

# SECULAR INSTITUTES ACCORDING TO HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

• Juan M. Sara •

“God and the world share with each other what each has and *is*. This mutual communication constitutes the ecclesial form of life of the secular institutes . . . as the eucharistic way of being characteristic of Christ, the concrete *analogia entis*.”



And if these world secular institutes are today forming the avant-garde of the Church in the modern world, this is so only by virtue of the living paradox that is none other than the paradox of Christ's Church herself: holding fast to Christianity's fountainhead and point of origin, she flows out into the world, bringing with her this very fountain of life. This in fact was the way Christ ultimately accomplished the will of the Father: firmly rooted in it, he went out and brought the movement of this will to the very last sinner (“the least of my brethren”).<sup>1</sup>

John, leaning his head on the Lord's breast, confesses wordlessly to him that he is ready to help raise everyone, even the most lukewarm, even the most distant, from human to divine love. This is the johannine form of love. Even though John has no

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<sup>1</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4: *Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 287–288.

\* Dedicated to Adrienne von Speyr on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth.

doubt that he is loved as a friend, that the Lord has a special predilection for him, he knows that the Lord therein loves the others, too, and that his privilege is to bear something that will underscore that all are included in the Lord's love.<sup>2</sup>

The present article attempts to bring into focus some central features of Hans Urs von Balthasar's understanding of secular institutes (*instituta saecularia*). The *Weltgemeinschaften* ["world communities"], as he preferred to call them,<sup>3</sup> occupied the center of his mission, giving a unifying force to his life and work. They increasingly became the focal point of his interest, indeed, his very existential "source-point." It was to the task of founding and promoting this incipient form of Christian life that he dedicated his personal gifts.<sup>4</sup>

By way of introduction, we can say that, for Balthasar, the importance of the secular institutes lies in their proposal of a new unity between "the worldly state and the state of God [*Weltstand und Gottestand*]," between the original impulse of the Gospel and the needs of today's post-Christian world. The secular institutes are constituted by their integration of an exclusive service of God and the world as *a form of Christian life*. "Integration" is thus the key term on which Balthasar relies in order to characterize the being and the mission of the "world communities." For the same reason, we will move, in what follows, within the wide precincts of this integration, in the attempt to unfold some of its central aspects.

Our method is simple: to sketch the form of the secular institutes by touching and exploring their central foci. Balthasar himself once remarked that perceiving and interpreting living forms is like observing a constellation of stars on a clear night: one has to follow the thread of light against the dark background of the infinite. In what follows, then, we present five aspects that shed light on the spirit of the secular institutes. Each point, and all of them taken together, seen against

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<sup>2</sup>Adrienne von Speyr, *Erde und Himmel*, vol. 3: *Die Späten Jahre* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1975), 322.

<sup>3</sup>Jean Beyer, S.J., ed., *Die kirchlichen Urkunden für die Weltgemeinschaften* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1963), 8–9. This volume contains the most important pontifical documents concerning the secular institutes. It was also the first in a series (published by Balthasar) called, appropriately, "the new way" [*Der neue Weg*].

<sup>4</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 47, 58.

the background of the mystery of divine love, will suggest something of the richness, still in germ, of the secular institutes' form of life.<sup>5</sup>

A prior clarification: the present essay will not lay out Balthasar's contribution to the question of the necessary interrelation of the different states of life in the Church—states all founded in the one, principal state of Christ himself. It will concentrate instead on his conception of the consecrated life in the world. What we say here concerning this state is not meant, however, to detract in any way from the other forms of life in the Church. Quite to the contrary: each state in the Church, while having a specificity of its own, also includes the others. Each state *is* in its *self-giving* to God (the “Non-Other”: *Non-Aliud*) and to the other in the Church and in the world. Thanks to this self-giving, the one, Catholic Church lives in the *wonder* of divine Love (it lives by “transcending itself into miracle”).<sup>6</sup> The *raison d'être* of each state, of its existence and its unique gifts, is not self-perfection, but service within Christ's service of giving the world back to the Father in the personal, differentiating unity of the Holy Spirit.

### 1. Counsel and Gospel

In order to approach a proper understanding of our topic, we must first concentrate our attention on the Biblical foundation of the consecrated life. Everything depends on this starting-point, this first integrating “*et*” between the consecrated life *and* Jesus' original life with his disciples. Jesus Christ “called to himself those whom he

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<sup>5</sup>Compare the doctoral thesis of Daniela Mohr, *Existenz im Herzen der Kirche. Zur Theologie der Säkularinstitute im Leben und Werk Hans Urs von Balthasars* (Würzburg, 2000) on the secular institutes in Hans Urs von Balthasar. This work, the first on our theme, offers a good presentation of the existing material. Nevertheless, Mohr's basic thesis differs from that of the present essay. According to Mohr, Balthasar's effort aimed at an integration of God and the world, but in fact succeeded in suffocating a true lay life, a real call and significance of the (human) other, with a conception of the vows understood too narrowly in terms of the religious life, of an exclusive, and excluding, call of God. Our difference from Mohr is rooted, ultimately, in a different understanding of unity, that is, of the characteristic way in which the Holy Spirit unites.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 287–307.

willed,” and they followed him (Mk 3:13; Mt 10:1; Lk 6:13; Jn 1:39). For Balthasar, this simple fact to which the Gospel bears witness points to the “christological foundation” of the consecrated life or state of the counsels.<sup>7</sup> This personal call of Jesus separates the one called from the world and, at the same time, consecrates him to follow Jesus exclusively as the only Son of the Father. This christological exclusivity is, in turn, the foundation of an openness that includes all of creation.

Balthasar cites Saint Paul to corroborate this original unity between counsel and Gospel. The Apostle, in fact, characterizes his life as a following of the *Crucified*: “I have been crucified with Christ [*Christô systairōmai*]; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:19–20; cf. 1 Cor 2:2; 2 Cor 5:15; Phil 2:6–8; Heb 5:8–9; 1 Cor 4, 9:13). Christ’s being crucified, which is primary and original with respect to every other, is the apex of an existence that is a total donation of love—and it is precisely *this* act of handing oneself over totally that is the nucleus animating the consecrated life: “The scope of *Christ’s total donation*, which has redeemed me and made me a son of God, is precisely defined by the ‘evangelical counsels.’”<sup>8</sup> This donation in poverty, chastity, and obedience perfectly expresses the divine Love, even as it is the sole means of our salvation.<sup>9</sup>

The consecrated state is the most intense “active participation” in the “reality and effectiveness of the Lord’s redemptive mission.”<sup>10</sup> The ever-deepening intensity (what Balthasar called the “always more,” the “Je-Mehr”) that characterizes this participation is based entirely on the life of Christ. Consequently, it is not opposed to the other states of life, but is rather at their service.

The state of the counsels, then, is an immediate following of the central existential act of the Person of the Son: “the fundamental act of his existence is to do, not his will, but the will of the Father.”<sup>11</sup> Jesus’ entire spontaneity is sustained, and determined, by his deeper obedient

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<sup>7</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Gottbereites Leben* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1993), 13.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 203–204.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 365.

<sup>11</sup>Balthasar, *Gottbereites Leben*, 14.

donation to his Father:<sup>12</sup> “for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of the one who sent me” [*allà tò thélema tou pémpsantós me*] (Jn 6:38). Christ’s earthly mode of existence in poverty, obedience, and virginity is his very “form of life.” Here, then, we find the original unity between the evangelical counsels and the life of Jesus, a unity that expresses in an incarnate way his total love for the Father.

Moreover, Jesus communicates this unity to his own, inviting or counseling those who can and, therefore, *must* hear, literally (*sine glossa*, as Francis of Assisi put it) to “sell all” (Lk 18:22), to leave “house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the Gospel” (Mk 10:29), to leave “house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God” (Lk 18:29). This act of leaving everything is the initial and permanent moment of an exclusive following of Jesus (Mt 19:21, 29), a following that involves taking something of his cross and losing one’s life for him without complaint (Lk 9:23ff). This is not, of course, a negative or neutral self-emptying, a leap into the void or into what the egocentrism of a fallen world considers the “beyond.” It is rather a following of Christ’s self-giving to the Father in incarnatory, cruciform, eucharistic love. *This* “beyond,” *this* “always more” that characterizes the Son’s relation to the Father, is never a neutral vacuum, but the Person of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the holy bond linking the Word and the Father; he is their “beyond,” the personal embodiment of the fruitful “more” of their love.

The Church itself (and so all of the states that form its structure), originates in the Person of Christ.<sup>13</sup> The Church participates in Jesus’ original “state” in and before his Father in the Spirit. It participates in the eccentric-concentric state that the Son takes on in his incarnation for the salvation of the world: *from* the Father to the world and, together with the world, *toward* the Father (incarnation—cross—eucharist—glory).

Now, the Church is not merely an extension of the Son without any freedom of its own. Rather, it comes into being thanks to the primordial created response given by Mary at the Annunciation and at the foot of the cross. Mary’s unlimited “Yes,” which is obedient, virginal, and poor, is the condition of her maternal fruitfulness; it is the bond linking her divine maternity and

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 122.

her motherhood of the Church, of all believers (Lk 1:38: *fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*; 1:45ff: *magnificat anima mea Dominum*; 11:28: *quinimmo beati qui audiunt Verbum Dei et custodiunt*).<sup>14</sup>

The consecrated life is the most intense form of participation in this original dialogue between the Yes of the triune God and the Yes of Mary who is mother because she is virgin. It has its origin at the foot of the cross. It springs forth when Christ, breathing his last, gives, gives to each other, and thus unites in fruitfulness, his virgin mother and his virgin disciple, John (Jn 19:25–27). This action of the Son fulfills the “economy” of the trinitarian “mystery” (Eph 3:9). It is the consummation of his self-gift, which coincides with the outpouring of his blood and the ex-spiration of the Spirit to the Father and, through the Father, to his bride, the Church (Jn 19:28–30), represented *in actu primo redemptionis* [in the primary act of the redemption] by its original cell (Mary–John), the “dove” of the Song of Songs.<sup>15</sup>

The religious life continued this dialogue of total self-giving between Jesus and his mother in the Church after the time of the apostles and the first persecutions. The monastic life, for example, is a prolongation of Christian martyrdom (witness) through appropriation of the paschal mystery thanks to the life of the evangelical counsels. Monasticism is a concrete way of incarnating the one thing necessary (Lk 10:42). Each historical form of consecrated life is a following of Christ, the Founder *par excellence*, and of his mother, the handmaid of the Lord. Each form is perfect in itself, inasmuch as it is a concrete representation of incarnate triune love in its totality. But this perfection is open to new developments. In the unique event, there is room for new, creative leaps forward.

The trail of light formed by the great religious founders reveals a tendency towards an increasing intensification of the *unity* between consecration *and* worldly mission. We see this tendency in the succession stretching from Basil through Augustine, Benedict, and Francis, to Ignatius of Loyola. The goal of this tendency is not to cancel the distinction between the triune God and the world, the cross and eschatological fulfillment, consecration and life, but rather to bring them into a more intense unity, a unity that is indeed the fruit of their positive, ineliminable difference.<sup>16</sup> This fruitful unity is understood more and more

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>15</sup>Balthasar, *Spirit and Institution*, 298.

<sup>16</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Die grossen Ordensregeln* (Trier: Johannes Verlag, 1974),

“from above,” in terms of the absolute trinitarian love itself, while this greater theocentrism brings with it, in turn, a greater affirmation of, and engagement with, the world.

Recapitulating, we can say that the consecrated state has a *form-giving, representative* function within the body of the Church, because it expresses as a state the “perfection of love in the gift of all one has—one’s possessions as well as one’s life and all the goods of one’s soul” (poverty, virginity, and obedience). This state makes present in history, in the mode of renunciation, “the idea of man as God conceived him and as he ought to be.” It is a freely-given participation in the imparticipable incarnation-cross-eucharist of the Son, which is itself the uttermost expression of the holiness and glory of the triune God in and from the world in its actual fallen condition.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. *The evangelical counsels and the world*

The first integration (the counsels and the Gospel) brings us to a second central aspect: the integration of life according to the evangelical counsels *and* the world. This integration indicates the particular modality that the consecrated state acquires in Balthasar’s conception. In order to illustrate this, we will present two observations, the first more personal and the second more doctrinal in nature.

In the fall of 1940, as Balthasar was walking through the country around Basel with his friend Robert Rast (1920–1946), the two began to realize that the present situation called for a unification of total Christian engagement and authentic professional life in the world. This encounter gave birth to the idea of what would come to be called the “*Schulungsgemeinschaft*” [training community], a group of Catholic formation for young professionals.<sup>18</sup> Rast’s untimely death left a “painful void” in Balthasar’s heart, even as he was confident that his friend would

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<sup>17</sup>Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 168.

<sup>18</sup>Peter Henrici, S.J., “A Sketch of Balthasar’s Life,” in *Hans Urs von Balthasar. His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 17.

watch over the nascent mission from heaven.<sup>19</sup> Around the same time, Balthasar met, also in Basel, Adrienne von Speyr. The meeting would be decisive for him. Von Speyr was a medical doctor who had married Werner Kaegi, a history professor at the university of Basel, after the death of her first husband. Although a Protestant at the time of their meeting, von Speyr was to enter the Catholic Church on the Feast of All Saints in the year 1940. Together, Balthasar and von Speyr felt the call to throw their energies into the foundation of a Catholic consecrated community for young people with a university education who would find the stability of their mission, not in a monastery, but at the heart of the world. An authentic, uncompromising evangelical consecration, Balthasar and von Speyr believed, would be capable of maturing through remaining, that is to say, *being*, in the *saeculum*.<sup>20</sup>

This initiative was confirmed by three documents of Pius XII: *Provida Mater Ecclesia* (1947), *Primo Feliciter* (1948), *Cum Sanctissimus* (1948). In these documents, the Church showed herself once again—and, for Balthasar and von Speyr, in a surprising way—to be a “mother at once far seeing and provident,” as Balthasar would later write, playing on the Latin word “*provida*.”<sup>21</sup> Balthasar, in turn, entrusted to the Church the protection of these new communities called *instituta saecularia*. *Provida Mater* centers the consecrated life in the traditional “total giving and consecration to Christ” (*plenam Christo deditioem et consecrationem*).<sup>22</sup> But it now recognizes a new way of realizing this perfection of love in the midst of the world (*etiam in saeculo*). This way consists of living a total consecration while simultaneously remaining in the world (*in mundo manentes*).<sup>23</sup> This “being” in the world is not something neutral. Nor is it simply a lesser evil. Rather, it is the patient abiding, indeed, *being*, of consecrated love. It draws its nourishment from the world itself (*non tantum in saeculo, sed veluti ex saeculo* [not only in the

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<sup>19</sup>Speyr, *Die Zeit der grossen Diktate*, 178.

<sup>20</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Our Task* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 47.

<sup>21</sup>Beyer, *Die kirchlichen Urkunden für die Weltgemeinschaften*, 10.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 12–14. The reference is to number 2 of *Provida Mater*.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 20. The reference is to number 7 of *Provida Mater*.



world, but, as it were, from the world]),<sup>24</sup> for it subsists only in its service of the other. In principle, then, this abiding in Christ's self-giving is not separate from the world. Rather, it has its being in giving itself to the world. In this way, it enables the love of Christ to grow from within the world itself. Such is the ecclesial integration to which Balthasar aspired—an integration that happens in the dialogue between the Church's consecrated Yes and the world itself, embraced and fostered by the rhythm of absolute love (*Non Aliud*), which grows together with the world and, in so doing, sets it free.

In obeying this mission, the secular institutes become, *concomitanter*, a Christian response to the problem of contemporary secularization.<sup>25</sup> This response springs from the “superministerial” origin of the Church, the cross as the well-spring of all the sacraments. It resonates from within the complex problematic of the lay life itself, which is, as it were, its proper soundbox.<sup>26</sup> Planted firmly by the evangelical counsels in the original center of the Church, the members of the secular institutes live in a movement towards the worldly periphery. Moving in an ellipse between the consecrated center and the secular periphery, they find themselves positioned, by grace, at the point where the immanent Trinity, the economy of salvation, and post-lapsarian creation meet. In this way, God and the world share with each other what each has and *is*. This mutual communication constitutes the ecclesial form of life of the secular institutes. This form is an immediate *sequela Christi*<sup>27</sup> as the

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 46. The reference is to no. 2 of *Primo Feliciter*. The italics are original.

<sup>25</sup>See Pope John Paul II's messages during his visit to Austria in June of 1998.

<sup>26</sup>See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Layman and the Church,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2: *Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 315–331.

<sup>27</sup>“But his [the Son's] life, which he distributes to all, is the life that comes from the Father and is lived for the Father's sake, which, brought to earth by the Holy Spirit, will issue in the distribution of the Holy Spirit. It is the life of the Trinity in its opening to us . . . . For this reason, we are invited, *following him*—in whatever way—to participate as far as possible in his intimacy with the Father and the Spirit in our love for him and for our fellow human beings. The trinitarian event in the life of the Son is necessarily offered to us concomitantly—in a form adequate to us—through the invitation to *follow Christ*” (Adrienne von Speyr, *Das Wort und die Mystik*, vol. 2: *Objektive Mystik* [Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1970], 112).

eucharistic way of being characteristic of Christ, the concrete *analogia entis*.<sup>28</sup>

The christological and marian character of this form of life moves us to enter with reverence into the consecrated heart of the Church, which is the origin of worldly being itself (*interior intimo—superior summo*: more interior than the inmost—higher than the utmost): the mystery of the all-encompassing trinitarian God in whom all things (including all that we have said and have yet to say)—has its consistency, its perfect expression, and its ultimate meaning.

### 3. Secular institutes and trinitarian mystery

The foregoing discussion suggests the next step we must take: to enter into the decisive integration of the world, the creation as a whole, within the mystery of the triune God. For the first two integrations sketched above also receive their primary foundation and ultimate illumination when placed in the light, at once descending and ascending, of trinitarian love, the primary analogate of all integration and unity. It is in this third, trinitarian integration that the ultimate root of the secular institutes lies.

Balthasar sought to perceive, live, and think all of reality from and towards the mystery of the triune God, the *analogatum princeps* of every “manifest hidden mystery” (Goethe). His mission, work, and Christian engagement in the world arose from, developed within, and culminated in, the mystery of the Holy Trinity.<sup>29</sup> By the

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<sup>28</sup>“The measure of maximum nearness and of maximum separation between God and man is given its foundation and its roots and altogether surpassed by the real nearness and real distance between Father and Son in the Spirit on the Cross and in the Resurrection. The Son alone knows what it means to live in the Father, to rest in his bosom, to love him, to serve him, and he alone can know the full significance of being abandoned by him” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994], 69). See, too, the footnote on the same page.

<sup>29</sup>The centrality of the mystery of the Trinity as absolute love was one of the first fruits of Balthasar’s “double mission.” We cite a few texts that attest to this point. On the feast of the Holy Trinity in the year 1942, Balthasar writes that “all of her works, as well as mine, must contain something trinitarian . . . . To show, live, and give back the Trinity in our works” (Adrienne von Speyr, *Erde und Himmel*, vol. 1: *Subjektive Mystik* [Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1970], 198). On the other hand, both authors see Mary as the appropriate response to this Mystery. It is only thanks to Mary that we escape the constant danger of intellectualizing or suffocating the mystery of the divine

same token, Balthasar conceived the secular institutes as the organic ecclesial expression of this mystery.

Any meditation on the mystery of the Trinity has to begin with the incarnate Son.<sup>30</sup> Starting from his earthly life, we can perceive the life of God himself. There is thus a living unity of heaven and earth. And Jesus lived a life consecrated exclusively to his Father by the Holy Spirit. In the unfolding event of the life of Jesus (*economia*), we contemplate the unfolding event of absolute being (*theologia*). The whole creation has its ground in Christ as the concrete *analogia entis*. Christ recapitulates created being in himself in the same act in which he expresses in his person the fontal being-love that is the Father. The Son lives as man on earth only in order to serve—and so to glorify—his Father.<sup>31</sup> In his obedient service of the Father, the Son brings to completion creation as such, for it is by this service that he sustains it and hands it over to the Father by the mediation of the Holy Spirit. It is only the Son's act of obediently giving himself over, and thus of going beyond himself, that allows creation to be filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit. The world, participating in the economic mission (the three persons always act together in a way befitting their respective personal properties), which is the temporal expression of the intra-divine event (the event of the one essence and the processions of the persons in God), is also able to give something of itself to God, in a reception of, and response to, the divine love.

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being. "No being has as close a relation to the Trinity as Mary. She is for us in a special sense the path and the representation of the Trinity" (ibid., 434). She is the created person in whom the tri-personal God shows, gives, and utters himself. She literally represents this mystery insofar as she conceives and gives birth in her virginal flesh to the Son of the Father in the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:26–38; 2:4–20).

<sup>30</sup>Speyr, *Objektive Mystik*, 94; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik*, vol. 2: *Wahrheit Gottes* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1985), 13–23.

<sup>31</sup>"The revelation of Christ is at the service of the revelation of the Trinity. When dogmatic theology confuses or flattens these differentiations with talk of merely external appropriations, it risks undermining the entire credo, so much so, that the only securely knowable thing left is Pontius Pilate, whereas the rest sinks to the level of a mere simile" (Speyr, *Objektive Mystik*, 97); "Jesus' relation to the Father . . . is not merely the expression and self-declaration of a naked humanity, but, through the humanity, of his person, which is inseparable from, and exhibits itself through, his humanity—the person of the trinitarian Son of the Father (Mt 11:27)" (Balthasar, *Wahrheit Gottes*, 117).

Balthasar places the secular institutes (*in et ex saeculo*) in God's interaction with the world thanks to the unity of the trinitarian missions. He places them, in other words, precisely where the two-in-one mission of the "two hands of the Father"—the Son and the Spirit—takes place.<sup>32</sup> The very form of these communities (a form that unites the state of God and the worldly state) expresses as such the mystery of the interpenetration, in being and action, of God and the world in Christ and the Spirit.

According to Balthasar, the Father created the world very good in view of the precious blood of his *Son*.<sup>33</sup> The Son, for his part, lets himself be sent by the Father for the task of redemption, as the definitive Word that unveils the Love of the Father and, so, of the whole Trinity in flesh and blood. He shared our life and our work for thirty years. While Christ's whole life was one of vicarious representation, he brought this mystery to its apex in the three days of the *Mysterium Paschale*. At the end of the earthly life of the incarnate Son, both Father and Son bestow their mutual *Spirit of love*. This bestowal achieves the unity of the economy of salvation and the intra-trinitarian *theologia*. The Spirit, who unites Father and Son both subjectively and objectively, is now breathed forth on the cross through the flesh of the Son into the body of the Church. The intra-trinitarian *filioque* now takes place as eucharistic gift in the incarnate relation of Christ and the Church, his Bride.

In handing over the Spirit in death ("consummatum est, et inclinato capite tradidit spiritum" [Jn 19:30]), the Son goes to "the end" of love (cf. Jn 13:1) in the uttermost concreteness. By the same gesture, moreover, he fully completes the return gift he makes to the Father in the Trinity itself—only now he does so through his abandonment, in an act of substitution for us whereby he really "takes away the sins of the world." The unity of trinitarian love occurs as event in the obedient, eucharistic death of the Son. This central mystery of love is received, and answered, by the immaculate Church in the person of Mary who, at the foot of the cross, represents all her children, that is, all believers.

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<sup>32</sup>The expression "two hands of the Father" is from Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.* V, 1, 3.

<sup>33</sup>What follows is a commentary on a rich passage from Balthasar's *Our Task*, 128–130.

The Spirit, witness and fruit of this mystery, is given to *all* believers. But he is given in a qualified way to those called to continue Mary's poor, virginal, and obedient reception of the mystery at the foot of the cross. The mission of the consecrated, then, finds its native ground, its matrix, when they "stand" with Christ and his mother at the timeless moment in which heaven and earth are perfectly united in the Son's death out of love and in the breathing forth of the Spirit from the Son's flesh into the body of his Bride, the Church. The heteronomy of sin is transformed into a common rule of love. The spiration of the Spirit by the Father and the incarnate Son (*filioque*) now extends to include humanity itself in the eternal thanksgiving that links the divine persons. Obeying the Son in his thanksgiving to the Father in the Holy Spirit (who embodies the "rule" of the Christian's loving obedience), the consecrated person can be at one and the same time child-like before God and mature before the world, simple and ingenuous and prudent. He can pray and work, he can cultivate the growth of his profession and of his vocation. And he can do all this in unity, inasmuch as all of the aspects just mentioned express the one self-donation of Christ to the Father thanks to the Spirit.<sup>34</sup>

The secular institutes belong, by their very origin, where the world is concretely taken up into God. Their very form is rooted in the free *circumincessio* between God and the world. The two hands of the Father are at work in them, fashioning from the world a response worthy of the divine love.

We could make the same point drawing on an original intuition of Adrienne von Speyr: God needs more love than he receives from the world *and* human beings need more love than they receive from the world. The secular institutes aspire to place themselves at the intersection of these two needs. Where these needs intersect, vicarious, eucharistic interchange becomes possible. This "where" is, once again, the foot of the cross. At the foot of the cross, both necessities—the Father's desire to be loved by his creation and human beings' desire to be loved by God and by their brothers—are superabundantly fulfilled. The most needy, those who patiently seek God's love in their wretchedness, those praised in the Beatitudes

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<sup>34</sup>"We then understand: it is the Holy Spirit who mediates this atmosphere of the 'towards.' It is embodied in the Son, but communicated in the Spirit. And then everything goes to the Father, whom we do not see" (Speyr, *Objektive Mystik*, 572).

who hunger and thirst, the poor in love, have a special place in this fulfillment. The very ecclesial form of the secular institutes both enables and obliges them to return filial human love to the Father from the heart of the world together with his Son, and to return fraternal divine love to their brethren together with the same firstborn Son—to the glory of the Father.

Balthasar thus finds the evangelical counsels theocentrically at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:25–27) and in the reception of the Spirit (Jn 19:30; 20:21). The counsels are situated in an oscillation—not in a fixed location, but in the encounter of God’s need and the world’s need for love. This “place” is the indescribable point of unity between the *analogia entis* and the *analogia caritatis*, between creation and redemption. It is there that the secular institutes’ form of life becomes integrated with love of God and the world.<sup>35</sup> Taken up into this oscillating, contemplative center, those who are called do not give a love of their own, possessed independently of their brethren. They do not offer a “donation” from the surplus of some worldly treasure. Rather, they give the love of God himself *thanks to God and to the others*. This love “belongs” to them only insofar as they participate in the movement of gratuitous donation characteristic of *God’s* love. In the unity of person and mission, they live an existential eucharist in the rhythm of God’s super-fluous love. Their very ecclesial form, which unites the consecrated center of the Church and the heart of the world, enables and fosters the interchange between God and man. Indeed, this ecclesial form itself occurs in the fire of God’s ever greater love as a new and eternal covenant. “For our God is a consuming fire” [*ignis consumens*] (Heb 12:29). “But because love is ultimate, the seraphim cover their faces with their wings, for the mystery of eternal love is one whose superluminous night may be glorified only through adoration.”<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. Secular institutes and the Trilogy

At this point, it will be good to say a word concerning the correlation that exists between the secular institutes, with their

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<sup>35</sup>Balthasar, *Our Task*, 128–132.

<sup>36</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logik*, vol. 1: *Truth of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 272.

trinitarian shape, and Balthasar's principal work, the so-called Trilogy (*The Glory of the Lord*, *Theo-Drama*, and *Theo-Logic*). This symphonic work provides the secular institutes with a realm of meaning, a luminous space in which to be nurtured and to grow. At the same time, the secular institutes provide the Trilogy with a qualified locus of existential concreteness and an opening to the world of time (this latter aspect already suggests the following point).

### *Origin*

The above-mentioned correlation is rooted first of all in a common origin. Both the Trilogy and Balthasar's conception of the secular institutes arose from the existential and intellectual maturity that came to Balthasar when, according to his own account, he attained the full form of his existence thanks to the meeting of St. Ignatius and St. John the Evangelist mediated by Adrienne von Speyr: "It was Adrienne von Speyr," Balthasar writes, "who showed the way in which Ignatius is fulfilled by John and therewith laid the basis for most of what I have published since 1940."<sup>37</sup> This "way" was the *kairos* in which the form of Balthasar's person and mission—and, therefore, his mature conception of the secular institutes' form of life and of his Trilogy—took shape.

Balthasar's perception, his work, and his thought both generate, and aspire to consummate, classical forms. The desire for love that Balthasar finds in both God and the world is preserved and enhanced by authentic forms, by expressive plenitudes—by the complete, yet ever new love of John that, through its own inner movement, expands into the total, obedient service born of decision that characterizes Ignatius of Loyola. The aspiration towards love has been met by its fulfillment, which in turn surprises the aspiration with an ever-greater fruitfulness, which is ever more engaged with those who have not yet, or have not yet wanted to be, touched. Such was the experience that was born for Balthasar in the silence of prayer and dialogue—and became a life and a work filled with a new, even deeper aspiration. Anchored in the *Urgestalt* of Christ's being

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<sup>37</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 89.

and life, both the form of consecrated life in the world and the Trilogy devoted to the form of absolute love began to take shape in Balthasar's thought and life:

It ought to be possible to revive everything from the core so intensely that whatever was dead would vainly resist resurrection. The result would be a breakthrough born from the most elementary potencies of Christianity. So, neither apologetics *ad extra* nor esoteric silliness . . . but simple Christian irradiation: from the inmost core to the outermost extremity.<sup>38</sup>

The Trilogy, as is well known, is structured in accord with the transcendentals of the beautiful, the true, and the good, each of which is seen in terms of the analogy that obtains between the transcendentals in God and their creaturely forms—an analogy mediated in each case by the obedience in love of the Son. Thus, the first part of the Trilogy—*The Glory of the Lord*—lives from the analogy between the real beauty of the world and the glory of God. The second part, the *Theo-Drama*, lives in the analogy between the dramatic theater—which is tragic without Christ—and the *Theatrum Dei*. Finally, the *Theo-Logic* moves within the analogy between the truth of the world and the Truth of God.

Balthasar sees the transcendentals as, respectively, a self-manifestation (*pulchrum*), a self-giving (*bonum*), and a self-uttering (*verum*). In God, these acts are the self-manifestation, self-giving, and self-utterance of being as love in the concrete essence, especially in man's Yes. In both cases, however, they are epiphanies of the gratuity of being/Being, mediated, once again, by the loving obedience of the Son. The ecclesial form of life for which Balthasar labored—the form of the secular institutes—corresponds both in its rhythm and in its content to this epiphany:

the greatest possible radiance in the world by virtue of the closest possible following of Christ. At the point where the tension between being a Christian and being a man like other men is at its strongest . . . there is raised up . . . the reality itself, either in its visibility or (as with everything weighty in Christianity) in its invisibility. Today this form of existence takes a new ecclesial

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<sup>38</sup>Speyr, *Die Zeit der grossen Diktate*, 195.



shape in the “secular institutes.” For these as a structure are beyond doubt the unifying midpoint of the Church.<sup>39</sup>

### *Unfolding*

When Balthasar speaks of the “closest possible following of Christ,” he is speaking of an obedience (Ignatius) of love (John): “In my view, all that is decisive takes place in the spiritual space that lies between the two poles of John and Ignatius.”<sup>40</sup> What is at stake, in other words, is a loving disponibility (*fiat*). This disponibility is the center both of the consecrated life and of each of the three parts of the Trilogy, for it is the central attitude of Christ himself—the attitude by means of which he brings to completion the Father’s creation. Obedience is the real, incarnate, concrete mode in which love is expressed and so realized. It is thus the center of the transcendentals and the power that sustains their unfolding—and, for the same reason, the center of Christian life itself.

The contemplation of Christ’s original consecration to the Father brings to fruition the creature’s response—a response of total self-donation. The contemplative is one called, marked, consecrated, and blessed, who truly forgets himself, goes out of himself, distributes the gift he has received, and shares his very self. He is one who communicates overflowingly, who gives to others with ever greater generosity, because he himself receives, and giving and receiving are one and, in their unity, infinite: *Benedixit—fregit—diditque*. Working in the Lord’s consecration, he is a collaborator of the truth who unveils, together with Him, the love of the Father that anticipates every thought, who shares in realizing the truth of God and the world.

The unfolding of the Christian life, of which the consecrated is but a condensation in the act of service, and the unfolding of the transcendentals, are co-extensive. The center of each of the transcendentals in the Trilogy occurs in Christ’s obedience of love, which takes within itself, out of pure grace, the creature’s response to God. This attitude opens up both the Being of God and the being of the world. Obedience is the Yes that perceives and brings to light

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<sup>39</sup>Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect*, 58.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

both created being and triune being (*Er-scheinung* [appearance]—*pulchrum*). It is the Yes that gives, in radical decision, and that enacts the mystery of vicarious representation—especially in the “serious case” (death)—for the other, the brother for whom Christ died (*Ent-scheidung* [decision])—*bonum*). Finally, obedience is the Yes that bears witness to and unveils being as love—in the world and in the cross of the Son (the way, the truth, and the life) as the Word of the Father, the Yes that, in substitution, unites and unveils (apocalypse) heaven and hell (*Ent-hüllung*—*verum*).

*The end: opening in service*

The unfolding of the transcendentals draws its life from a fundamental unity: the whole process is born from the full, obedient response of the Son’s love of the Father—and from the obedient response of pilgrim man to the love of creation and of God. Thus, when we arrive at the end, we find ourselves once more in the beginning. Every recapitulation is fruitful: it enables the emergence of a fruit, a new task in which the origin lives, expresses itself, and smiles . . . . Now, the task to which the Trilogy opens us is identical to the task of the form of the secular institutes: to live gratuitous love that characterizes the being both of God and of creation, to allow it to light up, give itself, and utter itself in the midst of the suffocating world of “self interest”:

And so what we are truly concerned with here is a new integration in which Christians must lead the way, an integration of the service of the world into the all-embracing openness of man to Being. “Service” would mean the responsibility for a destiny whose dimensions lie with Being, which disposes and determines. “You cannot serve two masters,” and so one of them, the service of the world, must take its measure from the other, which itself has no measure (being “indifferent”). For a man can give himself fully only once. But his gift of self is a response, to the one who is the ground of his being-permitted-to-be; to him who ultimately wants from man not things and objects but his very self. *Fili, praebe mihi cor tuum*. However perfect things may be, man will never improve his heart through them; the world will

only be filled with love by making ultimate decisions for love, and never through the ameliorations of technology.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, would not this very tension between the total, secularized world and the universality of the Christian mission in this world—would this not keep alive a dramatic interplay? Would it not preserve us from the leveling-down of everything, Christian or non-Christian, under the universal, impersonal, dialectical law of “die and become”?<sup>42</sup>

[I]f every mission, in particular every highly nuanced mission [in the sense used by Adrienne von Speyr], is a participation in the whole mission of Christ . . . the drama of each particular Christian life can, in its own way, be a kind of reflection of the mission of Christ . . . .<sup>43</sup>

Where Hegel announces the *end* of drama (albeit a drama seen chiefly in terms of “art” and “theater”), new possibilities of drama open up from the angle of a Catholic theology. It may be the task of Christians to lay hold of drama’s relevance and interpret it to the world, just as, elsewhere, we have enjoined them to shoulder responsibility for the philosophical task.<sup>44</sup>

The confession of one’s own unveiledness before God and the confession of the unveiledness of one’s neighbor before us are both only one aspect within the all-ruling confession of God’s mystery for every creature.<sup>45</sup>

The *truth* of sin (particularly when it is seen as the lie) must be realized somewhere in the iron ruthlessness implied by the sinner’s “No” to God and God’s “No” to this refusal. And this could only be realized by someone who is so truthful in himself that he is able to acknowledge the full negativity of this “No”:

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<sup>41</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 654.

<sup>42</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 1: *Prologomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 68.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 68–69.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 69–70.

<sup>45</sup>Balthasar, *The Truth of the World*, 271.

someone who is able to experience it, to bear it, to suffer its deadly opposition and melt its rigidity through pain.<sup>46</sup>

##### 5. *The secular institutes and historical mission*

We must now touch briefly on a final aspect: secular institutes and the Christian task in history. Both God and the world express their being in a historical event, in history understood as the *apocalypsis*—the unveiling—of their mutual love. The theater of the world is the place of the mutual self-revelation, self-donation, and self-declaration of God and the world. It is also the expressive field in which the secular institutes fulfill their native form.

The secular institutes, we have seen, are a qualified existential locus for the mutual glorification, “dramatization,” and confession of God and the world. They bring about an epiphany of God and the creation thanks to their very consecration, by their enactment of their own being as an obedience of love. This obedience, the center and apex that includes the other evangelical counsels, enfolds and fosters their action in the world. Indeed, their defining task is “worldly profession as the expression of consecrated obedience, Christianization of the worldly domain thanks to the full form of the consecrated state.”<sup>47</sup> Incarnated in the temporal sphere, this obedience is the concrete expression, at the level of the beautiful, the good, and the true, of God and the world.

In order to understand something of this central point, we will consider Balthasar’s *Tragedy Under Grace*, a book-length study of German Catholic historian and man of letters Reinhold Schneider. The book represents Balthasar’s dialogue with Schneider concerning the task of Christianity today, which is to say, the way in which it must collaborate in the assumption (*tollere*) of the human tragedy into the drama of God himself. Significantly, *Tragedy Under Grace* bears the following dedication: “Written for and dedicated to the Secular Institutes.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Does Jesus Know Us?—Do We Know Him?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 35.

<sup>47</sup>Balthasar, *Gottbereites Leben*, 105.

<sup>48</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Tragedy Under Grace: Reinhold Schneider on the Experience of the West* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 5.

Schneider's conception and configuration of reality were historical rather than systematic. He saw history, moreover, as the place of the coming of God's kingdom:

The Christian life is never concerned only with souls but with the whole world, with the salvation of all men, and with the glorification of Christ by all and the return of all men to the Father through him: it is concerned with sharing in the accomplishment of history.<sup>49</sup>

Now, for Schneider, the weight of a man, of a time, of history itself is measured by the quality of their decisions. The cosmos becomes history—history as the image and the locus of the event of God's decision for God on the cross of the Son.<sup>50</sup>

Accordingly, Balthasar's study of Schneider's work traces the decisions of the dominant peoples of the West as a succession of concrete forms of the "apocalypse" or unveiling of the European soul—in the light of *the* decision *par excellence*: the cross of the God-man between the Old and the New Covenants.<sup>51</sup> The degree of fullness reached by any historical figure (one who represents the whole of a people or a community) is conditional upon how intimately he approaches, and how intensely he shares in, the divine-human decision of the Lord of history.

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<sup>49</sup>Reinhold Schneider, *Das Heilige in der Geschichte* (Heidelberg, 1947), 13; cited in Balthasar, *Tragedy Under Grace*, 24.

<sup>50</sup>"The weight of a man, of a time, of history as a whole is weighed from the peak of the decisions taken; and all that is in the world and in nature (although these remain fallen nature and guilty world in the concreteness of history) is material and presupposition for the decision. In this sense, the principle that *gratia supponit naturam* holds good for the historian Schneider. Far from bringing about a harmony that would dispense from the contradiction of the Cross, the encounter of these realities can take place only in the Cross" (Balthasar, *Tragedy Under Grace*, 27).

<sup>51</sup>Balthasar's first great trilogy, the *Apocalypse of the German Soul* (1937–1939), already traces the unveiling of the decisions of figures representative (in Balthasar's strong sense) of the German soul—decisions of that soul (portrayed in the "myth" of Prometheus and Dionysus) for the God of the Crucified or for itself. Nietzsche sums up the either-or in its most extreme form: Dionysus or the Crucified. This either-or cannot be resolved by a judgment from the outside, but only by an existential accompaniment of the decisive figures in order to help the soul confront, and confess to, the crucified God who comes toward it.

Both Balthasar and Schneider point to this apocalypse, and both seek, each in his own way, to contribute towards the unveiling of the history of our time. By dedicating *Tragedy Under Grace* to the secular institutes, Balthasar orients them towards the shaping of history as their proper domain and task. He invites them to impress on the ever-moving margin of history the seal of consecrated love (here we have, once again, the interplay between center and periphery mentioned above).

We cannot enter here into the concrete fabric of Schneider's historical symbolism. Suffice it to say that he assigns to each nation of the European West a particular mission in the drama of the historical coming of the kingdom, with a certain preponderance of his own people (the Germans). The heart of Balthasar's study consists, for its part, in the examination, from the point of view of a present open to the future, of the *analogia historicitatis* between the kingdom of the world *and* the kingdom of the Father.

*Tragedy Under Grace* ends with what, according to Balthasar, was the ultimate goal that drew Schneider from the beginning. Schneider hoped for a type of "holy man of a supernatural form, but turned toward the formlessness of the world and history, the religious knight."<sup>52</sup> According to Schneider, Christian nobility or knighthood was a central protagonist of Christian history, a pure expression of the Christian West. He saw it as a form of existence open to, and responsible for, the world by reason of a Christian mission.

It would be a mistake to denigrate this ideal as a mere romanticism or elitism. For its core consists in conceiving one's existence solely as a mission within the mission of Christ, a pouring of one's personal center into an uttermost service. For Schneider, the analogy of history spoken of just now comes to pass in the analogy of Christian service, which helps man's Yes to God and the world to blossom forth from the midst of the contradiction or negation of God and the self-contradiction of the world. The decision that this service requires qualifies, for the most part in silence and hiddenness, the weight of the world's history. The existential eucharist of Christian service lifts, both ontologically and supernaturally, the *theatrum mundi* into the *Theatrum Dei*.

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<sup>52</sup>Balthasar, *Tragedy Under Grace*, 29.

Schneider's greatest wish was that this ideal would survive in the heart of his people. Balthasar, for his part, made his own Schneider's legacy, affirming the core of the ideal of Christian nobility. At the same time, Balthasar translated this core into the paradoxical form of the secular institute. The consecrated person is such because of his fundamental decision to follow the leading Actor of history. This decision for an immediate and exclusive *sequela Christi* enables him to *be*, without any heteronomy, in the heart of the world's history. But, whereas in the knightly orders of the Middle Ages, this decision typically led to the hospital or the battlefield, it now takes the consecrated person into the whole range of professional service in the world. In Balthasar's conception, the *veluti ex saeculo* means the professional world as the expression of evangelical consecration, the fruitful unity of obedience and responsibility from and for the real problems of the world.<sup>53</sup>

Balthasar privileges the professions as a crucial locus of the Christianization of today's world. The secular professions are a connection between the academy and practical activity. They express or carry out the human *logos* in the multiplicity and complexity of contemporary life. They mediate the impact of secularized reason on human life. Because, for Balthasar, the secular institutes aim ultimately at a radical healing of a secularized,

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<sup>53</sup>See the following important text: "Mary is not a nun, but she is Mother *because* a virgin. Christ is not a monk, but he is King *because* he is poor and obedient unto death. It is not through Catholic 'action' that the world will be redeemed but through poverty and obedience and an exclusive orientation toward God. And it would be in keeping with our advanced age if Catholics were to learn better to understand that responsibility for the world goes well with obedience, disposition over the world goes well with poverty, experience of the world goes well with virginity—indeed, that the ultimate fruitfulness, even in the realm that is most truly that of the laity, can be expected precisely from this source. Let the one who can grasp this, grasp it. But the one who can grasp it is not the one who psychologizes but the one who thinks christologically in obedience to God's word. What the Middle Ages founded in a one-sided and provisional way for the warrior and the hospital brother must be extended today to the whole breadth of the professions of the laity, in a way that begins from the autonomy of the lay state and from its own problematic, not as a kind of 'third order' appendage to the monastic world, and not necessarily by means of 'lower orders' (diaconate of the laity), which would threaten to make the laymen who had received such a qualification into appendages of the clergy" (Balthasar, *Spouse of the Word*, 331).

fragmented reason, he also insists that their task is to reawaken consecrated love in the midst of the post-Christian academic and professional domains—to enable a secularized being and *logos* to find reconciliation and so to grow, not against, but with the Logos of the Father of history.

Thanks to the trinitarian foundation that we saw above, Balthasar is able to stretch to the utmost the poles that gave definition to the figure of Christian knighthood, transforming the old ideal into the new form of consecration in the world. The result of this transformation is a new integration that makes possible an existential “apocalypse” of man, that is, a confrontation between the extreme decision of divine love and the extreme decision of post-Christian man. The vehicle of this decision is the consecrated Christian’s decision in and *for* a form of Christian life.

The post-Christian tendency of modernity arises, according to Balthasar, from within Christendom itself. Beginning with the nominalism and conceptualism of the late Middle Ages (when the being of the world begins to appear as a neutral or univocal concept),<sup>54</sup> it continues in the Enlightenment, consumes itself in the “will to power”—the extreme nihilistic “gratuity” that attempts to enhance earthly “becoming” to the point of absorbing heavenly “being” in an eternal becoming with no ultimate meaning<sup>55</sup> or direction—and finally collapses exhausted in the

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<sup>54</sup>Balthasar, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, 9–29.

<sup>55</sup>“This is the will to power: ‘resolute commitment to oneself and ‘being master not only of oneself but also of things beyond oneself; thus ‘the will is a potentiality that leads to power.’ Indeed, it leads to ever greater power; hence the idea of the superman. And this ever-intensifying development must be equated with Being-as-such. As Nietzsche says: ‘At its height, the will to power wishes to imprint the mark of *being* upon the process of *becoming*.’ Logically speaking, this inevitably involves the idea of the eternal recurrence of the same things” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3: *The Action* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994], 157). Consider also the following intuitions from Nietzsche’s so-called *Wille zur Macht*: “If ‘there is only *one* being, the I,’ and all other ‘beings’ are made in its image . . . and if, on the otherhand, the I turns out to be something in *becoming*, then—recapitulation: to impress on becoming the character of being—that is the *supreme will to power* . . . . *That everything recurs is the most extreme approach of a world of becoming to the world of being—the summit of contemplation* . . . . ‘Being’ as appearance; inversion of values: it was appearance that *bestowed value* (Friederich Nietzsche, *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Karl Schlechta [Darmstadt], vol. 3 [=WzM], 895. “Come l’uom s’eterna . . . (Inf. XV, 85)” (WzM, 561). “To transform the belief



fragmentation of meaning in which we find ourselves today. The terminus of this historical apocalypse, the collapse of a self-defeating anthropocentric nihilism, reveals an express contradiction of the gratuity of Christian love. Balthasar's hope is that, just as a negative "theological *a priori*" (the separation of reason and faith in order to give space to the freedom of grace) closed the Christian era and opened the way to post-Christianity, so today a theological *a priori* of the gratuity of love (that unites reason and faith in order to allow them to grow together concretely in the glory of their mutual self-donation) might close from within the modern era and open a new Catholic theater of the world.<sup>56</sup>

What Balthasar is proposing with the secular institutes, then, is the possibility of embracing "from below" within the obedience of love the negative tendency operating in the West since the late Middle Ages, its visceral "No" to being assumed in Christ—thanks to the qualitative decisions of those called to an exclusive consecration of this obedience of love in representation of all. What is at stake is thus more than a mere critique from a distance: it is nothing less than a real, patient entrance into the other in order to participate in the substitutionary event of the decision of Christ himself. By the same token, the ultimate goal of the secular institutes is, in Balthasar's conception, to foster an existential, eucharistic echo in present history of that original dialogue between the triune God and Mary that we saw above. This dialogue is nothing other than the growth of the world in total gift to God, authentic worldly profession in Christian consecration, the flowering of the logos in the divine Logos, the fruitfulness of God in man.

The destructive force of the post-Christian tendency towards univocity and contradiction could therefore be transformed, Balthasar hopes, in the analogical rhythm of the *Ever-More* of

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that 'so and so *is*' into the will that 'so and so *shall become that*' (WzM, 849). "That this 'gratuity' [*Umsonst*] is the character of our present nihilism has still to be shown . . . . *Duration*, with a 'gratuitousness,' without an end and goal, is *the most paralyzing* idea, especially when one grasps that one is being fooled and yet has no power to keep from being fooled. Let us think this idea in its most terrible form: existence, as it is, has no direction and goal, but inevitably returns, without any finale in nothingness: '*eternal return*.' That is the most extreme form of nihilism: nothingness ('meaninglessness') eternally!" (WzM, 853).

<sup>56</sup>Balthasar, *Prologomena*, 69–70.

absolute love.<sup>57</sup> The death to self that occurs in this transformation would *already* be a participation in the work of the “two hands of the Father,” the overcoming of self as fulfillment in God: history (apocalypse) in History (Apocalypse), the decision of man in the Decision of God, the form (of life) in Form (of Life), flesh in Flesh, pain in Pain, joy in Joy, created being in triune Being—and all this in a perfect integration open to new developments.

Let us conclude with a text that sums up the task and spirit of the secular institutes. Here we perceive clearly the legacy and the ecclesial mission that Balthasar bore in his heart, an existential program open to the future, a posthumous message delivered to the world in hope:

The spirit that must inspire [the consecrated life] at the present hour must bear in itself the entire span that goes between renunciation and making use (on the basis of one’s mission), and it must also have the span between Spain [Schneider’s symbol for the visibility of the faith as form] and Russia [the symbol of total confession as participation in the cross of the abandoned Lord], between Ignatius with his form and John with his all-embracing love, and this tension must be lived in the ecclesial form that . . . offers a place to the most exposed positions of the Christian in the world.<sup>58</sup>

### 6. Recapitulation and opening

As we noted at the beginning, this essay has attempted to present five foci that both in themselves and in their interrelation convey something of the form of life that characterizes the secular institutes.

To be sure, this form of life might appear to fall far short of producing any “springtime” in the Church, much less in the world,

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<sup>57</sup>“The tendency today is towards the destruction of form . . . . Against this strange univocity of the moderns, the character of *form* of the revelation must be maintained—in an unmodern manner—for only when we accept the unique incarnation of the Logos can the infinite dimensions of the Pneuma be understood as his glorification (Jn 16:14) and not as his dissolution” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 4: *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989], 37).

<sup>58</sup>Balthasar, *Tragedy Under Grace*, 259.

which, in increasingly subtle ways, is dominated globally by the culture of death, by “self interest.” The Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater* will soon be sixty years old, yet the child seems not to be growing, to have stayed an infant. Indeed, it seems not even to have learned to walk. What, then, is this child? The “synthetic child” of Novalis or one who, in the midst of such purity and richness, of the mystery of the whole in the fragment and the circumincession of the transcendentals, has lost its wits and is no longer normal? Does a form of life, a mission, that by its very constitution is so rich and so demanding provide each institute and each of its members sufficient material for a realistic discernment of spirits? Under what banner does it, do they, stand?

The words of Jesus to his followers after the “No” of the rich young man are especially pertinent to the secular institutes: “‘Who then can be saved?’ But Jesus looked at them and said to them, ‘with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’” (Mt 19:25–26). So, too, is the alternative before which every Christian is placed:

The whole question of a possible alternative to the system is, therefore, . . . whether it is possible for a Christian to ignore or put aside the challenge of the *Ernstfall* [decisive moment] to follow Christ’s example for the sake of an *aggiornamento*. In other words: *Is it possible for him to make intellectual experiments concerning his faith unless his capacity for loving is fully engaged in this activity?* For, as we have seen, the object of our faith is none other than the manifestation on the Cross of God’s inexhaustible love for all men and for me as an individual.<sup>59</sup>

When we abide in this concrete decision of love, everything is light, hope, and charity (1 Cor 13). The seriousness of the case never becomes immature and destructive anguish, but a humility that opens us and moves us more and more to serve. In this context, to abide means to live in the *Mysterium* (Eph 1:14). This mystery, the fruitful union of heaven and earth, is the foundation of all that we have said here. It is the infinite background that has become illuminated in the five points of light that we have discussed. It is a Mystery of a joy offered and received in grateful response:

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<sup>59</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 75–76.

It is, of course, the Son who brought about the most beautiful expression of joy in the triune God and who communicated to us a hint of what the joy of the triune God in heaven might be like. But the Son's joy in God contains his joy in all creatures that he has received from God the Father, for they have all been created for him, even those that are now unfaithful to their destination. The highest, most precious thing that the Father has given his Son is his mother, and all those who belong to him in some way become newly lovable on her account. But in all creatures the Son sees mirrored the joy that the Father has in him, the Son, and this experience of the Son is so sublime that we are unable to follow it, because it belongs in the hidden realm of trinitarian joy. But even this hidden reality is not inaccessibly closed to us, and all at once we understand that joy in God is what pushes our limits further and further, because it is not we who create this joy, but the infinite God who implants it ever more deeply in us.<sup>60</sup>

—*Translated by Adrian Walker.*



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<sup>60</sup>Speyr, *Objektive Mystik*, 575–576.