* 13, no. 3 (1997): 293–318; Michael Sticklebroeck, "Trinitarische Prozessualität und Einheit Gottes—Zur Gotteslehre H. U. v. Balthasars," *Forum Katholische Theologie* 10 (1994): 124–129; Bertrand de Margerie, "Note on Balthasar's Trinitarian Theology," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 127–130; Brian J. Spence, "The Hegelian Element in von Balthasar's and Moltmann's Understanding of the Suffering of God," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 14, no.1 (1998): 45–60; Michael Schulz, *Sein und Trinität. Systematische Erörterungen zur Religionsphilosophie G. W. F. Hegels im ontologiegeschichtlichen Rückblick auf J. Duns Scotus und I. Kant und die Hegel-Rezeption in der Seinsauslegung und Trinitätstheologie bei W. Pannenberg, E. Jüngel, K. Rahner und H. U. v. Balthasar* (St. Ottilien: Eos Verlag, 1997).

<sup>43</sup>*TD* 5, 84. Although the terminology of "kenosis" and "surrender" may lead to thinking that the trinitarian donation could be caused by an ultimate negativity in God (à la Hegel), for Balthasar divine generosity is utter freedom whose grounds for existence can be found only in itself and not in any type of arbitrariness (DS 71, 526). See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4: *The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 313–314; Sergej Nikolaevic Bulgakov, *L'agnello*

Father is, from all eternity, the one who pours himself forth to another, first to the beloved, homoousios Son, and, with and through him, to the Spirit. The Father is that inexhaustible beginning which has always surrendered himself without losing himself, and hence, from all eternity he is with the Son and the Holy Spirit (Lk 6:36; Eph 2:4; Rom 8:32). The Father's donation, in order to be a real donation, requires giving the other two hypostases to themselves; that is to say, the Father is the one who wishes to let the Son and the Holy Spirit be. At the same time, Balthasar claims that since the taxis of the trinitarian processions is not only irreversible but also eternal, the processions are not only "bringing forth," or "positing the other" (second connotation of "relation"), but the presence of the other hypostases who "let themselves be brought forth" is also required ("relation" understood as such).<sup>44</sup> In fact, Balthasar states that the Son and the Holy Spirit respond to the Father's surrender with an equal surrender (*Hingabe*) that is an acceptance to proceed from the Father, a giving in return (the Son), and an ever-new possibility of gratuitous love and surrender (the Holy Spirit). The "gift" of the Son and the Holy Spirit, then, is both their "consequent" surrender to the initiative of the Father and their "antecedent" consent to be begotten by or to proceed from the Father.<sup>45</sup>

The eternity of the divine processions, however, which requires holding together both senses of relation in God (understood in Balthasar as a gift given, received, and consented to), cannot be viewed as a coalescence of "the process of being generated" and "having been generated already." Such a dichotomy can only end up sounding like an oxymoron. If it is not clear from the start that

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*di Dio. Il mistero del Verbo Incarnato* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1990)—this edition contains the "Introductory Note" and the "Introduction" to the dialectics of the idea of theanthropy in the Patristic Age that are omitted in the French translation; Margaret M. Turek, *Towards a Theology of God the Father. Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theodramatic Approach* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); id., "'As the Father Has Loved Me' (Jn 15:9): Balthasar's Theodramatic Approach to God the Father," *Communio* 26, no. 2 (1999): 295–318.

<sup>44</sup>*TD* 5, 85.

<sup>45</sup>It is in this way that Balthasar intends to preclude any possible subordinationist presentation of the triune mystery. The Father is never without a Son and they are never without the Holy Spirit. For a concordant explanation of the "role" of the persons in their being generated or spirated, see *WP*, 58. One cannot lose sight of the fact that the divine "being-with" is that of the one God.

divine procession is unlike the production of beings (which eventually is called to come to an end) the result is inevitably a concept of eternity as an atemporal *nunc stans*, informed at base by a sequential idea of history and thus proposing the untenable figure of a divine procession that has lost both its beginning and end but whose outcome has already taken place. Instead, Balthasar claims that eternity, when approached from Christ's self-awareness, is better understood as an event of relation: the Son, for example, always receives himself from the Father "in a *presence* that includes both his always-having-been and also his eternal future (his eternal 'coming') from the Father."<sup>46</sup> The divine persons are present to each other in their coming from another and being with and in the other. The "being for and with" the other and the "coming from" another of the divine persons is not then a sign of transiency but is rather their own subsistence. In this sense, unlike in the created world, the "coming from" does not have an ephemeral nature. Their "eternity," conceived in terms of presence, consists then of an immemorial past that is always poured forth in the present, a present that is receptivity and grateful giving in return, and a future that is both eternal confirmation of the gift of love and ever-new response. Divine communion is both from eternity and "created afresh" at every instant. If this is the case in God's own being, then "history" needs to be seen in terms of God's faithfulness in fulfilling his covenant, and not merely as the succession of separate occurrences that can be reconciled only with difficulty. When eternity is thus understood as an event of relation, it is possible to discover that eternity is the plenitude of time. Eternity is, in fact, the eternal confirmation of the original creation and the victory over man's resistance to God's faithfulness—a faithfulness with such a powerful fascination that it can elicit a grateful but free adhesion by the human

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<sup>46</sup>TD 5, 91–93. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994); id., *A Theological Anthropology* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1990); id., *Heart of the World*, trans. Erasmo S. Leiva (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979); David L. Schindler, "Time in Eternity, Eternity in Time: On the Contemplative-Active Life," *Communio* 18, no. 1 (1991): 53–68; Kenneth L. Schmitz, "Traces of Eternity," *Communio* 15, no. 3 (1988): 294–304. It is also worth mentioning that Schelling's understanding of eternity could be fruitfully used if corrected by a principle of positivity. See Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Jason M. Wirth (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000).

being. It is this understanding of eternity that prevents Balthasar from confusing event with historical becoming.<sup>47</sup>

Undoubtedly, Balthasar's illustration of the divine hypostases may sometimes give the impression that for him the persons are endowed with, so to say, a life of their own. Balthasar's methodology, which understands the divine hypostases in personalistic terms, considers the persons as "subjects."<sup>48</sup> In fact, if in the economy the three persons appear as having their own personhood, their own "self," then, in a mysterious way, this must also be the case for the immanent Trinity.<sup>49</sup> For this reason, the communication of the divine nature (agape) must not be understood in terms of a mechanical transfer of some-thing, i.e., the whole of the divine essence, motivated by love. Instead, as indicated before, the gift of the Father is the free positing of some-one with whom the other hypostases are eternally in communion.<sup>50</sup> In giving all of himself without losing himself, the Father gives the other to himself, and thus gives him the capacity to be a self (which includes the Father's freedom) whose uniqueness is that of being the same absolute love, as received and

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<sup>47</sup>Commenting on Gregory of Nyssa, Balthasar writes: "We believed that becoming and Being were opposites, two forms, as it were, analogous without a doubt, but irreducible. Through the Incarnation we learn that all the unsatisfied movement of becoming is itself only repose and fixity when compared to that immense movement of love inside of God: Being is Super-Becoming. In constantly surpassing ourselves, therefore, by means of our love, we assimilate ourselves to God much more intimately than we could have suspected" (*Presence and Thought. An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995], 153). This "Super-Becoming," as he states later on in *TD* 5, 91–93, is coming-to-be and not historical developing.

<sup>48</sup>For a concordant exploration of the meaning of hypostasis, see François Bourassa, S.J., "Personne et conscience en théologie trinitaire," *Gregorianum* 55 (1974): 471–493, 677–720; Luis Ladaria, *La trinità, mistero di comunione*, 161–178. Both Barth and Rahner distrusted the concept of person because, tending as it does to mean almost exclusively a center of consciousness and freedom, it could very easily lead to tri-theism. For Rahner, then, being conscious of oneself is not an element that distinguishes the divine persons.

<sup>49</sup>Balthasar thus does not hesitate to adopt the personal pronouns to refer to the divine persons: I and Thou refer to the Father and the Son, and We refers to the Holy Spirit. As is well known, Balthasar here refers to the work of Heribert Mühlen, *Der Heilige Geist als Person* and Matthias J. Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis, Mo.: B. Herder, 1961).

<sup>50</sup>*WP*, 58.

reciprocated in thankfulness (Son), or as given from both of them and surrendered to them as an ever-new love (*Je-Mehr-Sein der Liebe*) who “searches the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10) and makes God be absolute gift (Holy Spirit).<sup>51</sup> In God, the “totality” of the gift, therefore, does not mean only that the persons enjoy the same identity; it also means “otherness.” Fatherhood is, indeed, the generation of another. Incorporating the richness of the reflection on the Father’s original surrender, together with his emphasis on personhood, Balthasar conceives the triune mystery of love as a “communion of persons.”<sup>52</sup> For Balthasar, then, the “self-awareness” and “actions” of the divine persons cannot be perceived as an un-originated, independent consciousness or deed, but rather as that of being (*esse*) God and of being a God who is a communion (*Mit-sein, Gemeinschaft, Geschehen*) of persons who are different from each other. Since each divine subject is the gift received or given, each one has the awareness and freedom of the divinity that is communicated or received. The awareness of the divine self is possessed and exercised by each one of them in a perfect unity with the other divine persons. In fact, without falling prey to the illusion of introducing space in God, Balthasar suggests that every person “‘makes room’ (‘space’) for one another, granting each other freedom of being and action.”<sup>53</sup> According to Balthasar, the unity of

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<sup>51</sup>*Dominum et Vivificantem*, n. 10.

<sup>52</sup>From its beginning the Fathers of the Church understood “communion” as that which the hypostases share together, i.e., the divine substance. See, for example, Gregory of Nyssa, “Quod non sint tres dii,” in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. H. A. Wilson, vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 331–336; Basil, *Ep.* 38, n. 4. With Balthasar’s reflection there is a new connotation: communion is of persons, and hence it is a being-from, with, for, and in the other. It is worth noticing that other trinitarian doctrines like those of the Eastern Fathers, which, before the development of the Latin reflection, followed what today is called the “social model” of the Trinity, always rejected the possibility of going any further than stating that God is one and three. See for example, Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Oration XXXI*, 32, in *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: the Five Theological Orations of Gregory Nazianzen*, ed. Frederick W. Norris, trans. Lionel Wickham and Frederick Williams (Leiden, N.Y.: E. J. Brill, 1991).

<sup>53</sup>*TD* 5, 93. It is this trinitarian space, which is another way of characterizing both the hierarchical order and the unity of the divine persons, that is the ultimate ground that allows for the existence of space in the created world—and not just the existence of matter. This entails that space is to be conceived as interiorly ordered

essence in the circumincession of the persons does not eliminate but on the contrary makes possible and preserves the difference of the divine hypostases. Difference in God, however, does not indicate pure distinction but precisely that exuberant, overflowing, rich unity which is identical in each hypostasis and, at the same time, is so in a unique, radically different way. It is this difference between the persons in God that ultimately grounds the ontological difference in the finite world, a difference which is at the root of the eventfulness of creation.<sup>54</sup>

This understanding of personhood, along with his account of relation, spurs Balthasar's theological reflection to do its utmost to defend the uniqueness of each person in order to illustrate at that very moment that the uniqueness is so because the three persons are one God (absolute love). While recognizing that his interpersonal model encounters the opposite limit from Augustine's and Aquinas' proposals, Balthasar, with his characteristic elliptic style, attempts to preserve a harmonious balance in his account of the divine mystery by holding unswervingly to the twofold mystery yielded by faith, which cannot be synthesized by a higher concept (neither that of "person" nor that of "event"): the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit really exist as distinct persons, and these hypostases are one God.<sup>55</sup>

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from and to relation.

<sup>54</sup>Balthasar here concurs with Bruaire, who states that "talk of the 'ontological difference' thus undergoes a radical transformation: being does not differ *from* the supreme Being, but *in* him, since there is the Spirit *in* God, as the difference between the hypostases in himself . . . . The ontological difference is null if it signifies the being that God is not" (Claude Bruaire, *L'être et l'esprit*, 190n; quoted in *TL* 2, 135). This affirmation, written polemically against Heidegger, flows from the lucid recognition that, as Aquinas puts it: "Ex processione personarum divinarum distinctarum causatur omnis creaturarum processio et multiplicatio" (*I Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 2, ad. 2; quoted in *TD* 5, 62). See also John Milbank, "The Second Difference," in *The Word Made Strange* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

<sup>55</sup>Balthasar states that, "perhaps, the most adequate way to defend the unity of the godhead if one starts *only* from the economic Trinity, and thus to avoid tritheism, is by means of the *circumincession* of the hypostases." See also *TL* III, 144. See *TL* 2, 133ff; *TL* III, 110–116. It deserves mention that the "one" and "three" are not mathematical but transcendental numbers. See, e.g., *ST* I, q. 30, aa. 3–4. In this regard, Balthasar is also careful to indicate with the Greek Fathers that "person" cannot be understood as a univocal concept able to portray perfectly the differences of the hypostases.

Balthasar explains that the divine essence and the eternal processions are coextensive and that the former also is “concomitantly determined by the unrepeatably unique participation of the Father, Son, and Spirit in this event [of love] and so would never exist except as fatherly, sonly, and spirit-ually.”<sup>56</sup> Balthasar’s insight, then, is that it is “love alone” which exists in the eternal personal gift of himself to himself, and in which it is absolutely good that there be another who welcomes, consents to, and, as Augustine and Aquinas already intuited, reciprocates the absolute love that is communicated.<sup>57</sup> One can never go behind this absolute love, which is the ultimate ground of which there is no beyond.

#### 4. Ever-greater surprise

Balthasar’s claim, presented above, that God’s eternal “happening” (*Geschehen*) is to be characterized as a movement of agapic donation (*Übereignung*), does not intend to propose that love is the logic undergirding the divine processions—as if love were simply their animating principle. If God *is* love, then each one of the hypostases must be perceived for what it is, love. Seeing them *as* (ontological) love is the first step towards elucidating the reasons for Balthasar’s affirmation that within the event which the Triune God is there has to be something like fulfillment, risk, letting be, expectation, gratitude, and surprise.

Without, obviously, claiming to exhaust the divine mystery, Balthasar contends that to speak of “love” requires acknowledging what is proper to it. Love, as we saw, is the utterly free affirmation (positing) of the other that, while allowing him to be himself, always generates a unity that is “considerate” (*rücksichtsvoll*) of the other’s difference; that is to say, a unity able to see the other for what the other is.<sup>58</sup> If we turn to the incarnate Logos to understand what this divine respect (beholding the other) means, we discover that the Father’s handing-over of himself to the Son is seen by the Son as

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<sup>56</sup>*TL* 2, 137.

<sup>57</sup>*TL* 2, 38. See Augustine, *De Trinitate* VI, 5, 7. It is interesting to note some echo of Augustine’s understanding of the Holy Spirit in terms of friendship in Aquinas. See, for example, *QDDPD*, q. 10, a. 2, ad 11.

<sup>58</sup>*TD* 5, 89.

“the object of infinite amazement, wonderment and gratitude.”<sup>59</sup> The amazement expressed by the incarnate Logos is not proper only to the economy; it must echo something of the eternal hypostases who are one love. The Son is divine love as received and as grateful response because the Father is, and because the Father is an over-abundant gift (*Hingabe*) to him. The paternal and filial hypostases of absolute love reveal that the agape that unites the Father and the Son is more than the exchange of gifts which takes place among human beings (even if that gift were life itself). They disclose that the “totality” of their love is the exuberance of yet another, who is both the unity and the fruit of their love, the Holy Spirit. If God, from the beginning, in the Father “is already the miracle of love, of being itself in the gift of himself, this miracle ‘completes itself’ in the Holy Spirit, who, precisely because he is the exuberance of love, in his being always ever greater, is the ungraspable and insurmountable vertex of absolute love.”<sup>60</sup> The absoluteness proper to divine love is that of being paternal (Father), filial (Son), and spiritual (Holy Spirit) as the over-abundant gift of love. The infinite “excess” of the gift, its “ever-greatness,” invites us to see the triune mystery as a communion of persons who exist in awe of and amazement at each other, as a “community of surprise (*Überraschung*).”<sup>61</sup> This wonderment springs then from the fact that, for Balthasar, God is ever-greater (*semper maior*), not only for us but for himself, who is absolute love in three persons.<sup>62</sup>

The meaning of the divine “ever-greatness” would remain beyond our grasp if explained quantitatively (there is something left to be given), or chronologically (apart from the eternally present

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<sup>59</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child (=Unless)*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 45.

<sup>60</sup>*TL* III, 146. See also Balthasar, *Creator Spirit*, 105–277; Aidan Nichols, *Say It Is Pentecost: A Guide Through Balthasar's Logic* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001); John R. Sachs, “Deus Semper Major-Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam: The Pneumatology and Spirituality of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Gregorianum* 74, no. 4 (1993): 631–657; Kossi K. Joseph Tossou, *Streben nach Vollendung. Zur Pneumatologie im Werk Hans Urs von Balthasars* (Freiburg: Herder, 1983).

<sup>61</sup>*TD* 5, 54.

<sup>62</sup>Along with that of von Speyr, it is worth recalling the influence of Erich Przywara. See his *Deus Semper Maior. Theologie der Exerzitien* (Munich: Herold Verlag, 1964).



donation there is a future donation that is yet to come), or gnoseologically (there is an unshared secret in God). Balthasar, following von Speyr, uses the comparative ever-greater as the way to express God's infinity, and thus as the "true superlative," in order not to lose sight of the fact that, in God, one is always dealing with persons whose *esse* is infinite love. God is ever-greater because he is three persons, and because these three persons are one infinite mystery of love. The comparative ever-greater is thus "the linguistic form of amazement."<sup>63</sup>

If one thinks of the relation between the human being and God, simultaneously with the idea of infinity, the ontological transcendence implied in the *semper maior* cannot be transposed in God (there are not three gods). Nevertheless, looking at the relation between parents and their child or between two lovers may provide an inkling into what God discloses of himself in Jesus Christ. The human lover is in awe, first of all, at the very existence of the beloved. It is the very presence of the beloved that gladdens the lover and makes him live in a "now" of thankfulness, which is unconcerned with securing the future. At the same time, since one is dealing with love, this awe is intensified by the fact that the other is there "for me," and that this preferential relationship interiorly opens both of them up to the whole of the cosmos. Undoubtedly, human existence is unable to remain in this original position. It is thus called continuously to recover this tension and to avoid any attempt either to possess or to conquer the beloved, or to determine the future and fruitfulness of their love. Forgiveness and surprise are two of the fundamental dimensions of love that enable them to regain this awareness, this tension. While forgiveness posits a new, deeper beginning between them, surprise shows that one of them has broken through habits and preconceived ideas. Yet "surprise" indicates not only that something unforeseen has taken place, but more importantly, that a "ruse of love" has been found to allow them to see each other as they are and to rediscover the nature of the love that unites them. In this way the grateful, amazed contemplation of the other attains a depth previously unknown to them. Analogically speaking, one could say that in God himself, the surprise or wonderment comes from the fact that the persons are eternally other, different from each other, and that they are so

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<sup>63</sup>Unless, 46.

precisely inasmuch as they are for and with the other. It is the way in which they are for each other, let each other be while always being in the other, and, so to say, “look at” each other, that sheds some light on the fact that God is an ever-greater event of love, and that the divine persons exist in grateful wonderment at each other. In this regard, as Balthasar contends, surprise is not only a human experience but also a divine one, if God is, in himself, an event of absolute triune love.<sup>64</sup>

We have already indicated that if the gift of self of the Father (*Urkenosis*) is to be a real gift, it has to be a complete gift of self, and thus, although it is not made either by necessity or by will, but by nature, it has to be free. What we need to ponder now is that this absolute freedom is not simply the positing of another who enjoys the same divine freedom and who is the total surrender of himself to the other.<sup>65</sup> If it is a truly free donation, it cannot claim a return. The Father, Balthasar says following von Speyr, gives himself over

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<sup>64</sup>The similarity outlined here is analogical. In this regard, one cannot identify the way in which the hypostases are the one divine nature with the unity among human beings. Nevertheless, the trinitarian communion of persons illumines the meaning of man’s dual reality as male and female and as a social creature existing in communion with and for others. This being a communion of persons is informed by the dynamics of gift proper to love which, as indicated, includes, among others, these elements: donation, risk, reciprocity, expectation, fulfillment, surprise, embrace. See, for example, *TL 2*, 25–62; *TL III*, 146–149; Angelo Scola, *Il Mistero Nuziale* vol. 1: *Uomo-Donna* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 1998): 43–61; Marc Ouellet, *Divina somiglianza. Antropologia trinitaria della famiglia* (Rome: PUL, 2004).

<sup>65</sup>Balthasar also sees this primordial kenosis as a “super-death.” Not so much, it seems to us, because he claims that there is something like “death” in God. Were this assumption true, one would introduce negativity in the absolute, and this is not coherent with Balthasar’s trinitarian thought. By “super-death,” then, Balthasar is hinting at the possibility of grounding in God what he calls “the good death” of Jn 15:13. In other words, Christ can ask his apostles to be ready to give their lives for their friends exactly because God is nothing but the total gift (surrender) of himself to himself. Balthasar’s affirmation does not mean, then, that love begets death, which enters into the world because of sin (Wis 2:24; Rom 5:12). Rather, aided by the work of, among others, Ferdinand Ulrich, he attempts to say that the readiness to die, which always takes place within the horizon of the resurrection and thus of eternal life (Jn 10:17), is the final affirmation of the other in *statu isto* and the imitation of him who loved man when man was still inimical to God (Rom 5:8). See *TD 5*, 83–85; *TL 2*, 141–149; Ferdinand Ulrich, *Leben in der Einheit von Leben und Tod* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1999).

completely to the Son (“lets him go”) and “expects” that the gift of himself will be fulfilled, that is to say, accepted and reciprocated. The Father, however, “will never override the Son’s filial stature” and, thus, will not demand to be loved back.<sup>66</sup> For Balthasar, there is no real gift of self if there is not a complete gift of self, and the gift of self is not true if it imposes or predetermines a positive answer. The “risk” entailed in the Father’s insurmountable expectation, however, is eternally “surpassed” by the Son, who is both “the [Father’s] primal expectation and fulfillment.”<sup>67</sup> The Son reciprocates overabundantly the “excessive” gift that his generation is. Thus, there is nothing “undetermined” in God. For this reason, it is important to note that the Father’s expectation does not signify a lack in the divinity. Absolute plenitude is, in a sense, the only word for divine love; “fulfillment” and “expectation” represent an attempt to delineate absolute love’s eventful nature. The language of fulfillment and expectation reveals that the exchange of (hypostatic) gifts is not so much a “correspondence” between the divine persons; e.g., the Son “co-[r]esponds” to the love of the Father and that balance is shattered by their gift, in turn corresponded, to the Holy Spirit. If it were a matter of correspondence, then one would have to admit a lack, or a negativity, in God. Nevertheless, since it is *absolute* and *free* love, the gift cannot but be super-abundant, ever-greater, and utterly free in its offer, its reception, and its return. The exuberance that we see in the relation of love between the Father and the Son is also at play in the procession of the Holy Spirit, “when Father and Son see their mutual love surpassed as it issues forth from them as a Third Person, standing boldly before them and expressing their innermost being.”<sup>68</sup> There is no absolute love if it does not exceed the “wildest expectations,” and there is no true plenitude if it “contains itself,” that is to say, if it does not exceed itself in giving itself over without any limitation, only to receive itself back overabundantly in an excess of love (the Holy Spirit).<sup>69</sup> Bearing in mind what we said previously regarding Balthasar’s understanding of the divine persons, it is now possible to see that it

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<sup>66</sup> *WP*, 50.

<sup>67</sup> *TD* 5, 79.

<sup>68</sup> *WP*, 30; *TD* 5, 89.

<sup>69</sup> *TD* 5, 79.

is the eternal interplay of fulfillment and expectation that undergirds a divine “wonderment.”

God’s overabundant, ever-greater gift of himself to the other is “anything but blind.” It is indeed supremely wise and provident.<sup>70</sup> One cannot fail to point out, however, that, for Balthasar, divine omniscience is grounded in love and that this love will never allow the wisdom of the divine persons to request an answer, or to be used, in a way that would jeopardize the exuberance proper to absolute love. If faith, for the human being, is understood as an encounter between God and the human person, mediated by the form of Christ who is contemporaneous to the human being through the Marian Church, then, in God, Balthasar contends, faith can also be perceived analogically as the opening up to the other in such a way that the “irrefragable knowledge” of God does not overrule the exuberance of love, but welcomes it (1 Cor 8:3).<sup>71</sup> If omniscience were synonymous with “having been exhausted,” it would neglect the fact that, according to Balthasar, when the Father generates, he risks, i.e., he does not wish to determine the Son’s, or the Spirit’s, over-fulfillment of his “unsurpassable love.” It is not a matter of what is “more” or “less” important. Rather, it is a question of seeing that the harmonic coming together of divine wisdom with the ever-greater absoluteness of love requires both the person’s freedom to explore the infinite “realm of his own free sonship [or spiritu-ality], of his own divine sovereignty” and the knowing of himself through the other. While it is true that love and wisdom are contemporaneous in God, one cannot forget that truth, for Balthasar, is essentially understood as an event of disclosure (*aletheia*), an unfolding, which takes place according to the form proper to absolute triune love. Thus, contrary to what often happens among human beings, surprise in God does not mean that one of the persons unexpectedly discloses to the others what was previously, avariciously, kept secret. Rather, it has to do first of all with the fact that the hypostases are eternally other (person), and, second, with the mysterious nature of the reciprocal gift that the eternal happening of God is: the ever-greater,

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<sup>70</sup>TL 2, 140–141.

<sup>71</sup>TD 5, 97. For Balthasar’s understanding of the Christian experience of faith see GL 1, 219–425; Giulio Meattini, *Sentire cum Christo. La teologia dell’esperienza cristiana nell’opera di Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1998).

personal, gratuitous love that generates gratitude both for the gift that is eternally given and received and for the “expectation” that is always already “fulfilled.”<sup>72</sup> This gratitude, when seen from the point of view of the eternal over-fulfillment of the divine expectation, is a fundamental element of what Balthasar calls surprise. Surprise, then, could be seen as the subjective (hypostatic), grateful response to the (objective) ever-greater donation of divine love; it is absolute love gratuitously and gratefully given and reciprocated.

### 5. *Eternal fruitfulness*

After having explored in what sense the Triune God can be represented in terms of “event,” this essay concludes with some remarks intended to illustrate the usefulness of this concept for understanding the newness of Christianity and of human existence.

The Incarnation of the Logos is indeed an unforeseen, ungraspable event that both undoes and fulfills human expectations and preconceived ideas concerning God and the meaning of human life and history.<sup>73</sup> It is the event of Christ alone that can unfold the design concealed in man’s creation and reveal to man who he is and what he is called to be and enjoy, son in the Son, because Christ indeed reveals himself as the one in whom everything consists.<sup>74</sup> The event of Christ also grants man the eyes of faith that enable him to catch a glimpse of the order beneath every phenomenon and historical event within the divine mystery, and to begin to respect the proper distance, as J. Marion would say, between idols and the icon of Christ (Col 1:15–20).<sup>75</sup> In this sense, without unraveling its

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<sup>72</sup>In this regard, man’s gratitude for God’s salvific deed is only a faint echo of the reciprocity that characterizes donation in God, where there is no shadow of negativity.

<sup>73</sup>For a description of Christianity as an event, see Giussani, *He Is if He Changes*.

<sup>74</sup>As is widely noticed, Balthasar here reiterates Aquinas’ and Bonaventure’s doctrine. See *TD* 5, 61–65.

<sup>75</sup>In this regard Maximus the Confessor beautifully states: “Christ is everything in all of you. It is he who encloses in himself all beings by the unique, simple, and infinitely wise power of his goodness. As the center of straight lines that radiate from him he does not allow by his unique, simple, and single cause and power that the principles of being become disjoined at the periphery but rather he circumscribes their extension in a circle and brings back to himself the distinctive

mystery, Christ enables man to behold the face of the ultimate ground that presents itself without losing itself through the different phenomena; *tam pater nemo*. God's revelation in Christ discloses the depth and meaning of the eventful nature of beings and history. Under the light of his presence they are nothing but the inexhaustible exuberance of divine creativity through which God gives himself to man and awaits his return (Heb 10:5).

The insertion into human history of the overabundant, ever-surprising movement of agapic donation is an unmerited and unexpected grace, with which God "for-gives" and "accompanies his creation in a perpetual now."<sup>76</sup> His bestowal of grace also demands an answer.<sup>77</sup> God, in Christ, seeks to gain a free and conscious adhesion, a reciprocation similar to the one proper to God (Mt 8:10), which cannot but be rewarded with the same ever-greater overabundance of the triune mystery of love (Jn 15:1–17). In this sense, Christ reveals the heart of man's speech, which is the participation in the same ecstatic dialogue that permeates the trinitarian life. If one considers the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, it is possible to see that the dramatic exchange of divine and human "yeses," is,

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elements of beings which he himself brought into existence. The purpose of this is so that the creations and products of the one God be in no way strangers and enemies to one another by having no reason or center for which they might show each other any friendly or peaceful sentiment or identity, and not run the risk of having their being separated from God to dissolve into non-being" (Maximus the Confessor, "The Church's Mystagogy," in *Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold [New York: Paulist Press, 1985], 187). Also see Marion, *L'idole et la distance*.

<sup>76</sup>TL 2, 114–145. It is interesting to note here the progression of John Paul II's trinitarian encyclicals: Christ is the redeemer of man, who shows to him that he is made for love and in love (*Redemptor hominis*, n. 10). The redemption that Christ brings is that of the Father, whose justice blossoms forth from and brings man back to his infinite mercy. That is why he is described as the one "rich in mercy" (*Dives in misericordia*, nn. 7–8). The merciful design of the Father, incarnated in Christ, becomes operative in the hearts of men because the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, convinces man of his own sinfulness so that, after having obtained the contrition for his own sins, the Holy Spirit may enable him to taste the eternal life the risen Lord has gained for him (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, nn. 33–42).

<sup>77</sup>See also Balthasar, "Is the Mass a Sacrifice of the Church?" in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993) for an interesting presentation of the role of man's freedom in Christ's salvific offer of himself.

of course, more than a simple exchange of entreaties and answers.<sup>78</sup> God's request to Mary is an offer of himself that longs to be accepted. Mary's discreet and simple response is, again, nothing but the complete offer of herself (*fiat*). God incorporates Mary's self-offer within the offer of himself and thus becomes incarnate by taking his flesh from her. Astonishingly, in his gift of himself to man, God becomes, through Mary, "Creature of his creature," and Mary, virgin mother of God.<sup>79</sup> What God seeks and finds in Mary is nothing but grateful reciprocity. God, who loves gratuitously, only accepts being loved gratuitously. Mary's *fiat* illustrates that the life of the human being is called to become, through the gift of the Spirit of Christ, an "event." Not so much because of the significance that his or her historical existence may acquire but, more simply, because, as we see in Mary, human existence becomes a participant in, and thus witness to, the gratuitous and grateful reciprocation of God's always new love. To every human embrace, regardless of its insurmountable precariousness, God responds with an overabundant gift of himself (Rom 5:20), which in turn elicits in the human being the desire to respond as Christ has indicated: "to the end" (Jn 15:12–13). This unending, increasingly intensifying dialogue is thus the continuous experience of eternal richness in which the gift itself is nothing but God himself and the fecundity of man's life (Lk 8:18). The fruitfulness that God bestows on man (Lk 1:49) by giving his very self to him not only involves man as an "isolated" being; it also constitutes the generation and reconstitution of a people (Lk 1:50–55), the Church, which, in her mysterious unity, is the sacramental sign of the divine communion.<sup>80</sup> Precisely because

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<sup>78</sup>In this regard, Giussani, recalling Kierkegaard's "imperative," clarifies that Christ's offer of himself with his claim to divinity sets forth man's existence as a question that cannot but be faced and solved. See Luigi Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, trans. Viviane Hewitt (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 33–35.

<sup>79</sup>The prayer Dante puts on the lips of St. Bernard says: "Tu se' colei che l'umana natura/nobilitasti sì, che'l suo fattore/non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura" (*Divine Comedy. Paradiso XXXIII*, 4–6).

<sup>80</sup>"... the mystery of the Church is rooted in God the Trinity, and therefore has this trinitarian dimension as its first and fundamental dimension, inasmuch as the Church depends on and lives in the Trinity from her origins to her historical conclusion and eternal destination" (John Paul II, *A Catechesis on the Creed*, vol. 4: *The Church. Mystery, Sacrament, Communion* [Boston: Pauline Books and Media,

human existence is inserted into God's eternal happening, the growth of human life and the fulfillment of man's desire can never cease.<sup>81</sup> God opens up the ever-greater mystery of his love and brings the human being into himself so that, seeing the glory of the Lord, he may be continuously transfigured "from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18), always fulfilled and never satiated. □

*ANTONIO LÓPEZ, F.S.C.B., a priest of the Fraternity of St. Charles Borromeo, is assistant professor of theology at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.*

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1998], 76). See *Lumen gentium*, 1–9.

<sup>81</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* II, 239; Jean Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: Brill, 1970); id., *Platonisme et théologie mystique. Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Aubier, 1953).