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Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Kenosis: The Pathway to Human Agency

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To Katie, Samuel, and Elijah

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the kenotic motif in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, particularly in light of his concern to protect human agency. This dissertation argues that Balthasar views kenotic spiritual practice as the pathway to achieve true human agency. This kenotic pathway to agency is placed in contrast to Balthasar's concept of original sin as an attempt by humanity to achieve agency on their own terms. The narrative of original sin results in two possible outcomes for Balthasar: a spiritual pathway toward the absorption of the self, which results in the annihilation of the self or, the autonomy of the self is emphasized to the degree that self-actualization becomes the goal of the spiritual journey and other humans are seen as obstacles to self-realization. This project explores the themes of kenosis within the doctrine of the Incarnation and Trinity as the solution to understanding human agency and as the answer to original sin in and through the Incarnation. The Christological and Trinitarian shape of sainthood and spirituality are explored in the final two chapters. Balthasar's treatment of St. John of the Cross, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and Elisabeth of the Trinity are examples of how the kenotic motif is revealed in the lives of the saints. The final chapter looks at Balthasar's spirituality as thoroughly kenotic and that this kenotic activity cannot be systematized into a universal ethical or spiritual model; rather, it is enacted through discernment. This discernment is based on the norm of the gospel as "hard sayings" and as "good news." Each individual human being is invited to take on a unique mission,

which forms them into a theological person, those providing a deep and real sense of human agency. The dissertation ends with a speculative interaction of Balthasar's kenotic thought with three other scholars, Edith Wyschogrod, Sarah Coakley, and Sallie McFague, in order to offer a glimpse into future discussions of kenosis in contemporary theology.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BOUNDARIES OF KENOSIS

In Matthew 16:24-25, Jesus says to his disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." Some strands of traditional Christianity interpret this (and other biblical passages like it) in a manner that encourages self-abnegation and personal trauma in the name of Christian discipleship. In early Christianity, those tortured and martyred Christians were viewed with particular reverence by the church. One vivid and graphic example of this phenomenon of self-abnegation occurs in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch. Apprehended by the Roman government and on the way to face martyrdom in Rome, he wrote several letters to Christian churches during his journey. In his *Letter to the Romans* he writes:

> I am writing to all the Churches and I enjoin all, that I am dying willingly for God's sake, if only you do not prevent it. I beg you, do not do me an untimely kindness. Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, which are my way of reaching to God. I am God's wheat, and I am to be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become the pure bread of Christ.[1]

Ignatius viewed his certain death at the hands of the Romans to be of positive value even to the point that he did not want intervention on his behalf. In addition to the clear statements that Ignatius envisioned his martyrdom as a profoundly personal and volitional act, he also believes that his actions and his death will ultimately take on a christological significance. He hopes to become "the pure bread of Christ." This is a

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[1] Ignatius of Antioch, "Letter to the Romans," in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril Richardson (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 104.

significant reference to the Eucharist and its relation to Jesus' crucifixion. Ignatius is emulating a christological concept of self-sacrifice, interpreting his own agency through the lens of the Incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus himself. In this dissertation I will call this constellation of meaning the "kenotic motif" or principle.[2] Kenosis is a Greek term that means emptying. This term has been applied to the Incarnation, mainly, in Christian history. However, Christian spirituality, operating in accordance with the idea that we should model our lives after Christ, has used words like self-surrender, mortification, indifference, and *apatheia,* to describe a specific experience of emptying that takes place within the Christian discipleship.

The Problem

The sentiments of Ignatius are not an isolated instance in Christian history. The impact of the kenotic structure of spirituality and Christology has continued in a variety of forms and expressions. In the twentieth century, with the collapse of the Enlightenment ideal of "progress," two world wars, and the horrors of the Holocaust, Western theology has become preoccupied with suffering, theodicy, and human agency. Genocide, imperialism, the collapse of metaphysics, the feminist and civil rights movements, and the rise of the so-called hermeneutics of suspicion and Marxist theories of class struggle have ushered in a new concern in postmodern Christianity in light of human flourishing.

These events and intellectual movements have heightened and altered some of the tensions present in the kenotic motif. It has become more commonplace to posit that this

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[2] Terms such as "self-sacrifice, self-giving, abandonment, kenosis, and self-emptying" will be treated as very similar in meaning. For a discussion on these terms and possible ways of distinguishing between them, see Ruth Groenhout, "Kenosis and Feminist Theory," in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 290-312.

kenotic theme places the suffering and sacrifice of the cross directly in contact with the divine being itself, leading some theologians to claim God suffers alongside us in solidarity.[3] There are also theological perspectives that use the motif of kenosis as a spiritual path to freedom from oppression and enhanced personal agency. Sarah Coakley, for example, argues for a version of kenosis based in vulnerable contemplation, believing that a reformulated notion of traditional forms of kenosis is "crucial for my understanding of a specifically Christian form of feminism."[4] Rosemary Ruether also affirms the idea of a "kenosis of patriarchy,"[5] a subversive indictment against all hierarchical and patriarchal ways of living. Oliver Davies calls it "dispossesive intentionality" and believes that society would crumble without the practice of self-emptying.[6]

Yet, other contemporary thinkers have grave concerns about this kenotic model of God and the spiritual ethos of Christians such as Ignatius of Antioch. It may come as no surprise to those familiar with the postmodern situation that language of self-emptying and sacrifice come under heavy suspicion. Is it not this type of rhetoric and metaphor that has encouraged submissive and self-destructive behavior, often encouraging the oppressed to stay in unjust and abusive situations? Does not self-sacrifice turn human beings into passive shells of humanity, drawing victimization and suffering like a magnet? Certainly, some postmodern theologians believe that the answer to these

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[3] For a brief description of the historical factors that contributed to this theological paradigm shift, see Ronald Goetz, "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," *Christian Century*, April 16 1986, 385-389.

[4] Sarah Coakley, "Kenōsis and Subversion: On the Representation of "Vulnerability" in Christian Feminist Writing," in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 5.

[5] Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 137.

[6] Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics and the Renewal of Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 16-17. The first two chapters are grouped under the heading "Kenotic Ontology," in which Davies uses kenotic themes to describe ontology and the self.

questions is "yes." Daphne Hampson believes that in the case of women, "the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm."[7] Darby Kathleen Ray, too, says that "the salvific values of suffering, self-sacrifice, and obedience are too easily distorted into a theological tool of subjugation."[8] Marit Trelstad believes these themes could encourage a "hero-victim relation, even if it claims to offer protection and salvation, there is an inherent disregard of the presumed victim's self-agency."[9] James Cone asserts that the dominating white theology of America "becomes a sedative that makes the victims of injustice content with servitude. Without struggle, the negative suffering inflicted by oppressors becomes positive and thus leads to passivity and submission. Without struggle, the idea of redemption becomes a human creation . . . designed to numb the pain" instead of bring about human flourishing.[10]

The charge laid down by all of these thinkers in their own way is if the kenotic motif is to survive as a viable theme in Christianity, it must be subjected to a new set of criteria and refashioned and clarified in a manner that does not obscure the liberating power of the gospel. If some of these more sobering charges are true of kenotic discourse, then all who employ kenotic language are encouraging bondage and passivity instead of extolling the freedom offered in Christ. The crux of the matter is this: does kenotic discourse make disciples or produce victims?

The Argument

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[7] Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 155.

[8] Quoted in Mark A. Mcintosh, *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 96.

[9] Marit Trelstad, "Introduction," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006), 7.

[10] James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 168.

These themes and questions raised thus far should indicate that there are many avenues from which to approach this problem of kenosis and human flourishing. For example, one could examine kenosis through a survey of changes in the kenotic motif throughout history. This was undertaken in the 70's by Donald Dawe and also more recently by David Brown.[11] Another approach would be to examine only contemporary discussions of kenosis. Yet another approach would be to focus on a particular thinker that emphasizes kenosis in some way: P.T. Forsyth, Jürgen Moltmann, Sarah Coakley, Oliver Davies, Sergei Bulgakov, and various philosophers would be worthy of such a study.

This dissertation will approach the problem through the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. While the contemporary problem of human flourishing remains of interest and present as an implicit conversation partner; the content of this dissertation will be the theme of kenosis as it operates within Balthasar's writings. I chose Balthasar for this study for three main reasons: First, this conversation about kenosis and Balthasar has already begun. Aristotle Papanikolaou's article "Person, *Kenosis,* and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation" in *Modern Theology* began a dialogue about Balthasar's kenosis and what it might mean for a contemporary anthropology.[12] Papanikolaou's work was also continued in a 2012 article by Carolyn Chau entitled, "What Could Possibly Be Given?: Towards an Exploration of *Kenosis* as Forgiveness-Continuing the Conversation Between Coakley, Hampson, and

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[11] Donald G. Dawe, *The Form of a Servant: A Historical Analysis of the Kenotic Motif* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963). David Brown, *Divine Humanity: Kenosis and the Construction of a Christian Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011).

[12] Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Person, *Kenosis* and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation," *Modern Theology* 19, no. 1 (2004).

Papanikolaou."[13] I see my own work as a participation in these conversations through a more extended treatment of Balthasar's writings.

Second, Balthasar is influential in contemporary theology but often misunderstood. Many aspects of his theology are polarizing. It is my hope that this dissertation can provide some clarity in Balthasar's theology as well as suggesting that theologians in the contemporary situation need not either accept Balthasar's theology wholeheartedly or roundly reject it. In the case of kenosis, I hope to show that his thought offers a flexibility that he himself did not make use of in terms of the application of self-surrender.

Third, my own research and interests have centered on Balthasar's theology for quite some time now. I find his theology valuable, challenging, and interesting. When I discovered Papanikolaou's article, I felt that his work and the suggestions he made begged for a deeper treatment of Balthasar's sources than the length of an article would allow and that is how this project began.

While the problem of kenosis in the contemporary context cannot be quickly or easily solved, and it is not my intention to do so, I will argue that Balthasar's use of the kenotic motif is intended to preserve and facilitate personal agency and prevent the loss of self. I defend that statement in two main parts.[14] The first part of my argument will investigate Balthasar's criticisms of a variety of worldviews. I will establish that the

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[13] Carolyn A. Chau, "What Could Possibly Be Given?: Towards an Exploration of *Kenosis* as Forgiveness-Continuing the Conversation Between Coakley, Hampson, and Papanikolaou," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 1 (2012).

[14] While these are the two main parts of my argument the content of the dissertation will be skewed heavily toward the second part because Balthasar's positive constructions are most worthy of inspection. The first part of the argument serves as boundary markers from which to guide us through the real important pieces of Balthasar's thought.

essence of these critical comments point to a unifying concern: to protect the integrity of human agency. I will use these criticisms to discover the boundaries of Balthasar's kenotic discourse that will allow me to clarify what Balthasar does *not* mean when he speaks of self-emptying, self-surrender, self-giving and so forth.[15] I use the term "self-annihilation" to describe the outer edge of Balthasar's definition of kenosis and I will describe ways in which Balthasar sees self-annihilation occurring.[16]

Second, I will analyze the positive construction of kenosis within Balthasar's work. He believes that kenotic love is the only way to safeguard the self on an ontological as well as spiritual level. This will require both examining kenosis in terms of a multilayered approach to relational love that expresses itself in christological and Trinitarian language in addition to understanding Balthasar's description of selfhood and spirituality.

This introductory chapter will concentrate on two related but separate areas. The first area will provide an overview of Balthasar's theological style and in general terms, describe the difference between motif, doctrine, and the problematic language

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[15] I see this aspect of my dissertation to function in a similar manner to what Kevin Mongrain does in his book, Kevin Mongrain, *The Sytematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2002). Mongrain argues for the centrality of an Irenaean vision of Christianity to Balthasar, which is the mutual glorification of humanity and God. But at the same time he is not attempting to address the accuracy of Balthasar's reading of Irenaeus as based in the Irenaean texts. My argument is similar in that it is not my intention to analyze the strength of Balthasar's reading of other religions or philosophies. It is my intention to describe what Balthasar sees as problematic within them and to show how those problems indicate something vital about the boundaries within the kenotic motif operates in his work.

[16] It must be acknowledged that "self-annihilation" does not always take on a negative tone for Balthasar. It depends on context. However, out of all the terms Balthasar uses to describe the phenomenon of kenosis is most clearly on the fringe. "Talk of 'annihilation' takes on contrary meanings, depending on whether the criterion is the un-word or the super-word. If the absolute is the One that excludes any sort of multiplicity and so rules out anything that exists after the manner of worldly being, whether material or spiritual, it can be attained or at least touched only through the radical removal of finite being. Such is the path of all extrabiblical forms of religious mysticism." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory: Volume II: Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 120-121. Hereafter cited as *TL II.*

surrounding kenosis. Once these preliminaries are established, the second area will typologize Balthasar's criticisms of an array of philosophies, religions, and spiritualities. It is my contention, in this second area, that Balthasar's criticisms of other religions center mainly on their understanding of human flourishing and the relation of that flourishing to a kenotic model of divine and human activity.

The Context

Balthasar was extremely well-read, and his criticisms of other views often appear in terse, general statements. He often consolidated all of his expansive reading by establishing two extremes and placing his own thought in between. This leaves almost any interpreter, no matter how learned, feeling as if Balthasar has done away with entire schools of thought with a casual stroke of the pen.

Take, for example, the organizational structure of Balthasar's book *Love Alone is Credible.*[17] Balthasar organizes this book around the ideological constructions of the cosmos and the human person. After a one-hundered-and-forty-six-page litany of names, thinkers, and eras of history he distills the opposing positions down to two insufficient categories. Balthasar offers his solution to these historical insufficiencies, a third category of unprecedented kenotic love, as the meaning of the universe, central ethical ideal, and highest integrative motif. "The point of integration cannot lie in cosmology. . . . But it is also not possible that the point should lie in anthropology, because man is no measure for God, and man's answer is no measure for the Word that is sent to him."[18] This is a

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[17] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 147.
[18] Ibid.

powerful polemic approach that can be a barrier to those who wish bring Balthasar's thought into dialogue with others.

Balthasar's positive constructions also receive equal puzzlement from some interpreters. His close relationship to the mystic, Adrienne von Speyr is often ignored, his treatment of the descent into hell has raised questions about his orthodoxy, and his unusual approach to the study of the early Fathers have drawn criticism from academic specialists in those fields.[19] But most important, for our purposes, is to grasp the inner style and logic that gives rise to both Balthasar's criticisms of other systems of belief and the content of his theology. Balthasar's approach suffuses his criticisms and his constructions with figurative, metaphorical, robust, speculative, and allusive language.

This style causes consternation for those who came after Balthasar. On the one hand, the scholar can't help but experience a sense of freedom and exhilaration at this affective and heady mixture of ideas expressed with such force and creativity. But on the other, his work also tends to leave the reader without the clear and comforting demarcations of a more conventional systematic theology.[20]

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[19] For more on this issue of the descent see Edward T. Oakes, "The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 2 (2007): 184-199. Alyssa Pitstick, "Development of Doctrine, or Denial? Balthasar's Holy Saturday and Newman's *Essay*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11(2009): 131-145., Gavin D'Costa, "The Descent into Hell as a Solution for the Problem of the Fate of Unevangelized non-Christians: Balthasar's Hell, the Limbo of the Fathers, and Purgatory," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 2 (2009): 146-171. Edward T. Oakes, "Descensus and Development: A Response to Recent Rejoinders," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 1 (2011): 3-24. For von Speyr see Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 10-12. For the Fathers, see Polycarp Sherwood, "Survey of Recent Work on St. Maximus the Confessor," *Traditio* 20(1964): 428-437.

[20] R.R. Reno addressed this aspect of Balthasar's style in a negative way, almost to the point of suggesting that Balthasar did Catholicism a disservice. See R.R. Reno, "Theology After the Revolution," *First Things* (May 2007). While Reno's point agrees with my exploration of Balthasar's boundaries, I have some reservations of Reno's proposal for a more systematic style of presentation. For a more positive review of Balthasar's style, see Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

Yet it is not mere rhetorical flourish: this "style" does not just dance across the surface of the Balthasarian waters. It is equally evident in the organization he employs (contrary to the usual systematic expression in terms of theological loci) and in the sources he draws from.[21] Balthasar remains a much more staunchly anti-systematic thinker than those who take the Neo-Scholastic approach. Balthasar, in reflecting on his own work, described his approach to theology as moving along the path of Goethe while theologians like Rahner, choose the path of Kant.[22] To put the difference rather crudely, Balthasar, in following Goethe tends to view reality from an aesthetic and phenomenological perspective, rather than choosing a Kantian instrumentality of practical reason.

While Balthasar may lack the typical conceptual overlay that does not mean there is no coherence or organization, and some scholars have argued persuasively that there is an internal logic to help assuage the confusion. This study, on the kenotic motif, will build on this scholarship that envisions an internal logic within Balthasar's theology.[23] Yet, before attending to this internal logic, I would like to move from the difficulty of Balthasar's style to the problem of kenosis itself. Kenotic language, which is already inherently paradoxical, becomes even more complicated when expressed in Balthasar's

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[21] If Balthasar's theological sources point us toward a different theological style, Aidan Nichols makes the important point that "playwrights, poets and novelists as theological sources [are] as important as the fathers or the schoolmen."Aidan Nichols, "Introduction," in *Mysterium Paschale* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 1.

[22] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Geist und Feuer: Ein Gespräch mit Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Herder Korrespondenz* 30(1976): 72-82. Quoted in Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 72-73. Oakes goes into fascinating detail about the differences of these two approaches.

[23] Kevin Mongrain does something similar in his book that he calls the "Doxological Rule of Resistance," which is a set of internal criteria that he believes assist in helping scholars understand the Balthasar's theology. Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 201-206.

style. The next section will address how the motif of kenosis functions in this dissertation.

It is important to explore briefly what motifs are and how they differ from doctrine. Doctrine is usually divided up into topics such as the Christian life, the nature of God, salvation, and the person and work of Jesus. These are presented as discrete yet connected topics and are often expressed in the form of propositions. The idea of motif, as described by Dawe and Anders Nygren, is a "broad assertion" at the core of something.[24]

Kenosis is a motif that speaks to the core of Christianity and reoccurs in many different contexts. The "broad assertion" is that God's relationship to sinners is characterized by his infinite and continual self-gift. It is infinite because God's resources are, of course, unlimited. This self-gift reoccurs in various biblical stories. It recurs in theological extrapolations, as well as spiritual treatises and hymns. It forms the central piece of the Eucharist and other liturgical practices. It informs our ethics and our decisions about what a good life might look like.

In choosing the path of Goethe, Balthasar allows for a freedom in expression of the kenotic motif that many other theologians are either unwilling to or incapable of executing. Balthasar is less concerned with presenting an orderly and sequential presentation of Christian theology than allowing the essential core of the Christian faith to be illustrated and revealed in a myriad of ways. His approach is more phenomenological.

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[24] Dawe, *The Form of a Servant: A Historical Analysis of the Kenotic Motif*, 19.

The second inference that justifies my approach is that the relation that Dawe sees between motif and doctrine follows the organization of this dissertation. I will be examining how kenosis changes depending on the doctrinal context and how the themes of kenosis impact those doctrines. This will provide at least some order to the kenotic motif, which is sorely needed if we are to avoid using it in a manner that contradicts the human flourishing that is contained in the offer of salvation as truly good news. Yet as a motif, kenosis is used in a variety of doctrines and in spiritual writings and it appears under the guise of terms such as abandonment, indifference, self-surrender, self-sacrifice, self-giving, agape, and others. The definition is simply "emptying," yet its meaning has a power that underlies liturgy, ethics, anthropology, spirituality, and theology. This is why I am using the term kenosis not only in reference to the original Greek terminology and its biblical reference but also using it to represent this motif in more general terms. I chose to use the term *kenosis* to describe this entire phenomenon because of its biblical origins and its connection to the doctrine of the Incarnation. For Balthasar, the Incarnation is the central piece of revelation and it is the only basis for the kenotic motif.

The Fruit of Original Sin: Absorption and Autonomy

One way to think about Balthasar's theological commitments is to begin with what he sees as the central problem, i.e., how Balthasar talks about original sin. In humanity's original state,

> the deepest longing of man is to ascend to God, to become like God indeed to become equal to God. . . . But we know that the serpent got a hold of this very innermost drive of man [toward God and transcendence] to press on to God, and poisoned it. Original sin does not sit somewhere on the periphery of human

nature; no, the very promise *eritis sicut dei* [you shall be like gods] is the perversion of the original core of man's being itself.[25]

In his concept of original sin, a natural and good desire–to be like God–becomes perverted so that humanity no longer seeks this transcendence in cooperation with God's intention, but "gives his notice to God that he will no longer do God's service."[26] Balthasar's theology is characterized–and his reading of intellectual and spiritual history informed–by this understanding of original sin as a human initiative to engage with God in a manner that God has not decreed. Every single religion, philosopher, and spiritual path in existence bears within it this problem.

Apart from God, this leaves humanity with two choices, according to Balthasar. The history of spirituality, philosophy, and religion can't escape the "despairing dialectic between the identification of itself with God and the denial of God, only to arrive in the end, at a chaotic failure to distinguish between the two."[27] I term these two approaches *absorption* and *autonomy*. In Balthasar's understanding, both of these approaches arise from faulty uses of the kenotic motif and lead to what I term self-annihilation."

Balthsasar's problem with philosophies of absorption is that they deny the agency of the individual, rendering him or her passive and incapable of achieving a dynamic relationship with the divine. This category of absorption applies to those who view spirituality as a necessary escape from creaturely limitation. Creaturely life is considered

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[25] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Fathers, The Scholastics, and Ourselves," *Communio* 24, no. 2 (1997): 353.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 134.

a "burden" to be overcome by losing one's self in the Absolute Spirit.[28] The spiritual

practice that follows out of this approach is devastating to the self:

> Thus one finds in one's human nature a place-perhaps only a point, but this point
> suffices-where one can, as it were, traffic with God 'religiously' *on the same
> footing,* where a mystical *identity* obtains between Creator and creature. Now to
> reach this mysterious identity-point requires all kinds of strenuous effort: The
> earthly atemporal now seem in this regard to be only an external husk that
> envelopes and hides the inner kernel which must be shattered ascetically,
> 'denied,' and made transparent. The perfected and knowing exercitant looks
> through all this as mere appearance, for all non-identity with the divine is
> basically a non-being; and this applies as well therefore to the constricted ego and
> to one's unique individuality.[29]

 In other words, kenosis in the absorption model focuses on the removal of the earthly,

the body, the creature, viewing it as an obstacle for the divine spark of humanity's

unification with divine fullness.

Take for example, the practice of nonviolence in the Eastern religions. This

example of classic absorption spirituality is undergirded by the metaphysical belief that

separation, including the existence of individual experience, is an illusion. Therefore,

Balthasar avers, these spiritual paths "since the Upanishads–in Buddhism, Jainism,

Vishnuism . . . aim to destroy the appearance of personality."[30] To Balthasar, this

nonviolent approach is fundamentally misguided because the agency of the individual is

already obliterated because there is no such thing as an individual. Nonviolence is

embraced upon the prior assumption that individual physical suffering is an illusion.

Balthasar also decries a modern interpretation of absorption, which it is less about

the surrender of individuality to become one with an Absolute divine being and more

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[28] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory V. The Last Act*, trans.
Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 326-327. Hereafter cited as *TD 5*.
[29] Balthasar, "The Fathers, The Scholastics, and Ourselves," 353.
[30] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilogue* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 75.

about the individual's surrender to an ideal or societal goal–even one that is thoroughly

materialistic and atheistic in nature. Balthasar believes the philosophies of Marx and

Hegel are dangerous for that reason. Kevin Mongrain remarks,

> von Balthasar demonstrates that Hegel believes that the particular individual must make an act of absolute surrender to the "generalized individual" of the nation or the state. This act of surrender requires the overcoming of the point of view of insane self-conceit, which undertakes to improve the world according to the 'law of one's own undisciplined heart' . . . ; the overcoming of the point of view of private virtue, which is 'conquered by the world's onward course.' Von Balthasar goes on to explain-directly quoting Hegel's highly pejorative terminology that this overcoming of self in surrender to the state requires also that one surrender all personal care for anything that one could call one's own, the desire to be recognized by others, and the "hypocrisy" that one's "conscience" is absolute. Thus for Hegel, on von Balthasar's interpretation, reconciling the finite particular and the infinite universal requires the complete relinquishing of personal existence in a total surrender to assimilation by the "absolute spirit" as it is expressed in the "community of the nation" in its political organization by the state; this total surrender finds its highest expression in the individual's willingness to undergo death as a sign of solidarity with the nation.[31]

Whether it is the stages of purification, purgation, and illumination of the Eastern

Religions or the totalitarian vision of Hegel and Marx, Balthasar subjects them to the

same criticisms: in varying degrees they take the practice of kenotic love out of its proper

context and thus destroy its power to transform the individual. In particular there are two

main faults that merit further exploration: it glorifies suffering, and promotes a passive

spirituality.

Suffering is absolutely not an intrinsic good in Balthasar's understanding and

should, therefore, not be glorified. It remains an inevitable experience for the Christian on

the spiritual journey but Balthasar does not consider it to have inherent value. What

matters is the disposition of the Christian who faces suffering.

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[31] Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 143.

> It is not a question of glorifying earthly suffering (often the result of worldly injustice) [Mt. 5:6], persecution [5:10] and abuse [5:11], which could be morally doubtful) but of whether we are open or closed to the fundamental values of the kingdom of God. Such openness can prove itself through action, even through militancy, just as much as through endurance.[32]

Not only does Balthasar condemn the glorification of suffering but resistance to suffering is an inference from this passage. Even in the life of a saint, where the extremes of love reach heightened proportions, Balthasar places a cautionary word about using suffering as a spiritual tool of growth. "The point isn't the record of suffering but the intensity of love. Every penance that increases true love is good; any penance that narrows and preoccupies the soul is harmful."[33] This statement shows a considerable concern for the individual as they discern their own call in the midst of the kingdom.

For some, their callings may well involve suffering–that is not to be debated. But suffering is neither an end in itself nor something that should be always avoided. There is a level of discernment that is necessary. Suffering must be chosen only when love is present and the will of God is clear. It is when "the attitude of renunciation hardens to a defence against pain and death–and thus also against love–it becomes self-deception."[34]

This is precisely what Balthasar sees happening in the absorption typology. "Buddhists and Stoics train themselves to enter a sphere without suffering and hate; the impact of contradictions does not affect them, for they communicate with the enemy in a

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[32] Balthasar, *TD 5*, 500-501.

[33] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizbeth of the Trinity*, trans. Anne Englund Nash Donald Nichols, and Dennis Martin (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 249.

[34] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics: Volume V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Andrew Louth Oliver Daivies, Brian McNeil C.R.V., John Saward and Rowan Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 632. Hereafter cited as *GL 5*.

supra-personal absolute. The Christian, however, must open his heart and allow himself to be the most intimately affected, challenged, hurt."[35]

Balthasar also condemns absorption philosophies because they promote passive spiritualities, in which the importance of human activity goes unacknowledged. Balthasar interprets the kenotic motif in terms of an active obedience: "This co-operation can no longer remain at the level of indifference in the sense of *merely* letting things happen; no, the particular will of God, which is to be actively grasped and carried out, must also be actively pursued. For the Rhineland mystics, abandonment came in at the end."[36] In this quotation Balthasar shows a legitimate concern on the placement of the abandonment. What he means is that by placing abandonment at the end, two consequences result. The beginning of the spiritual journey harbors an undercurrent of autonomy and technique. Second, abandonment at the end without any connection to the active process of spirituality results in a passive eternal rest. Both of these consequences are highly problematic for Balthasar as I will show later.

Absorption's equally damaging opposite is what I will call autonomy: the belief that human agency is solely realized in individual action and rational choice.[37] The individual is seen as the arbiter of meaning. What is so distasteful to Balthasar about this perspective is that it places the emphasis on human activity to the exclusion of divine revelation and promotes violence and competition among humanity.

The term 'autonomy' can also be misleading. In *Theo-Drama II,* Balthasar stridently declares that human freedom (he calls it "finite" freedom) is "a presupposition

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[35] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Communio: A Programme," *Communio* 1(1972): 11.
[36] Balthasar, *GL 5*, 105.
[37] Autonomy comes from two Greek words: *autos,* which means self, and *nomos,* which means law.

for the whole biblical drama . . . that takes place between God and mankind."[38] What Balthasar cautions against is a human autonomy that rejects the path of self-giving love in exchange for self-realization: "Thus a man may decide that, for the *purposes of self-realization,* the whole area must remain completely open (so that, if there were a preexistent and fully realized absolute freedom, the path of finite freedom would only be distorted and its course frustrated)" (italics mine).[39] Because of what we know of Balthasar's internal logic and his remedy for original sin, it may not come as a surprise to see that he believes the ultimate result of the autonomy model of self-actualization is rejection of God's invitation, it is a "No" to God, which inevitably ends in self-annihilation. "Man responds to this provocation [in the post-Christian situation] by attempting to manufacture the kingdom of God on earth, with increasing means and methods of power; logically this power that resists the powerlessness of the Cross is bound to destroy itself, for it bears the principle of self-annihilation within it by saying No to the claim of Christ."[40] The power and autonomy offered by post-Christian sources lead not to self-fulfillment but to destruction.

In Balthasar's reading of history, there are many ups and downs in Christian theology. Scholasticism and the modern period have brought about a refreshing and important emphasis on the importance of individuality and the "meaning and consciousness of Christian mission."[41] The uniqueness of each person comes to the fore. Yet, there is a danger that this might morph into a more radical approach where the

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[38] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory II: The Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 215. Hereafter cited as *TD 2.*
[39] Ibid., 213.
[40] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramtatic Theory IV. The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 442.
[41] Balthasar, "The Fathers, The Scholastics, and Ourselves," 392.

individual is given sole authority and free reign. There is a sliding scale in Balthasar's

estimation on the autonomy principle and various thinker's relation to it.[42]

Take, for example, Balthasar's infamous criticisms of Karl Rahner. Balthasar and

Rahner have many commonalities, and Balthasar showed appreciation for some aspects

of Rahner's work, but ultimately he worried that Rahner's Christian convictions are

overshadowed by his ideas from German Idealism. Fergus Kerr explains:

> It is always a good question to ask what a philosopher fears. Von Balthasar's
> highly implausible claim that the success of Christianity has wiped out all other
> forms of religion and metaphysics is tied up with his suspicions of Karl Rahner's
> theology." He fears that the deity of natural religion is "the kind of God whom
> now, in the post-Christian age, modern transcendental theology would like to
> reinstate."[43]

Balthasar equates German idealism with the newest version of a natural religion.[44] Karen

Kilby observes that it is precisely this point at which Balthasar gives his "fiercest

criticisms of Rahner" and points to the clear implications for the kenotic motif:

> The context of these criticisms, that is to say, is the larger discussion of Christian
> witness (martyrdom), on the one hand, versus 'the System' (the system of German
> Idealism), on the other. Christians who want to be modern, to adapt to the times,
> to be able to speak to their fellow human beings in a language that can be
> understood, will be tempted to adopt the System in some form; but the cost,
> Balthasar maintains, will be the loss of martyrdom, of genuine witness, of genuine
> Christianity.[45]

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[42] For one version of this scale, see chapter six of Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*. For an alternative description, see Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 160ff.

[43] Ibid., 162-163. While Kerr rightly raises the question of plausibility regarding Balthasar's sweeping interpretation of religions, I want to reiterate that while that worthy avenue of investigation should be pursued, it is tangential the current investigation. What is important here is the function these religions serve in the development of Balthasar's understanding of kenosis.

[44] It is at least worthy of a footnote to mention that Balthasar's interpretation of Rahner is being challenged. Some scholars of Rahner, and Karl Rahner himself, have suggested that interpretations such as Balthasar's place undue emphasis on Rahner's systematic dependence on his early philosophical work *Spirit and the World*. Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, Interventions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 7.

[45] Karen Kilby, "Balthasar and Karl Rahner," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. S. J. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 258-259.

So what Kerr calls Balthasar's "fear" and what Kilby calls "his fiercest criticism" is the encroachment of a natural religious system that displaces kenosis (martyrdom) from the central meaning of the Christian faith. This supports the argument of this dissertation in the following ways. First, it confirms that Balthasar values the motif of kenosis (here expressed in terms of the disciples emulation of Jesus's emptying in his death). Second it reiterates the negative role that autonomy plays in the system of natural pathways to God (here expressed through his concerns about German idealism and Rahner's approach). And finally, it reinforces the point made about Balthasar's concern for system, because systems of thought are always designed and initiated by humanity in order to comprehend. Balthasar's goal is not comprehension but the expression of the form of Christ and the resultant worship.

Many critics of the kenotic motif see freedom, like bread and water and shelter, as limited resources, and self-realization as, on some level a Darwinian competition for survival in which individuals are pitted against each other to grasp at what is needed for freedom and flourishing. From their perspective, other human forces or divine forces are obstacles to the individual's self-realization. And in this worldview, the definitions of freedom and agency are reduced to force, power, and strength.[46] For Balthasar "this means that every positive, loving relationship to one's fellow man, who represents an

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[46] Sarah Coakley believes post-Christian feminism often employs this type of autonomy: "What rightly distinguishes Christian feminism from various secular versions of it must necessarily lie in this disputed christological realm [referring to the kenosis principle]: here if anywhere, Christian feminism has something corrective to offer secular feminism." Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 3-4. Aristotle Papanikolau, also speaking of Hampson comments that "Even though Hampson admits that autonomy 'need not imply conceiving of oneself as an isolated atom in competition with others', the fact that she prioritizes 'centredness' and autonomy' as preconditions for relations seems to undercut her concern to construct a relational notion of the self." Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Person, *Kenosis* and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation," *Modern Theology* 19, no. 1 (2004): 58.

attack on my freedom, is fundamentally and finally destroyed. Freedom and betrayal go together."[47] What starts out as a laudable attempt to preserve individuality and freedom ends up destroying the very thing it sought to protect. "Whenever the self tries to prescind from its rootedness in God and establish its own autonomy, it is attempting to consolidate its freedom; it is attempting to seize power.[48]

Balthasar believes that when the desire is divorced from the good and clothed in "a hegemony of instrumental rationality" it becomes one of the most audacious and honest expressions of evil, and, following Heidegger, he sees nothing surprising of the progression from Descartes and Kant's epistemology to the "absolute will to power in Nietzsche."[49] And this will to power and the evil behind it is not merely rhetorical or ideological violence but literal violence:

> Within the confines of the world, the *desiderium visionis* cannot be satisfied hence, if it does not seek its peace in God, it gives rise to all the familiar forms of fanaticism and anarchism, and the terrorism . . . the classical-romantic Faust figures are followed by the political Fausts of our century: thus as a clear realization that man, as constituted, can provide no hope of ultimate satisfaction, we have Nietzsche's Superman. And everywhere, beside Faust, beside Hegel, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, beside Zarathustra and Hitler, we discern the shadow of a demon, insinuating that all that exists 'deserves to be destroyed.'[50]

The autonomy principle must embrace coercion and violence to achieve its ends. The good of human flourishing cannot come out of such a view of the world.

Conclusion

In summary, absorption and autonomy share a common cause: original sin. Yet, there are some main differences, especially in relation to kenosis as a practice. The

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[47] Balthasar, *TD 2*, 424.
[48] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory IV. The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 147. Hereafter cited as *TD 4*.
[49] Ibid., 157.
[50] Ibid., 144-145.

absorption approach is a choice to rebel against creaturely difference by abolishing the creature through various sacrificial and ascetic practices. The autonomy approach allows the self (at least the rational piece) to come into its own but the relationship to the divine is downplayed or used as a justification for competition and oppression of freedom. The absorption model distorts the kenosis motif; the autonomy model attempts to obliterate it. For Balthasar, engagement with kenosis must take neither of these approaches. Loving relations with others and openness to the Divine are fundamental aspects of kenotic practice that are denied by the autonomy approach's sole focus on the self.

Yet, merely acknowledging the kenotic nature of reality and exercising it in spirituality cannot be the answer either. It cannot be a spiritual technique in which the finitude of the person is transcended or considered unimportant. It cannot be an ethical principle devoid of relational categories that is forced upon the individual to shape their actions. It cannot be an ontological principle in which the "I" of the human person is either passively relinquished into the Abyss of the Absolute or a process of knowledge that leads to the realization that the "I" is an illusion in the first place. The remaining chapters will examine how Balthasar's theology is an attempt to create a metaphysical and spiritual framework, grounded in the kenosis motif that supports a vision of human agency that respects creaturehood and offers freedom while situating the self within a web of relationships. This definition will move beyond concepts of superficial self-realization or an abstract ethical ideal, "for neither fantasy nor concept can express the true object of man's real longing. Nor can he know this of himself; for only God can

reveal it to him."[51] God, not human agency, will be the focus of the first two chapters. It is fundamental to Balthasar that the nature of humanity finds meaning not only from natural sciences, psychology, and philosophy, but from the revealed character of God in the Scriptures and in the Church. This is why it will be absolutely crucial to establish the character of God and his intentions with his creatures from the very beginning.

The second chapter will examine the Incarnation. The third chapter will relate the kenotic theme to the trinitarian life. The fourth chapter will discuss the anthropology/ spirituality that develop out of Balthasar's reading of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Chapter Five will briefly recapitulate my argument and conclude with an assessment of Balthasar's work.

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[51] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God: The Drama of Christian Discipleship*, trans. Margaret M. Turek (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 71.

CHAPTER TWO

KENOSIS, INCARNATION AND SALVATION

The introductory chapter described the parameters of kenosis in Balthasar's

theology by examining his criticisms of various worldviews. He rejects all of these

worldviews because they do not take into account the kenotic reality of the divine-human

relationship. Original sin ruptured the kenotic activity between God and humanity so that

before Christ, even the most sincere and well-intentioned religious systems were doomed

to fail:

> It was essential that Christ, in his Incarnation, should bring the fullness of heaven
> to earth . . . . Otherwise the contemplation of God would only have been possible
> in the forms of negative apophatic mysticism, which seeks to encounter God
> beyond all that is of the world, as the Wholly Other, who can be neither
> conceived, nor beheld, nor comprehended. Such a view, inevitably, does a great
> injustice to the world and our fellow creatures.[52]

Because of original sin, the true self is obscured, marred, and damaged. The Incarnation

and the ensuing process of salvation and spirituality begin transformation and recovery of

the true self, and thus, an avenue for attaining unprecedented transformative agency.

Yet it is not only other worldviews, but also Christian theology that is deficient.

Theologians have failed to recognize and articulate the transformative relation between

the creature and God that is of primary importance to Balthasar. His solution to some of

these past theological failings is his *Theo-drama.* As Aiden Nichols remarks:

> What all this means for Balthasar is that we must recognise the *priority of theo-
> drama over theology.* Unless theo-drama is accorded primacy, the varieties of
> contemporary theology Balthasar analysed in his *Prolegomena* simply cannot find

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[52] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, ed. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 54.

that central point of convergence which they need. The centre is not to be defined conceptually, however, as in a theological super-system where the different competing systematic theologies might be integrated at the level of ideas.[53]

This is a fundamental shift from a theology of ideas to a theology of relationships. One of the first things to note about Balthasar's discussion of the Incarnation is that it is not solely a matter of discovering the historical Jesus. Balthasar starts his inquiry with the sense that Jesus is not strictly a historical person, spoken about in the past tense and accessible only through written historical accounts. Instead Jesus is alive and active within the Church and the scriptures. He avoids treating Jesus (and scripture for that matter) as a "quest" in which the truth of Jesus is found through historical-critical methods. For Balthasar it would be more appropriate to say that the Christian's quest starts *after* we encounter Jesus through divine initiative.

In this theo-dramatic framework the rational, abstract constructs of philosophy or the portraits of Jesus hobbled together from historical sources can never aptly express the depth of the drama in the Incarnation. Only drama can adequately frame the Christian view of the divine and the human relationship: "now we must allow the encountering reality to speak in its own tongue or, rather, let ourselves be drawn into its dramatic arena. For God's revelation is not an object to be looked at; it is his action in and upon the world, and the world can only respond, and hence 'understand, through action on *its* part."[54] It is crucial to remember that for Balthasar, theology is participatory and active because the Incarnation and salvation of humanity is a saving action.

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[53] Aidan Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth: A Guide Through Balthasar's Dramatics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 52-53.

[54] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory I: Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 15. Hereafter cited as *TD 1*.

Balthasar's theology follows the contours of this theo-dramatic relationship. *Prima facie,* Trinitarian reflection (and its cosmic implications) seems to offer the most comprehensive vantage point from which to examine themes of kenosis. However, human knowledge of the Trinitarian matrix is only established *a posteriori* from the event of the Incarnation. The action of God in the Incarnation, not a speculation on the Trinity, is the starting point for Balthasar's enterprise. His answer to the discordant features of human attempts at transcendence is to emphasize God's initiative in the Incarnation rather than start with the implications for ontology of a triune God. I will follow Balthasar's own viewpoint that we only know of the triune God through the Incarnation of the Son. In addition, Balthasar insists that Christ is also the litmus test for an authentic humanity. Jesus is not simply an ideal life into which human beings must wedge themselves into a one-size-fits-all christological pattern. Jesus provides a vision of humanity "that is worthwhile, in which we need not essentially renounce any genuinely human function."[55] Paradoxically, in the Incarnation, for the first time the "true God" simultaneously "reveals to us the image of true man."[56]

This chapter will first situate Balthasar's unique approach to the Incarnation by a brief discussion of the often used terms "high and low Christology," as well as examining two proposed narratives of the history of kenosis. Second, I will discuss how Balthasar's theo-dramatic approach creates an especially fruitful conceptual garden for the motif of kenosis to blossom. Third, I will describe Balthasar's conception of the motive within

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[55] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Asceticism," *Communio* 27, no. 1 (2000): 25-26.

[56] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics: Volume I: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 562. In other words, this chapter will provide the basis for the further explorations into trinitarian kenotic activity and in tracing human kenotic activity in the next chapters. Hereafter cited as *GL 1*.

God, for the Incarnation. Fourth, I will explore Balthasar's vision of the salvific action of Jesus involving five biblical metaphors. Within these metaphors, I will highlight their relation to kenosis as well as other features of Balthasar's Christology.

Balthasar's Approach to the Incarnation and the History of Kenosis

I would like to elaborate now on how Balthasar's Christology might set him apart from other Christian thinkers. It has become a pedagogical trope to describe christologies as either "high" or "low" or "from above" and "from below." While the use of these terms can be vague, I will use Oliver Crisp's recent work to lend some clarity to where Balthasar might fall in this spectrum.[57] First, it is important to note that, for Crisp, a high Christology is not completely synonymous with a Christology from above, nor a low Christology the same thing as a Christology from below. The high/low dichotomy refers to the scale of the divine and human element of Jesus while the "above" and "below" terms are related to methodological approaches to Christology. And, for Crisp, none of these categories can be claimed as completely orthodox. According to Crisp, a high Christology is defined as one "according to which Christ is (minimally) more than human"[58] and a low Christology as one in "which Christ is (minimally) fully and merely human."[59] This definition of high Christology is not necessarily and indicator of orthodoxy. In fact, Crisp points out that some heresies, such as Arianism and Docetism fit within this definition.[60] In definition a "low" Christology can either affirm the fullness of the human person of Jesus Christ (as any orthodox position would hold) or can extend their definition to mean that Jesus was *merely* human and nothing else.

[57] Oliver Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009).
[58] Ibid., 23.
[59] Ibid., 25.
[60] It is interesting to note that Docetism is actually a "higher" Christology than the creedally orthodox in the sense that Docetism preserves a sharper distinction between the divine and the human, placing the divine at the center of meaning.

The other two categories used to classify christological approaches are Christology from above and from below. These indicate an emphasis on how one views the source materials. A Christology from above "begins with the data of divine revelation contained in, or generated by Scripture and/or the propositions of Catholic creeds and confessional statements and uses these data to formulation Christological statements."[61] The christological approach "from below" is "any method in Christology that beings with the data of historical document that refer to Christ including the new Testament and other extra-biblical materials, and uses these data to formulate christological statements."[62]

So, how much to these definitions help further this christological conversation? And furthermore, how do they aid in expressing Balthasar's own positions? In brief, Balthasar utilizes a combination of these approaches and does add one element. Balthasar definitely has a strong sense that Jesus is the divine Son, and thus holds to a high Christology. Yet, when it comes to methodological considerations, Balthasar is more complex. He does insist on the priority of divine revelation and is a faithful adherent to the creeds. He is suspicious of the approach from below, viewing it as a nascent attempt to fashion a Christology from a set of materialistic suppositions. However, Balthasar himself employs a Christology from below approach in Theo-Drama and recognizes its value.[63]

One additional aspect of Balthasar's theology that Crisp's book doesn't seem to account for is the experience and texts of the saints. For Balthasar, phenomena in these lives are christologically revelatory. In some ways this approach could be called "from

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[61] Ibid., 26.
[62] Ibid., 27.
[63] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory III. The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 150. Hereafter cited as *TD 3*.

above" in that these lives are judged by the creeds, church, and revelation. But in another

way, these are human lives and writings, existing in historical context and they have often

been marginalized doctrinally, even by the church itself. This aspect of Balthasar's

theology will be taken up in Chapter Four.

Balthasar holds the truths of the high and low christologies together in a unique

way that Mark McIntosh has brought attention to in his aptly titled book, *Christology*

Within. Instead of approaching Christology solely from above or below, McIntosh argues

that Balthasar searches out the connection between a Chalcedonian doctrine and the

"spirit" of the Ignatian model of mystical encounter,[64] in an attempt to avoid some of the

"metaphysical discomfort" of the high Christology approach.[65] McIntosh notes that

metaphysical discomfort is mitigated by emphasizing Jesus's actions as the connection

point between the divine and human in Jesus. The activities of Jesus have usually been

the domain of christologies of the low sort, in which they are discussed as human actions

designed to teach or enlighten. However, since Balthasar sees in the activity of Jesus a

union in mission with the divine, he sees it more than merely a moralizing lesson and at

the same time, Balthasar also refuses to accept any high Christology that would threaten

the understanding that Jesus's actions are anything other than perfectly human.[66] This is a

key piece that is noted by McIntosh:

> Where Chalcedon speaks of a union of divine and human *essences* in Christ, von
> Balthasar will speak of union of divine and human *activity* in Christ. He does this
> by radicalizing a suggestion that Maximus the Confessor had drawn from
> trinitarian theology and applied to christology. Maximus speaks of how the
> eternal Son possesses the divine essence according to his particular *mode* of
> existence as the Son. So Christ's humanity, while remaining perfectly human in

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[64] Mark Allen McIntosh, *Christology from Within: Spirituality and the Incarnation in Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 4.

[65] Ibid., 5.

[66] Ibid., 4-5.

its essence, is lived out according to that particular pattern of life or mode of existence which is the perfect enactment in human terms of the Son's eternal mode of existence. Von Balthasar adopts this christological insight wholeheartedly, for it allows him to speak of the divine in Christ precisely in terms of the very human pattern and activity of Jesus' life. This becomes almost an organic impulse in von Balthasar's christology.[67]

This "organic impulse" is important because it cultivates a uniquely fertile moment for kenosis in the history of Christian thought. The kenosis motif is allowed to operate in other theological areas usually closed off to its influence. To more fully understand this fertile moment, I will now discuss the narrative of kenosis that is offered.

Discussions of kenosis in theology almost always fall exclusively under the rubric of Christology. It seems prudent then, in order to support my claim that Balthasar's theology offers a more comprehensive and unique view of kenosis to elaborate on that history within the christological context of this chapter.[68] To begin with kenosis is to begin with Philippians 2:4-11 (ESV version):

> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.[5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,[6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,[7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.[8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.[9] Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,[10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,[11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This passage is one of the rare places that the word kenosis actually appears in Scripture. It has spawned numerous interpretations running the gamut from a decisive change in

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[67] Ibid., 5.

[68] This dissertation will utilize two main sources for this narrative of kenosis: Dawe, *The Form of a Servant: A Historical Analysis of the Kenotic Motif*. The other source is the more recent book by David Brown, *Divine Humanity*.

God's being to an ethical and hymnic metaphor for God's action.[69] Yet as David Brown

argues, the importance of this passage can be overblown. A full understanding of kenosis

"must stand or fall on the best interpretation of the New Testament as a whole . . ."[70]

The theologians of the patristic era debated some significant and substantive

parameters around the doctrine of the Incarnation. Due to cultural context, the newness of

the faith, and political influences, one of the central concerns was to describe how Jesus

became both God and man. While these debates happened with reference to metaphysical

concepts, the underlying concern was always soteriological. What did it mean for

humanity if Jesus was the highest, first-born creature rather than God's very Son?

According to most interpreters of the history of kenosis, the early church was

focused on creating a creed that prevented specific interpretations of Arian views and this

prevented them from detaching themselves from the corrupting influence of Hellenistic

philosophy. These views represented a perceived threat to the divinity of Jesus. In

addition to the Arian family of theological perspectives, the influence of Gnostic beliefs

"ascribed to the Logos only an apparent body (which excluded a Kenosis)" which also

caused difficulties for the early church as it set out to elaborate its beliefs.[71] So while the

Fathers were able to affirm a real descent and a real humiliation in the Incarnation, David

Brown reiterates that they were "closed off by the taking up of anti-heretical position,

whether in defence of the unchangedness of the form of God, and so of the Son's glory

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[69] A discussion of the Philippians passage occurs in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 23ff. Two recent surveys of these debates can be found in Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender*, 5-14. Gordon D. Fee, "The New Testament and Kenosis Christology," in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[70] Brown, *Divine Humanity*, 14.

[71] Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 28.

even during his Kenosis, or of the unchangeability of God in general."[72] And Donald

Dawe believes that the Arian controversies so controlled the interpretation of Philippians

2 that it skewed that interpretation away from acknowledging a possible change in God.[73]

According to the narrative provided by these authors, the idea of kenosis could

gain little traction in this period because of this doctrine of immutability. But that

narrative is skewed. Balthasar's disagreement with the narratives of kenosis that Dawe

and Brown provide is that they are operating within the unfortunate paradigm of Adolf

Harnack: they reject all versions of immutability as mutually exclusive with the kenotic

motif, ignoring the connection between the biblical version of *apatheia* and its

connection to kenotic Christology.

Both authors assume that kenosis by definition is tied to an emptying in some

capacity of divine attributes and thus excludes the possibility of divine immutability.[74]

What does this mean for Balthasar? Balthasar is no blind adopter of patristic or medieval

thought and he diverges from it in many ways,[75] but as Edward Oakes remarks, Balthasar

perceived the "essentially biblical presuppositions that operate within all of the Church

Fathers, transforming—however unconsciously, in many cases—the philosophy they

inherited."[76] Essentially, Balthasar believed that the *biblical* center of the mystical

tradition was present in antiquity in a way that Harnack and his followers were unable to

accept:

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[72] Ibid., 29.

[73] Dawe, *The Form of a Servant: A Historical Analysis of the Kenotic Motif*, 29.

[74] For a discussion of this mistake, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Ayers points out David Brown as one of these theologians that have made this mistake on p. 384 n. 3. Brown uses the modern narrative of hellenisation and the idea of progress to justify his position.

[75] For his relation to the Fathers, see Brian Daley, "Balthasar's reading of the Church Fathers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 187-206.

[76] Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption*, 121.

The technique of *apatheia* in antiquity for self-salvation from the world becomes, in the Christian age, the ascetic expansion of the heart and its preparation in order that it should flow into an unlimited readiness to love. . . . From Augustine *via* Benedict to Francis and Ignatius, this remains the primal truth which, though unchanging in its essence, is constantly illumined in new ways.[77]

These authors have generally appropriated Harnack's thesis that rampant Hellenism caused a homogenous doctrinal formulation of God's immutability that was taken not from biblical revelation but from Greek philosophy. As Lewis Ayres has argued regarding the fourth century, the problem is that the message scholars receive is that the historical-critical method is the sophisticated way of reading scripture and that the patristic method is the naive way of reading scripture. When this presupposition coupled with the general dismay fostered by Harnack's influence at the perceived philosophical and ascetic corruptions of the gospel holds sway, it fosters a superficial engagement not only with patristic writers but medieval ones as well that leads to misinterpretations of these writers' theologies.

Once Dawe's and Brown's narratives move out of the patristic era, they focus most of their energies on the creative developments that occurred in the nineteenth century in German and English circles, which were characterized by the willingness to dispense with notions of immutability. However, the problem with these later developments in kenotic thought, according to Balthasar, is that early Lutheran theologians were hampered by a viewing of the "divine attributes in an Old Testament fashion."[78]

The previous discussions of high and low Christology and the account of the history of kenosis offer a sort of beginning or prolegomena for Balthasar's doctrine of the

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[77] Balthasar, *GL 5*, 22.
[78] Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 31.

Incarnation and kenosis. They are both attempts at differentiating Balthasar's approach conceptually and historically in order to make the case that, for Balthasar, the Incarnation is of the utmost importance. Indeed it is the singular happening in all of reality that impacts all other facets of life and living. Balthasar's fascinating linkage of the Incarnation with kenosis and the implications he draws from it is expressed with wonderful creativity and courage.

Since the Incarnation is a response to sin and evil, Jesus Christ is predominantly a savior. Balthasar's description of Christology includes the work that Jesus does to secure our salvation. If it is true that salvation is the goal of the Incarnation, for Balthasar, then it can also be said that the kenosis is the primary descriptor of the Incarnation. As Aidan Nichols notes, that for Balthasar it is "the *kenosis* of divine love, not the *aussumptio* of the human nature, is the primary message of the Incarnation."[79] This section will describe in more general terms what the doctrine of the Incarnation means for Balthasar and how that doctrine uses kenosis in relation to various aspects of the drama of salvation using five biblical motifs.

The Five Biblical Motifs of Salvation

Balthasar covers five biblical motifs, or key features of salvation in the fourth volume of the *Theo-Drama.* While he believes these five motifs cannot be assimilated into a closed system, it will become evident through this exposition that they all contain the element of kenosis. Balthasar's vision of salvation is affected through stages of kenotic activity and that human agency is one of the outcomes of this kenotic activity.

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[79] Aidan Nichols, *Say It Is Pentecost: A Guide Through Balthasar's Logic* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 112.

Balthasar believes the "quintessence of Scripture" can be encapsulated in the following

five motifs:

> (1) The Son gives himself, through God the Father, for the world's salvation. (2) The Sinless One "changes places" with sinners. While, in principle, the Church Fathers understand this in a radical sense, it is only in the modern variation of the theories of representation that the consequences are fully drawn out. (3) Man is thus set free (ransomed, redeemed, released). (4) More than this, however, he is initiated into the divine life of the Trinity. (5) Consequently, the whole process is shown to be the result of an initiative on the part of divine love.[80]

This section will expound on these motifs, noting how each one relates to the person of

Jesus and the motif of kenosis.

The first motif contemplates the Son's self-gift through the Father to the world.

This motif holds within it the mysteries of the trinitarian life, creation, and covenant. It is

the site of the original kenosis in which we glimpse the relationship between the Persons

of the Trinity that form the backdrop for the Incarnation.[81] The Incarnation is directed in

two places: toward the Father and for the world. The Son offers himself up to the Father

from all eternity, in the form of willing self-gift, fully in service of the Father.[82] The

Incarnation is an extension of this eternal "eucharistic attitude" of the Son.[83] "Covenant

and creation are not only rendered possible by the son's 'eucharistic' response to the

Father: they are 'surpassed by it, since both of them can only become reality within the

embrace of the Son's response."[84] So all of creation, covenant, and Incarnation reveal the

depth of the love between the persons of the Trinity and that each were involved in the

salvation of the world.

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[80] Balthasar, *TD 4*, 317.
[81] This relationship will be the subject of the next chapter.
[82] This trinitarian primal kenosis will receive a full treatment in Chapter Three.
[83] Ibid., 331.
[84] Ibid., 330.

This motif of Jesus's giving up of self for the world's salvation is precisely the movement of divine kenotic love toward humanity, first apprehended by Christianity that forms the basis for all other forms of kenotic activity. It is this kenotic love that solves the terrible effects of sin and restores our relationship with God by contradicting all prior human attempts at reaching salvation:

> The primary reality is, not man's movement from below up to the absolute, in order, if possible, to disappear in it, but rather, as Ignatius of Loyola emphatically repeats, the movement *de arriba,* coming down from above, in which God empties himself out in order to fill man up with *his* loving self-expropriation.[85]

The Incarnation is the central answer to human sin, not because of the assumption of human flesh to divinize it, but because it reveals divine love for creaturely finitude. It is God's pronouncement, once again, that creation is good. It is a healing and restoration of human finitude.

In sum, this first motif represents three levels of kenosis. The timeless gift of divinity that the Father gives to the Son is the first. The reason for the Son's thankfulness toward the Father is because the Father fully surrendered all of his divine life to the Son. The second level of kenosis is the Son's gift back to the Father.[86] Finally, the third level of kenotic activity is the Father and Son giving themselves to the world. And all of this is to reveal God's love for the created order and his restoration of that order through kenosis, not through coercive power.

It is through the third level of kenosis that Balthasar's theology of mission enters into the drama. It is Balthasar's unique concept of mission [*sendung*] that provides the unity of activity between the divine and human Jesus that he sees in the Incarnation.

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[85] Balthasar, *TL 2*, 283.

[86] Within the Trinity, the Spirit is ushered out of this kenotic exchange within the Father and Son. Within the Incarnation, the Spirit, as the bond of love, maintains the loving relationship of the Father and Son even as Jesus is abandoned by God in the depths of Hell.

Mission is at the living center of Balthasar's action-oriented Christology. Mission is a

sending. As Balthasar quips, "No one can give himself a mission."[87] Jesus places his

identity within the external mission given him by the Father and in so doing grows and

develops his sense of agency. Mission is essential to the development of personhood. In

fact it is constitutive of personhood.[88] This means that for Jesus, his personhood was

something that was always his, yet developed as he followed his mission.[89]

The second motif, this exchange with sinners, is a classic expression of the

biblical and patristic sources on salvation.[90] This motif emphasizes the sacrificial and

substitutionary aspects of salvation. Jesus takes on our sins and our punishment of death,

and we receive the merits of his life and work. This exchange indicates a kenotic

movement into two aspects:

> the first is ordered more to the event of Good Friday,the second more to that of
> Holy Saturday. In the suffering of the living Jesus, there is a readiness to drink the
> 'chalice of wrath,' that is, to let the whole power of sin surge over him. . . . Sin's
> impatience, as the sum of all world-historical sinful impatience against God, is
> finally exhausted in comparison to the patience of the Son of God. His patience
> undergirds sin and lifts it off its hinges. Of course: it is not quantities that stand
> here as rivals over against each other but qualities. The quality of the loving
> obedience of the Son toward the Father . . . is not to be compared with the quality
> of the hate that surges over him.[91]

The exchange that takes place on Good Friday is an active and patient bearing of sin.

Then within Holy Saturday, Jesus solidifies "his solidarity in nontime with those who

have been lost to God. For these people, their choice is definitive, the choice whereby

they have chosen their "I" instead of God's selfless love."[92] Balthasar characterizes hell

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[87] Balthasar, *TD 3*, 154.
[88] Ibid., 155.
[89] Ibid., 157.
[90] Balthasar, *TD 4*, 244.
[91] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "On Vicarious Representation," in *Explorations in Theology IV: Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 421-422.
[92] Ibid., 422.

as a person's choice to serve his or her own "I" over God's offering of himself. Yet even here, in this seemingly final choice, "the Son descends; but now he is no longer *acting* in any way but from the Cross is instead robbing every power and initiative by being the Purely Available One, the Obedient One . . . the absolutely cadaver-like obedience . . . He is dead with the dead (but out of a final love)."[93] This obedience of Jesus and his exchange with sinners reaches its full dramatic tension in Hell where Jesus's identity has wholly identified with the damned.

Unlike the mainstream triumphalist approach, which envisions the descent into hell as a "'chaining' and 'robbing' of the power of death-Satan-Hades, thereby interpreting it as a victorious journey"[94] and treats the descent under the third motif of liberation as Jesus releasing the captives, Balthasar places it here, within the exchange of places, due to the emphasis that he gives to kenotic themes. In what is usually interpreted as powerful—overcoming the Devil—Balthasar treats as a divestment of power that overcomes evil through defenselessness and patience.[95] This exchange is understood as going into the experiences of a damned person, which would be death and hell—total alienation and resignation. It is this exchange in which Balthasar's logic of kenosis in the order of salvation reaches its extreme and "the omnipotent powerlessness of God's love shines forth in the mystery of darkness and alienation between God and the sin-bearing Son; this is where Christ 'represents' us, takes our place: what is 'experienced' is the opposite of what the facts indicate."[96]

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[93] Ibid.

[94] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Descent into Hell," in *Explorations in Theology IV: Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 407.

[95] Balthasar, "On Vicarious Representation," 421.

[96] Balthasar, *TD 4*, 335-336. This sense of backwardness or paradox is important to the kenotic motif as it is seen as power exercise in an impotent manner. Because the actions of redemption have a hidden meaning, because they "take place in the profound depths of the relations between the divine

The third motif of salvation is the release of humanity from sin. For Balthasar, human sin is primarily an attempt to grasp freedom and power apart from God. Thus, humanity,

> in seeking to arrogate this power [divine power] to itself, finite freedom does two things: it separates power from self-giving goodness, and it sets itself up against the absolute good-thereby incurring the judgment of the latter. Judgment reveals that the usurped power is actually God's power over the usurpers. The one who attempts to seize absolute power is overwhelmed by it; he has no defense against it. Seeking 'liberation' through total autonomy, he is so fettered by it (for total autonomy belongs to God) that release can only come from God.[97]

The liberation that God offers humanity is from the cycle of power and grasping for autonomy. Salvation opens up the kenotic mode of life to humanity, inviting it to live in a way that disconnects human freedom from the mechanics of power struggles and embrace a freedom constituted by self-giving, loving relationships. In Jesus, who embraces self-emptying love, we are shown another way of acting that will grant us true liberation.

But this was not shown merely through teaching or example alone, but through the divine activity of the Incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. Without these events, the power of death would not be broken: "only in absolute weakness does God want to give to each freedom created by him the gift of a love that breaks out of every dungeon and dissolves every constriction."[98]

In the Garden of Gethsemane, for example, Jesus empties himself of his own wishes in favor of accepting the mission granted to him. Inherent within this mission is the refusal of divine force as the solution to the dilemma of sin. Instead the solution

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Hypostases . . . it is just as possible to maintain that Jesus' being forsaken by God was the opposite of hell as to say that it *was* hell (Luther, Calvin) or event he ultimate heightening of hell (Quenstedt)." Ibid., 336.

[97] Ibid., 165.

[98] Balthasar, "On Vicarious Representation," 422.

involves "on the one hand, *obedience to the Father* (John 18, 11), and, on the other, *a decision in favour of defencelessness*–renunciation of the 'twelve legions of Angels (Matthew 26, 53) countermanding the attempt to defend him (Luke 22, 51 and parallels) and the instruction to Judas, 'Do your business.'"[99] To defeat evil Balthasar argues that Jesus chooses obedience and defenseless love, rather than making use of force.

The element of obedience has double significance, first for the life of Jesus in refusing violence even in the face of suffering and, also, for Balthasar's understanding of the journey of human transformation. Balthasar acknowledges that there is a disjunction and a jarring and painful effort in obedience. However, if sin is indeed an attempt at grasping autonomy, then obedience is the way to counter the sinful inclinations we find in our hearts. Balthasar says that, "by the grace of the Lord, renunciation leads the apostle not only to a new and promising fullness of earthly as well as heavenly gifts . . . and to the freedom of truth . . . and of Christ . . ., but also to an explicit sharing in the fruitfulness of the Lord's redemptive sacrifice. . . . Only in the eyes of the world are the renunciations of Christendom something negative."[100] Balthasar claims both an immediate and eternal benefit from the salvation wrought by Christ. The way of attaining salvation is obedience.

Jesus' "decision in favour of defenselessness" is an active, not passive choice in how respond to evil. Balthasar argues that

> for Jesus what mattered was not a form of self-perfection or a means of gaining knowledge. Rather, Jesus' intention was to amortize all attacks of violence in the spiritual field, alchemizing them in the very arena that is the instrument of evil. For Jesus, evil is not only psychologically exhausted of its power when we refuse to resist it, but, more crucially, it is taken captive in its very essence."[101]

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[99] Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 117-118.
[100] Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 160-161.
[101] Balthasar, *Epilogue*, 75-76.

Jesus's kenosis, instead of being wholly resigned and passive, is courageous and engaging. It is the very mechanism by which liberation is achieved for humanity.

This element of defenselessness is not only related to the concrete obedience described above, but it speaks as a condemnation of any principle, way of life, or spirituality that would create coercion and competition in the service of autonomy. It is a cosmic rejection of violence and coercion. For Balthasar, not only does Jesus affect salvation but he discloses the form of creaturely life and fulfillment.[102] Human flourishing cannot be achieved through violence. The hard-won liberation for the created order is achieved not through the use of power but in the subversion of it. Balthasar sees autonomous power has a threat to harmonious relationships. Even God, who has autonomous power, operates in the kenotic way of vulnerable self-offering. The constrictive search for autonomy and its pernicious effects on humanity are broken by Jesus through kenosis, and we are offered true freedom in proper relation with the Creator. That invitation to proper relation is discussed in the fourth motif.

The fourth motif is the invitation to respond to the freedom from sin, won by Christ when he stepped into the life of the divine Trinity. In this motif, Balthasar transitions from ransomed individuals saved from death and the futile search for autonomy, to the incorporation of the Christian into Christ's life. For Balthasar, this immersion into the Cross, death, and Resurrection and mission of Jesus is the true pathway to the maximization of human agency.

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[102] Yet elsewhere Balthasar seems to recognize that the ordinary every day life we experience is a competition. "The other forces of existence retain power and domination over against love. When man absolutizes creaturely love at the expense of the agonistic forces of life, he contradicts himself in a biological and cultural sense, as Nietzsche has shown. The sphere of ordinary existence, the place where people interact, contains at best a middle position in which love and self-interest, love and nonlove, temper one another." Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 64.

The work of Jesus was to bear up within himself all opposition to God, allowing it to exist within the infinite distance between the persons of the Trinity. This spatial analogy is meant to remind us of the distance, qualitatively speaking, that Christ went in Hell. He went there not only to identify with sinners but also to establish a place for sinners, in their rejection of God, to be encompassed within God's own being. Because God is triune, this establishment has precedent within the self-emptying relations of God.

> We must remember that the creature's No, its wanting to be autonomous without acknowledging its origin, must be located within the Son's all-embracing yes to the Father, in the Spirit; it is the refusal to participate in the autonomy with which the Son is endowed. This negation, however, is restriction: it is the refusal to follow truth to the very end . . . . For the Son, following the truth to the end means making a fitting response to the Father's total gift of himself by freely and thankfully allowing himself to be poured forth by the Father, a response that is made in absolute spontaneity and in absolute 'obedience' to the Father (and 'obedience here means the readiness to respond and correspond to the Father) . . . The creature's No is merely a twisted knot within the Son's pouring-forth; it is left behind by the current of love.[103]

So the very rejection of Jesus and the kind of freedom that he offers is dealt with by God through the divine act of self-emptying, defenseless, absolute love, so that even in our most resistant state we are still taken up, in a manner of speaking, into to the patterns of the triune life.

Consequently, we are invited to let go of our resistance to God and enter into the autonomy of the Son in order to find our true personhood. It is this inclusive nature of Christ that is key to salvation. The follower of Christ "is given a unique participation in the Son's uniqueness," resulting in the "inexhaustible multiplication of what is once-for-all and unique; thus it also permits each individual freedom to fulfill itself in an utterly distinct manner within the realm of infinite freedom."[104] This movement from

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[103] Balthasar, *TD 4*, 329-330.
[104] Balthasar, *TD 2*, 270.

individuality to personhood will be discussed further in chapter five, but let me briefly

state that the pattern that Balthasar envisions arising from these biblical motifs is one of

human agency established through the patterns of self-giving. The autonomy end of the

continuum, on the one hand, eradicates self-giving because it is a threat. The absorption

approach, on the other, turns self-giving into self-annihilation. Both attempts do not

successfully establish human agency but constrict it and do violence to it.

The fifth motif is the most comprehensive, identifying *divine love* as the thing that

initiates all of God's movement toward creation. The first key feature of this motif is that

it is a *triune* God who loves. By keeping this at the forefront, we can refute the charge

that Christianity believes in an abusive divine Father. The fifth motif balances all the

other soteriological motifs, providing a clear defense against the argument that the Cross

is "divine child abuse" being "paraded as salvific and the child who suffers 'without even

raising a voice' is lauded as the hope of the world."[105] While it is true that Balthasar does

indeed emphasize the Cross,[106] it is far more accurate to say that the controlling concept

is the sheer unanticipated course that divine love took in order to display love to his

creatures:

> Every "risk" on God's part is undergirded by, and enabled by, the power-less
> power of the divine self-giving. We cannot say that the Father is involved in 'risk'
> by allowing his Son to go to the Cross, as if only then could he be sure of the
> earnestness of the son's indebtedness and gratitude. However, if we ask whether
> there is suffering in God the answer is this: there is something in God that can
> develop into suffering. This suffering occurs when the recklessness with which

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[105] Joanne and Parker Carlson Brown, Rebecca, "For God So Loved the World," in *Violence Against Women and Children: a Christian Theological Sourcebook*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Continuum, 1995), 37.

[106] One such vivid passage is this one: "This withdrawal on the part of the Father [from the Son] reaches its acme-brutally, one might say-in the dereliction of the Cross, in which Mary has her share. In this dereliction, the father gives no word of answer to the Son and his Word, that is, the Son himself, sinks into the silence of death." Balthasar, *TD 4*, 359. Balthasar also argues at length that the Incarnation is ordered to the Passion. This does not contradict my point. I am merely trying to remind the reader that the cross does not just originate on the scene. It is the divine love that motivates the Incarnation and Passion.

the Father gives away himself (and *all* that is his) encounters a freedom that, instead of responding in kind to this magnanimity, changes it into a calculating, cautious self-preservation.[107]

Balthasar's vision of the Incarnation precludes understanding the Cross as "divine child abuse" because Jesus's voluntary suffering and self-emptying is always undertaken within the context of trinitarian love. To think of the kenotic motif as separate from love is to fundamentally misunderstand it.

The second key feature of this fifth motif is that it is a *loving* God who effects salvation. This love is most manifest in the Incarnation itself. He most definitely sees the Cross and the descent as crucial aspects of God's plan of salvation, but as parts of this expression of God's love for his creation. "The word which God addresses to us is a word of love: he utters it in a loud, manly voice in broad daylight, almost menacing, causing man to start out of his dreams and take notice of what he hears—yet it is also a word whispered in the night, soft and alluring, beyond comprehension, a mystery incredible even to the strongest faith, which no creature, however long he lives, will fathom.[108] The Incarnation is a waking up to a new reality in which God's love has found us from a slumber in which we were unable to comprehend beauty, unable to understand the scope of our importance to the Creator. The Incarnation is that announcement of love from God and it is based in this announcement that Jesus's sufferings must be understood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter aimed to review Balthasar's christological and soteriological perspective. First, I reviewed his understanding of original sin as an impulse toward absorption or autonomy—both illicit and misguided attempts at securing

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[107] Ibid., 327-328.
[108] Balthasar, *Prayer*, 39.

agency for humanity. Then I described briefly Balthasar's theo-dramatic approach to Jesus Christ, which emphasizes focusing on the personal activity of Jesus rather than philosophical or historical investigations and uses that activity as the basis of a Christology that is neither purely high nor low, neither precisely from above or from below. Then, after a brief summary of understandings of kenosis in Christian thought, I intended to elaborate on Balthasar's elusive and creative style that connects with the dramatic nature of existence. Finally, I analyzed the five biblical motifs of salvation through Jesus's activity that Balthasar claimed represented the fullness of God's plan of redemption. These five motifs each demonstrate Balthasar's ability to to incorporate kenotic love into narratives of redemption. In a way, kenosis is the common thread running through these motifs. Each has a kenotic element that enhances and deepens Balthasar's understanding of these metaphors.

Indeed, since the Incarnation encompasses every aspect of Christian theology for Balthasar, his usage of kenosis exhibited here exerts its influence throughout the other areas of Balthasar's theology. Balthasar is perhaps one of the first theologians to truly work out a comprehensive operation of kenotic economy across virtually every major doctrinal category.

CHAPTER THREE

SUPER-KENOSIS AND THE TRINITARIAN LIFE

One of this dissertation's primary goals is to link the kenotic motif in Balthasar's writings with his conception of human agency. The introductory chapter laid out Balthasar's criticisms of alternative worldviews and highlighted his central concern: to protect creaturely integrity from the absorption and autonomy models of human activity. These models, while distinct, share an origin in the first sin as recounted in Genesis. To Balthasar, absorption and autonomy are mistaken attempts to ascend to God. Among the negative outcomes of these techniques are passive spirituality, attempts to transcend creaturely finitude (including suffering), and the fomenting of violent competition between beings for self-fulfillment. These techniques are a rejection of the pattern of kenotic spirituality connected to interpersonal love that Balthasar proposes.

The second chapter explored Balthasar's christological employment of kenosis in the obedience of the Son toward the Father. Jesus's earthly life was an expression of deep kenosis, a full self-surrender in love toward the Father and toward humanity. Since Balthasar sees Jesus's earthly activity as unified with the Father and the Spirit, one of the major links between the ideas in chapter two and those of the current chapter is a close correlation between the activity as expressed in the economy of salvation and the inner trinitarian life. This chapter will address the multiple images of kenosis Balthasar uses in trinitarian thought. When read in its proper context, Balthasar's trinitarian theology has

two modes that are significantly different from each other and that have different implications for the kenotic motif.

The first mode of trinitarian discourse is intended to awaken love and gratitude in those who encounter it through the language of excess. It is this mode that introduces the language of trinitarian death, super-kenosis, and risk. This mode is intended not to establish definitive epistemology toward understanding facts about God but to cultivate a deeper intuition of God's excess and love. There is a discourse of poverty and wealth, death and life, kenosis and surplus that circles around the trinitarian mystery. This lends a distinctive flavor to Balthasar's trinitarian theology. Rather than focus primarily on the singular and plural nature of God, it emphasizes the mystical and biblical encounter of God's incomprehensible love.

Balthasar's second mode of trinitarian reflection is more confident and polemical. This is the ontological mode. Balthasar attempts to infer from trinitarian doctrine an ontological answer to the philosophical problem of the one and the many. In this mode, Balthasar's aim is not to initiate the disciple into the depths of God's love but to argue that, because of its trinitarian God whose procession is defined by kenotic love, the Christian vision of human freedom is superior to other religious and philosophical traditions.[109] In doing so he is offering a solution to the problems he identifies in the absorption and autonomy approaches: the trinitarian kenotic exchange of persons maintains a space for all that is non-divine (sin, human creatures, death). This space is what grounds the possibility of the highest human freedom not in competition with the

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[109] This mode is clearly connected to the delineation of absorption and autonomy in Chapter One. The Trinity is Balthasar's answer to those problems.

divine. Kenosis functions in this ontological mode as a way to protect personal freedoms, not only in the Trinity but also as the subtext for all human freedoms. So Balthasar sees kenosis as the guarantor rather than a stripping away of personal creativity and volition.

Secondary Literature and the Context of Trinitarian Discourse

These modes and implications lead to a diversity of opinions in the secondary literature. One of the challenges in understanding Balthasar's trinitarian and kenotic theology is the problem of metaphorical or analogical language. In the best-case scenario, Balthasar's trinitarian theology evokes a paradoxical search for a mystical encounter. In the worst-case scenario, Balthasar's speculations are contradictory and dangerous to human agency and go beyond faithful biblical interpretation.

In the secondary literature there are number of sharp criticisms and confusion related to Balthasar's trinitarian theology. Some of these arguments fail to pay attention to or misconstrue the manner in which this language is employed to support Balthasar's larger theological goal. Some critics attempt to downplay the difficulty of Balthasar's thought by simply minimizing his more controversial statements. For example, Aristotle Papanikalou overlooks Balthasar's more extreme language of suffering and abandonment in his definition of Balthasarian kenosis, averring that "*kenosis,* for Balthasar, is not self-sacrifice, but the movements of self-giving toward the other in order to receive the other that are constitutive of divine and human personhood."[110] This is only a partial explanation of Balthasar's concept of kenosis. It also includes self-sacrifice, poverty,

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[110] Papanikolaou, "Person, *Kenosis* and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation," 42.

struggle, abandonment, and death. Papanikolou does not adequately address these darker realities.[111]

From a more critical standpoint, Karen Kilby chastises Balthasar for being "confident and detailed" to a fault in his description of the inner life of the Trinity, especially in *Theo-Drama V*.[112] Kilby argues that the so-called trinitarian renaissance that has occurred in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is not a faithful return to tradition but a hasty reaction to the Enlightenment strictures on epistemology and the resultant deistic model of God. She terms this theological movement "robust trinitarianism," and identifies its trademark as overconfidence in describing (in Balthasar's case) the inner life of God.

Kilby's criticisms and proposed alternatives serve as an example of the ways in which many scholars misread Balthasar's trinitarian thought. This section will explicate some of Kilby's concerns to illustrate the importance of attending to the following internal contextual markers of Balthasar's theological perspective: analogy, negative theology, biblical revelation, and theology of the saints. Balthasar's trinitarian theology actually fits well with Kilby's proposed alternative, but with one caveat which I will explain later.

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[111] In this I agree with Carolyn Chau's statements: "Focusing on the pleromatic, fulfilling aspect of kenosis, Papanikolaou's attempts to refigure kenosis in a positive manner lead him to state at times, perhaps dangerously, that kenosis is not primarily a matter of self-sacrifice. Insofar as this is a corrective to mistaken notions of the purpose of kenosis Papanikolaou is right to do so; yet kenosis entails sacrifice or at least a certain ascesis." Carolyn A. Chau, "What Could Possibly Be Given?: Towards an Exploration of *Kenosis* as Forgiveness-Continuing the Conversation Between Coakley, Hampson, and Papanikolaou," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 1 (2012): 8.

[112] Karen Kilby, "Is Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 3 (2010).

Kilby is concerned that a robust form of trinitarianism in some cases[113] deviates too far from tradition, creating a climate for idolatry and encouraging a Christian triumphalism in the marketplace of ideas. She suggests an alternative that she names a "programme of trinitarian theological modesty."[114] This agenda of modesty is composed of a series of maxims.[115] First, the order of discovery is important: elaboration of trinitarian doctrine is based on the epiphany that Jesus the Man is also the Christ. Second, the "theologian who is thinking about the meaning of 'Father, Son and Spirit' cannot forget, say, the narratives from which they . . . first learned to speak of God in these terms."[116] This means that, regardless of the level of abstraction employed in trinitarian discourse, one cannot jettison biblical narrative and the personal names of the Father, Son, and Spirit. And the third and final point is that modesty is a necessary attitude to employ in relation to explanatory power of trinitarian discourse. As theologians "believing in the Trinity, we are not so much in possession of a more fully textured concept of God than a mere Enlightenment deist has, but in fact much less than any deist in possession of any sort of manageable concept of God at all."[117] Trinitarian discourse comprises "patterns of affirmation that immediately defeat us."[118] For Kilby, a correct

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[113] While at the beginning of the article, Kilby attempts to qualify her criticisms of robust trinitarianism to imply that some may not be guilty of her concerns, she ends the piece by addressing robust trinitarianism as as a collective and widespread problem. She also singles out Balthasar by name in one of the first few footnotes in the article. Balthasar is the only one worthy (or notorious) enough to receive a specific mention.

[114] Ibid., 67.

[115] For the sake of brevity and focus another maxim in this article has been omitted. That is that contemplation cannot have as its focus, the trinitarian nature of God. This criticism is unfounded in relation to Balthasar and not related to the trinitarian issue of kenosis that need to be discussed here.

[116] Ibid., 69-70.

[117] Ibid., 76.

[118] Ibid., 67. n. 7.

trinitarian theology offers not a new avenue of exploration but a confessional boundary marker that lets the theologian know where to cease his or her speculations.

Putting Balthasar's trinitarian language in its proper context requires an examination of four areas: the analogy of being, negative theology, the transition from biblical revelation of Christ to Trinity, and, briefly, Balthasar's theology of the saints. This examination will help clarify some of the problems in the secondary literature and provide a context for understanding kenosis.

The Analogy of Being

The analogy of being is articulated by the Fourth Lateran council as a way of governing and guiding our discourse and mystical encounters. The council's documents posit a similarity and a greater dissimilarity between the world and God. Balthasar believed Thomas Aquinas correctly understood analogy as a way of preserving the ontological distinction between God and humanity.[119] Growing out of this conviction, the pairing of similarity and a greater dissimilarity is an important aspect of Balthasar's theological language because it allows us to differentiate between God and creatures, which are fundamentally necessary for understanding the gospel.[120]

Balthasar does not, however, rely on an external system of analogy to govern his language but prefers to envision the oscillation of the similar and dissimilar not in a philosophical system but in the hypostatic union. Christ is the concrete *analogia entis*. As Balthasar reflects, "I have thus tried to construct a theology and philosophy starting from

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[119] For an extended discussion of Thomas, see *GL 4,* 393-412.

[120] Edward Oakes observes that the analogy of being is part of Balthasar's internal regulatory process in assessing Christian thinkers: "And thus, we may say that the concept of analogy will provide Balthasar with the key for unlocking the treasury of the Fathers, the Archimedean point for judging their form against the content of the Gospel, the tool for all his interpretive analysis." Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption*, 114.

analogy, not of an abstract Being, but of Being as it is encountered concretely in its

attributes . . . . God appears . . . in Jesus Christ."[121] This foundation in Christ of the

analogia entis is significant because Balthasar essentially fuses philosophical ideas of

language and being to the biblical revelation of Christ. The Incarnate One becomes a

unifier of difference. Jesus's activity does not fuse the human identity to the divine

identity but instead provides a conduit to real participation in it.[122] This real participation

is kenotic, but, based in analogy and difference, presupposes the value of a life sacrificed.

Kenosis is powerful because the self is valuable. Kenosis does not devalue of the

physical; it affirms the physical.

With the idea of analogy, Balthasar's theology shares Kilby's commitment to

adherence to the order of revelation instead of to a philosophical or methodological

framework. Balthasar has taken a philosophical theory and brought it into the light of

scripture, employing analogy to ensure that biblical revelation is central to the theological

task. In the case of trinitarian theology specifically, Balthasar employs analogy in a way

that allows him to make positive statements. While Kilby sees this as overconfidence and

hubris, Balthasar sees it as being faithful to the witness of biblical revelation.[123]

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[121] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 115-116.

[122] This is completely crucial to understand anything regarding Balthasar's use of kenosis. At the core of the kenosis is the idea that there really is something significant to be emptied. It presupposes a worth and value in what the creature has to offer God.

[123] On this particular area, Balthasar, being influenced by Barth and the *Nouvelle Teologie,* has significantly moved Catholic theology toward a commitment to order theology around revelation. Yet Kilby believes there is more to it than just trying to be faithful to revelation. She sees in Balthasar, a mind driven to capture the whole and his project an ambitious attempt in the case of his theological aesthetics, "to weave the New Testament together as whole to bring out its beauty." This is indeed one way to read Balthasar, but I remain unconvinced that it is the correct way. Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, Interventions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 55.

So how does analogy relate to the kenotic motif? Using this theme of analogy to expand on the motif of kenosis, it will be a general rule of interpretation that self-emptying will bear within it a similarity and a greater dissimilarity. Human kenosis is qualitatively different from divine kenosis, and the economic revelation of kenosis in Jesus is subtly different than kenosis within the trinitarian realm. Analogy partly explains these differences.

Negative Theology

To claim, as Balthasar does, that there is a real analogy between the created realm and the divine may seem to posit too easy a correspondence, one that could fall into error or even idolatry, as Karl Barth famously proclaimed.[124] Balthasar, who welcomed a dialogue with Barth, acknowledges this, and poses the following question: "Is it not superficial to emphasize the analogies between God and the creature, not to mention between the trinitarian God and intraworldly multiplicity, to the point (seemingly) of ignoring the 'greater dissimilitude' that, nonetheless, remains fundamental for everything else?"[125] Balthasar's answer is to employ a modified form of negative theology.

Negative theology, as conventionally conceived, is a philosophical or speculative negation of names or attributes of God.[126] However, as a philosophical system, it can overshadow the positive role of revelation, which is among Balthasar's central concerns. Thus, just as he did with analogy he will do with negative theology. He will retain a sense

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[124] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G.T. Thomson, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), X.

[125] Balthasar, *TL 2*, 87.

[126] For a discussion on the role of Pseudo-Dionysius in Balthasar's work, see Tamsin Jones, "Dionysius in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jean-Luc Marion," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 4 (2008): 743-754.

of positive revelation and anchor the use of negative theology not within an

epistemological system but firmly within that revelation:

> Negative theology takes on a radically different meaning as soon as we set foot in
> the biblical realm. . . . What in the nonbibilical search for the primal ground
> almost necessarily appeared as something free from the limitations of personality,
> or something to be touched only in moments of ecstasy, suddenly steps forth with
> the full impact of a spiritual freedom as the one God who has from the very start
> already found man the seeker and now addresses him with his grace and his
> demand. This puts an abrupt end to all system-building and to every form of
> resignation.[127]

For Balthasar, negative theology as a system of negation betrays its own goals, precisely

because the role of negative theology should be to *explode* systems of thought, not secure

them.[128] While at the outset negation seems to preclude the possibility of a confident

system, it is in actuality closed in upon its own assumptions. Balthasar's version of

negative theology affirms creaturehood, privileges divine revelation, and avoids an alien

superstructure of negation, instead keeping the primary themes of scripture at the center

while still acknowledging a dissimilarity present in all language spoken about God.

It is this positive element of revelation that really drives negative theology's role

for Balthasar. Negative theology is not so much about human epistemic limits (as Kilby

seems to say) as it is about the excess of love that is the Divine Being. Because of the

biblical revelation of God, "this awesome self-affirmation of God contains, as if

incidentally, an absolute negation."[129]

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[127] Balthasar, *TL 2*, 85.

[128] While negative theology seems, conceptually, to provide a way past closed systems of meaning, Balthasar's concern arises from some of the spiritual techniques employed by those who ascribe to such a system. Often it involves some form of the negation of self. Balthasar's kenosis is fundamentally opposed to such a conception.

[129] Ibid., 88.

In Balthasar's interpretation of the great apophatic theologian Pseudo-Dionysius, he sees a "third step" in this process of affirmation and negation: the "hymnic." Balthasar's discovery that "the 'hymnic' is therefore for Denys a methodology of theological thinking and speaking"[130] can also apply to Balthasar's own thought. Balthasar's "robust" language is not a confident overextension of propositional language. It is a deliberate heightening of tension that reaches a breakdown in the adequacy of human language and instead stammers after the "the liturgical songs of heaven."[131]

It is at this point that Karen Kilby completely misses the mark. While her "programme of theological modesty" is an important corrective to some forms of contemporary trinitarian theology, she classifies the language of Balthasar's super-kenosis as something like enlightenment deists' claims, meaning not that deists would posit a super-kenosis but that the linguistic style or intention of deistic claims about God stems from a mechanical set of propositional statements. So, when Kilby says that we have less of an understanding of God than the deists, she is speaking in terms of propositional statements. She judges Balthasar as if he were making propositional, rather than hymnic statements. If we use words as the deists do, of course what Balthasar is doing seems overreaching and ill-advised. But if we recognize the modesty and negative theology *inherent* in this hymnic and confident language of super-kenosis it will free us to ruminate on Balthasar's robust language without expecting a concise and digestible definition of God under those terms.

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[130] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics Volume II: Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles*, ed. John Riches, trans. Francis McDonagh and Brain McNeil C.R.V. Andrew Louth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 88.
[131] Ibid., 160.

But, one might ask, do not most other theologians follow this form of negative theology to some degree and yet end up with much more modest depictions of the inner life of God? Undoubtably, Balthasar's strain of negative theology does fit within the general themes of Catholic thought, but he is more willing than they are to see a link between negative theology, the economy of the revealed earthly Jesus, and the inner life of the of the Trinity. Balthasar believes himself bound to consider this avenue of approach and believes that it alone provides a true home for negative theology.

Rather than employing it as a way to stop human speech, Balthasar sees the incommensurability of God as an impetus to create more speech, to stretch the meaning of words. Balthasar purposefully uses provocative language in order to recognize that this excess of meaning is not an absence or a negative feature of Christian thought but one of the positive features of the Christian God. In this manner, he mimics the characteristics of love that he sees within the Godhead.

Negative theology relates to the theme of kenosis in this way: the hymnic element, instead of abiding in silence, ends up in an almost lyrical description of the depths of God's self-sacrificing and reckless love. Just as human love has inspired a proliferation of sonnets, poems, letters, and songs, Balthasar is inspired to suffuse his discourse with kenotic themes, since self-giving is the highest form of love. Balthasar's deep love for the creative mind flows from this theological stance. His unique collection of lay styles of aesthetics, and his affection for Goethe and other forms of literature confirm Balthasar's commitment to a theology based in the language of love. In fact it is the form of God, the beauty of God, that comes to us in the form of Jesus Christ that so inspires his effusiveness. Rather than overconfidence, as Kilby claims, Balthasar's only

crime is an excessive description of love. His confidence arises from being gripped by the self-giving God of love.

Christological and Trinitarian Kenosis

Perhaps the most basic guiding principle for Balthasar when it comes to trinitarian thought is that there is an explicit connection between christological kenosis and trinitarian kenosis. While such an idea is not completely unheard-of in theological circles, Balthasar's emphasis on it makes his work especially important for any attempt to reconsider the kenotic motif.[132] For Balthasar all trinitarian language must cohere around the Incarnation and, more specifically, the Cross and descent of Jesus. As Rowan Williams argues, the central question of Balthasar's trinitarian theology is this: "What does it mean to identify, as the definitive embodiment of God in human history, someone who declares himself abandoned by God?"[133] Balthasar's answer to this question relies, unequivocally, on the motif of kenosis: "There is only one way to approach the trinitarian life in God: on the basis of what is manifest in *God's kenosis* in the theology of the covenant—and hence in the theology of the Cross—we must feel our way back into the mystery of the absolute" (italics mine).[134] There are two important elements to this quotation. First, Balthasar explicitly identifies kenosis as the main theme in the covenant, the Cross, *and* the inner trinitarian life. Second, he again emphasizes that any theology

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[132] Here I am thinking of Sergei Bulgakov, Karl Barth, and Adrienne Von Speyr.

[133] Rowan Williams, "Balthasar and the Trinity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar,* ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37. Edward Oakes says the same: "Balthasar develops his theology of the Trinity out of his conviction of what it meant for Jesus to become cursed for our sake and experience the condemnation of the Father in hell." Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption*, 282.

[134] Balthasar, *TD 3*, 301.

that properly understands this will suggest a blindness, a groping, through the dark to reach ultimate mystery.[135]

Yet, while we human beings feel our way back to the trinitarian realm by recognizing the kenotic form in Christ, the kenosis in the Trinity retains a depth of meaning beyond what is revealed in the Cross. The Incarnation reveals, in full truth, the contours of God's character. Yet, because God's character is a surplus of love and the Incarnation itself is a trinitarian act, there must be a depth of meaning that the Incarnation hints at that is beyond our understanding. This depth of meaning is the application of kenosis to the trinitarian life that "makes possible all other kenotic movements of God into the world; they are simply its consequences."[136] So, while the Incarnation is the height of revelation, mystically and eschatologically speaking, the Son's kenosis and suffering in the world is a pale imitation of the force of love, recklessness, and abandon that is achieved within the Persons of the Trinity.[137]

Kilby's views here seem to be more muted. She agrees with this general approach, i.e., from Christology to the biblical names of the Trinity, but she believes that Balthasar is too confident and excessive in his approach, going beyond the themes of revelation and perhaps recklessly entering the rarefied air of speculation.

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[135] Kilby acknowledges this but is unconvinced by this language. She still thinks he is too vivid. Karen Kilby, "Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. C. Peter Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 218.

[136] Balthasar, *TD 4*, 331.

[137] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory V: The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 56.

Adrienne Von Speyr and the Theology of Saints

Up to this point, I have discussed the problematic nature of Balthasar's language as viewed by some of his interpreters. I offered up the interplay of analogy, negative theology, and the positivity of revelation as a way to understand Balthasar's trinitarian language. And, while Balthasar uses the language of groping and fumbling to describe trinitarian reflection, he also clearly studies and describes intimate details of the inner trinitarian life. Most theologians would not dare to broach this topic. What might account for this difference, for this staunch commitment to putting words to the mystery of God, this effusive discourse on the inner workings of trinitarian life even as he resists "systems"? There is a rationale for some of his most robust language.

As Chapter Four will explain in further detail, the saints, to varying degrees, become in Balthasar's mind a fertile field of theological reflection within the bounds of biblical narrative and church teaching. The theologian must attend to the saint:

> For theologians, on the other hand, they [the saints] are rather a *new interpretation of revelation; they bring out the scarcely suspected treasures in the deposit of faith*. . . . Their sheer existence proves to be a theological manifestation that contains most fruitful and opportune doctrine, the directions of the Holy Spirit addressed to the whole Church and not to be neglected by any of her members[138] (italics mine).

This aspect of Balthasar's thought is still underappreciated.[139] The reason that he views the saints this way is his view of God's love and communication as fundamentally

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[138] Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizbeth of the Trinity*, 25-26.
[139] This particular reason for Balthasar's vivid trinitarian language is not engaged by Linn Tonstad. Whether it would alter her final conclusions is unlikely since I doubt they would accept Balthasar's principles behind it. Karen Kilby does acknowledge this connection and is concerned, particularly with Balthasar's complicated and close association with Adrienne von Speyr, whose

sacramental and excessive. God's fullness knows no bounds and cannot be contained within the scriptures or the sacraments alone, but bursts forth in the lives of those who surrender themselves fully to him.

Balthasar's most controversial and vivid depictions of the Trinity come from *Theo-Drama V,* which is suffused with references to the mystic Adrienne von Speyr. Von Speyr's contemplative reading of scripture and her trinitarian awareness make their way into Balthasar's mindset, and he sees it, perhaps too uncritically, as another source of revelation.[140] Von Speyr's thought holds special importance for Balthasar, not just because of their close relationship and his respect for her writings, but because Balthasar believed she ought to become a saint. So far this sentiment has not been shared in any official capacity by the Church.

This does not erase the problematic nature of Balthasar's speculations, nor is it an attempt to lay blame on von Speyr for Balthasar's idiosyncrasies, but I hope I have pointed out an often-overlooked rationale for why Balthasar would order his trinitarian formulations in relationship to her work. He sees in von Speyr's writings a wealth of meaning that has come from God to her.[141] Balthasar felt it was his task to introduce her importance to a wider circle. Her trinitarian reflections provide a way of deepening our

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experiences have never been thoroughly "sifted by the Church" Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, 30.

[140] In the "note" in *Theo-Drama V,* he refers to this work as expressing "our" theology after mentioning the reoccurring footnotes to Von Speyr. For Balthasar, at least, his affinity with Von Speyr is not a minor connection, especially here in volume five.

[141] However, it is interesting to note that Balthasar (following off the quotation above) makes the statement that we are not bound by the saints in any way. So perhaps it is possible or prudent for the scholar following after von Balthasar to recognize that the Church has not officially made steps to declare Adrienne a saint and even if it had, Balthasar would acknowledge our right to choose to build our theology on a different source.

sense of what biblical revelation means. In the case of the Trinity, that involves paying

attention to God's work in the mystics.

The saints provide, as Balthasar put it, "a new interpretation of revelation." This is

precisely one of Kilby's complaints: that robust trinitarianism is innovative in a way that

is detached from tradition. But Balthasar sees neglected aspects of tradition at work in the

saints that his theology might incorporate within it. So what seems to Kilby novel and

disjointed from historic Catholicism Balthasar sees as an underexplored aspect of it.

Super-Kenosis and Trinitarian Persons

While attempting to keep in mind the discussions about the mode or form of

theological discourse laid out in the previous section, this chapter will shift in focus to

some of the *content* of Balthasar's trinitarian discourse. The theme central to this

argument is the idea of super-kenosis. Balthasar's strict emphasis on the events of the

Incarnation leads him to link that kenosis with a prior and greater super-kenosis within

the triune relations. This use of the prefix "super" signifies the operation of negative and

analogical language. It contains within it the idea of negation and excess by indicating

that this kenosis is the exact image of what we see in the Incarnation, but also "positively

affirms" something "superior to all subsequent negations."[142] The affirmation and

negation continue on together in this language of "super-kenosis" because of the ever-

greater aspect of the divine life.

So what is "super-kenosis" as Balthasar employs it? Balthasar believes that

trinitarian love is always the mysterious and fruitful positivity of kenosis and that kenotic

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[142] Balthasar, *TL 2*, 97.

love is what characterizes the processions of the Trinity.[143] The pattern of kenotic love

amongst the Trinity is one of full expropriation of self toward the other in love. Love has

many facets, and the "kenotic" and "self-giving" are the terms Balthasar believes are best

suited to indicating the wonderfulness and excess of love that he is so fond of expressing

in his theological extrapolations. The following section will scrutinize how the kenosis

motif appears in each person of the Trinity. This will allow for a new depth of

understanding of the function and application of kenosis in Balthasar's thought.

What is the hallmark of the kenosis of the Father? To him belongs a primal

initiation, a first primordial kenosis in which the Father, "who was never a self-enclosed,

all-knowing person" dispossesses himself in favor of the Son . . . and through the Son, to

the Spirit."[144] The generation of the Son by the Father is seen not as an intellectual act but

as an act of self-bestowal: "But the Father possesses it [divinity] insofar as he begets

before thinking about it [*unvordenklich*]; he possesses it only as given away."[145] He gives

the gift of divinity fully to the Son: "In the Father's love there is an absolute renunciation

of any possibility of being God for himself alone."[146] This kenotic activity grounds and

surpasses the economic kenotic activity of Jesus.

Even though the initiative for the kenotic event seems to lie with the Father,

possibly indicating that he is in control, Balthasar emphasizes that the Father initiates a

situation in which he allows himself to be conditioned by the other in the Son and

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[143] "And, if the self-giving of the Father to the Son and of both to the Holy Spirit reflects neither an arbitrary choice nor a necessary constraint but God's inmost being, this most intimate nature-however the processions may be distinguished from one another-can in the end only be love." Ibid., 136.

[144] Ibid., 137.

[145] Ibid., 135-136.

[146] Balthasar, *TD 4*, 323.

entwines his reputation with the Son's representation of him[147] and characterizes this as a "risk" taken by the Father.[148] This risk is not a hesitant, calculating sort but a reckless squandering of inexhaustible, infinite love for the Son:

> There are no in-built securities or guarantees in the absolute self-giving of the Father to Son, of Son to Father, and of both to the Spirit. *Humanly speaking*, it is a total surrender of all possessions, including Godhead. From the giver's point of view, therefore, it could appear to be an absolute "risk"[149] (italics mine).

Yet the level and type of risk this kenosis poses is unclear. Scholars are divided on this issue. Linn Marie Tonstad argues that "the giver, the Father, revels in a seeming threat—handing himself over entirely to another—yet never risks losing himself in this handing-over, because he is always ontologically secured and guaranteed precisely in the event of handing himself over."[150] For Tonstad, the "risk" is really more of a charade because, in her view, real risk entails ontological instability. Because there is no ontological instability associated with the Father's generation of the Son, any language of suffering, risk, or loss is an act. God, because he *is* self-giving, is incapable of risk. Bernhard Blankenhorn acknowledges the same ontological stability for the Father that Tonstad detects in Balthasar's work but comes to a different conclusion. He simply states that "nevertheless, an eminent wager" still exists, "one that is beyond our comprehension."[151]

Perhaps Balthasar's criticisms of Karl Rahner can illuminate, at least partially, the importance of this discussion. Rahner comments, "I would say that there is a modern

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[147] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory III: The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 519.

[148] Balthasar, *TD 4*, 328.

[149] Balthasar, *TD 5*, 245.

[150] Linn Marie Tonstad, "Sexual Difference and Trinitarian Death: Cross, Kenosis, and Hierarchy," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 4 (2010): 621.

[151] Bernard Blankenhorn, "Balthasar's Method of Divine Naming," *Nova et Vetera* 1, no. 2 (2003): 260.

tendency . . . to develop a theology of the death of God that, in the last analysis, seems to

me to be gnostic. One can find this in Hans urs von Balthasar and in Adrienne von Speyr,

although naturally much more marked in her than in him."[152] Balthasar responds to this

line of criticism in the beginning of *Theo-Drama V*, saying,

> Karl Rahner has dubbed our theology "gnostic"; in all probability he will
> probably find his verdict even more strongly confirmed when he reads the chapter
> on "the pain of God". We find his verdict unacceptable . . . . As this final volume
> of *Theo-Drama* comes to an end, it broadens out into what Karl Rahner rightly
> and emphatically refers to as the "mystery of God". Anything we say, by way of a
> conclusion . . . is nothing more than an astonished stammering as we circle around
> this mystery. We have tried to go as far as revelation permits—some may feel we
> have gone one step too far.[153]

Balthasar sees Hegel's work on the pain of God as valid and important, yet, in the same

introductory material of volume five, he distinguishes himself again from Hegel by

making use of a quotation from Kierkegaard:

> The Hegelian babble about the real being the true is therefore the same kind of
> confusion as when people assume that the words and actions of a poet's dramatic
> characters are the poet's own. We *must,* however, hold fast to the belief that when
> God—so to speak—decides to write a play, he does not do it simply in order to
> pass the time, as the pagans thought. No, no: indeed, the utterly serious point here
> is that loving and being loved is God's *passion.* It is almost—infinite love!—as if
> he is bound to this passion, almost as if it were a weakness on his part; whereas in
> fact it is his strength, his almighty love: and in that respect his love is subject to
> no alteration of any kind. There is a staggering perversity in all the human
> categories that are applied to the God-man; for if we could speak in a completely
> human way about Christ we would have to say that the words "My God, my God,
> why have you forsaken me?" show a want of patience and a want of truth. Only if
> god says it, can it be true, i.e., even if the god-man says it. And since it is true, it
> is also truly the climax of pain. The relationship to God is evidently such a
> tremendous weight of blessedness that, once I have laid hold of it, it is absolute in
> the most absolute sense; by contrast, the worldly notion that my enemies are to be
> excluded from it would actually diminish this blessedness.[154]

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[152] Karl Rahner, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews 1965-1982*, ed. Paul
Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, trans. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 126-127.

[153] Balthasar, *TD 5*, 13-14.

[154] Ibid., 12.

This quotation indicates that, while Balthasar is appreciative of Hegel, he is not following

him completely. In fact, as Cyril O'Regan remarks, "Balthasar grants to Hegel,

Moltmann, and even 'death of God' theologians, that too often—although far from

univocally—the Christian tradition has peremptorily dispatched suffering or compassion

from its figuration of the divine."[155] Balthasar takes into account the pain of God

theologians and their concern, but points out, as the Kierkegaard quotation suggests, that

to make God's suffering mean that it somehow weakens him does not coincide with the

biblical picture of God. He is concerned that it would make God's own being depend on

the world for his enrichment. Here again we see that Balthasar's reliance on analogy and

negative theology complicates but enriches the situation: "we approach the mystery from

two sides, that is, from that of negative theology, which excludes as 'mythology' any

notion that God *has to* be involved in the world process [Moltmann, Hegel]; and from the

point of view of the world drama, the possibilities of which must be grounded in God."[156]

These possibilities include suffering and death but they do not mean what suffering and

death mean.

But while Balthasar at least sets a clear boundary around the terms of the

God-world relation, he is equally emphatic about the immanent Trinity:

> The immanent Trinity must be understood to be that eternal, absolute self-surrender whereby God is seen to be, in himself, absolute love; this in turn explains his free self-giving to the world as love, without suggesting that God "needed" the world process and the Cross in order to become himself (to "mediate himself").[157]

In other words, the elements of the economic Trinity are grounded in the immanent.

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[155] Cyril O'Regan, "Balthasar and Gnostic Genealogy," *Modern Theology* 22, no. 4 (2006): 627.
[156] Balthasar, *TD 4*, 327.
[157] Ibid., 323.

Balthasar expressly rules out Rahner's complaint that his theology is gnostic in the same sense as Hegel's. But the problem left unresolved is how risk and kenosis can operate in the Trinity. One can surmise that the attribution of risk to the inner trinitarian life is, at the same time, more "risky" than anything exhibited in the God-world relationship. In submitting fully to the existence of the Son, the Father brings into existence an Other that is his equal. Kenotic love, in this primal instance, is the "letting be" of another. For Balthasar, then, it seems that true love implies a full recognition of the other, not in a way that endangers the ontological person of the Father but in a manner that allows room for the activity and interaction of another.

In chapter two we discussed the Son's kenosis as typified by two attitudes: obedience to the Father and defenselessness. These two characteristics continue into the immanent Trinity in "the perfect obedience of the Son, who wants to do nothing else on earth but the will of the Father who sent him" (Jn 6:38). This is both the means and the content of his eternal relationship with the Father. Obedience is the central activity and the expression of that activity is to reveal the Father's love. In the Son, the kenotic motif is expressed as obediential love. The nature of obedience in this context could be expressed in terms of receptivity or availability. When the Father gives himself fully to the Son, his gift is vulnerably awaiting completion by the reception of the gift by the Son.[158] This reception is the meaning of obedience. The Son assents to the goals of the Father.

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[158] For a discussion of this element see G.F. O'Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 121-124.

The attitude of defenselessness is also present in the Son's relation to the Father. Part of this relation is an implied distance or difference that allows for freedom. But it is also true that the Son uses this freedom in a manner that is wholly transparent to the Father and completely available to his wishes. It is this attitude or manner of relation that holds within it the kernel of the Cross and Descent, which is brought out because of sin.

Obedience, just like risk, does still leave us with some complications. Obedience implies a hierarchy—an uneven balance of power within the Godhead. For obedience to be the central characteristic of the Son within the trinitarian realm seems suspect and misguided. But when the Father's attitude is also taken into account, the term "obedience" loses its one-sidedness and balance is revealed. As with all of Balthasar's trinitarian constructions, it is important to keep in mind the dramatic character of this encounter—each member of the Trinity has moments of receptivity and activity.

Balthasar argues that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and is their mutual love enlivened. He argues that "the Spirit, must also be God if he is to be the 'personal' seal of that self-expropriation that is identical in Father and Son. For the Spirit does not want anything 'for himself' but, as his revelation in the world shows, wants simply to be the pure manifestation and communication of the love between Father and Son (Jn 1:26)."[159] The Spirit, as the bond of love between the Father and Son, remains withdrawn from the spotlight: "she gives place to Father and Son in a kind of *kenosis* (which is why she is so hard to grasp as a Person)."[160] The Spirit represents an underdeveloped area in Balthasar's thought that has a potentially important angle. In all

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[159] Balthasar, *TD 4*, 331.
[160] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory: Volume III: The Spirit of Truth*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 147.

the other relations Balthasar describes—mother-child, Father-Son, male-female—there is a duality. But with the Spirit, the Spirit is always mediating between two others.

In discussing the Persons of the Trinity separately, but entirely within their kenotic processions, it is also important to recognize the quality of their relationships that ensures they retain their "ontological security," to use Tonstad's term. While God is infinite, and superabundant, and his self-giving has no logical bounds, the self-gift of the Father to the Son does *not* include his paternity. The paternity of the Father is not fully given to the Son because this would result in the breakdown of the divine distance between them. Kenotic love *always* takes place within relations. When those relations dissolve, the result is self-annihilation, not self-giving. If one of the agents no longer retains his or her personal core, then we have run aground on the unyielding shores of absorption of autonomy. The trinitarian kenosis is meaningless if one of the Persons loses his or her identity in the emptying.

While this ontological security of Paternity, Spiritness, and Sonship characterizes the trinitarian life, "this does not imply that the Father holds back something for himself."[161] The Father, in his very paternity, is available just as the Son and the Spirit are also completely available to one another. The Father, in his Fatherhood, is completely available and willing to do whatever the Son would ask. That is the manner in which the Paternity of the Father is available to the Son. Likewise, Sonship and Spiritness each retain a distinctive mysterious quality to them that is not eradicated in the kenotic operations. Indeed it is that ontological stability that allows kenosis to be a meaningful manner of activity.

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[161] Ibid., 148.

Trinity as an Event of Love

As Rowan Williams suggests, this plural nature is described in self-emptying terms: "if the otherness of God is true otherness and if it is in no way conditioned from beyond, then it can only be imagined as the action of love and freedom; and an act of love and freedom that causes real otherness to subsist can in turn only be imagined as a self-emptying, a kenosis."[162] The kenosis of the Trinity is not a static, ontological emptying but an infinite *event* of kenotic love between the Persons. This shifts conventional theological discussions of the Trinity considerably.

> What is at stake, at least in a perspective of depth, is an altogether decisive turn-about in the way of seeing God. God is not, in the first place, "absolute power", but "absolute love", and his sovereignty manifests itself not in holding on to what is its own but in its abandonment—all this in such a way that his sovereignty displays itself in transcending the opposition, known to us from the world, between power and impotence.[163]

This eventful nature that Balthasar perceives in God allows for a real, if qualified, sense of eternal becoming within Balthasar's theology. God-as-event provides Balthasar with a sense of dynamic continuous excess of relational love. The Father continually gives all of himself to the Son, and the Son continually gives all of himself to the Father. The Spirit continually bridges this love and, at the same time, is this love.[164]

Because of Balthasar's commitment to finding the Trinity in biblical events and envisioning the Trinity itself as an event, the death of Christ leads Balthasar to conclude that there must be something within the triune life that could approximate and surpass

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[162] Rowan Williams, "Balthasar and the Trinity," 38.

[163] Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 28.

[164] For a detailed description of God as eternally becoming, see Antonio Lòpez, "Eternal happening: God as an Event of Love," in *Love Alone is Credible: Hans Urs von Balthasar as Interpreter of the Catholic Tradition*, ed. David L. Schindler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 75-104.

separation and death. In an infamous and much-debated[165] passage, Balthasar posits a

kind of super-death in the Trinity:

> In giving of himself, the Father does not give something (or even everything) that
> he *has* but all that he *is*—for in God there is only being, not having. This total
> self-giving, to which the Son and the Spirit respond by an equal self-giving, is a
> kind of "death", a first, radical "kenosis", as one might say. It is a kind of "super-
> death" that is a component of all love and that forms the basis in creation for all
> instances of "the good death", from self-forgetfulness in favor of the beloved right
> up to that highest love by which a man gives his life for his friends.[166]

The question that needs to be asked at this point is: does not this language of super-death

in the triune life make death coterminous with love?[167] The short answer is yes, but love

is not prefixed with "super." Balthasar is using the word "death" in a qualified way that

he never does with the word "love." Furthermore, the Father's death metaphorically

results in the life of the Son. What are the implications for placing an analogous form of

death so highly within the trinitarian life? For Balthasar, death expresses the extent and

depths of love. Death functions neither in terms of tragic finality nor as an idealized

sacrifice, but as a point of powerful excess that serves to describe love: "Greater love has

no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13, ESV). Death,

within a dialogical structure of personhood, represents a respect for the value of the other,

a creating of "space."

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[165] "The interplay of love, death, and kenosis in this passage invites questions about Balthasar's
understanding of relationships between subjects or persons. If the possibility of death is present already at
the level of the constitution of the Trinity, in this paternal self-gift "without remainder," then this model
seems to introduce death even before love, or at best simultaneously. Why might Balthasar think this
necessary? The first answer, already considered, is that Balthasar is trying to explain the existence in the
Trinity of something that could serve as a basis for what is made visible on the cross. What happens on the
cross is the epistemological access to the correlative divine relation that makes possible what is seen on the
cross—the distance between God and God." Tonstad, "Sexual Difference and Trinitarian Death: Cross,
Kenosis, and Hierarchy," 612. For more interpretations of this passage, see Blankenhorn, "Balthasar's
Method of Divine Naming," 255. Also, Alyssa Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the
Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 124-125.

[166] Balthasar, *TD 5*, 84.

[167] Tonstad, "Sexual Difference and Trinitarian Death: Cross, Kenosis, and Hierarchy," 612.

In the case of the Trinity, death does not mean the annihilation of the Father, but it creates a space for the unexpected and the spontaneous to occur. This primal death is in some sense of recognition of the Other, a giving space to the Other. The difference between Moltmann, for example, and Balthasar is that "Moltmann's understanding of primal kenosis as divine withdrawal … takes its cues from the Jewish notion of *zimzum*, ... [while] Balthasar's idea of kenosis stem[s] from the Father's generation of the Son."[168] The added feature, for Balthasar, is that this Super-Death is gifted to the Son in a manner that does not withdraw from him *but supports him in his own agency*. Balthasar's kenotic death is thus also called ecstatic self-gift.

Ontological Difference

This primal trinitarian drama of kenotic love that Balthasar infers from the Incarnation and Cross, then, has import for the idea of ontological difference. This intra-trinitarian exchange holds within it the mysterious yet very meaningful answer to the problems outlined in chapter one. More broadly, the Trinity is viewed as an answer to the entanglements of other philosophical traditions. Difference protects kenosis from becoming absorption because what is demanded of the Other is not the eradication of self (anti-difference) but the gift of self in freedom.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Balthasar continues to see the absorption and autonomy models of human activity as threats to human freedom. This same concern is present in his discussions of the Trinity, yet he speaks about it slightly differently. He says that "two approaches are barred us: the idea of a Father who generates the Son in

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[168] Celia Deane-Drummond, "The Breadth of Glory: A Trinitarian Eschatology for the Earth through Critical Engagement with Hans Urs von Balthasar," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 1 (2010): 49.

order to come to know himself as God and the idea of a Father who, because he has already known himself perfectly, generates the Son."[169]

For Balthasar, the first approach is "Hegelianism." The problem with Hegelianism is that the distance between God and the world is not preserved, which destroys the integrity that arises from separating humanity and the divine. While Balthasar's primary concern here is that Hegel's approach means that God is now under an external necessity, we can also see how the anthropological situation would be affected by this. Human persons within the world would then be either competing or cooperating for meaning with God. If God needs the world in some way, creaturely freedoms become unmoored and the created order becomes a stepping stone in God's game of self-actualization.

The second approach mentioned in the quotation creates an improper hierarchy between the Father and the Son, which in terms of trinitarian doctrine means the Father exists at some prior moment in which he was not part of Trinity. The implications of this approach would be aligning Balthasar with Arianism. Going beyond the Trinity is a refusal to accept revelation, a refusal to cease speculation, and a form of hubris. This approach destroys the integrity of the Trinity.

This ontological difference is how Balthasar's conception of God can be all-powerful, yet vulnerable to the Other.

> By taking the loss of God into himself, God, on the Cross, formed a space within himself where those without God can dwell. Thus denial, diremption and alienation from the Christian narrative became a moment in that narrative itself. We may deny God, but he does not deny us. A Christian metaphysics therefore needs to reflect at the level of ontology precisely this inclusivity of the Christian narrative and, critically, its ability not just to think difference but also to *think difference from itself.* It has metaphysically to embrace its own negation, just as

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[169] Balthasar, *TL 2*, 177.

> the Christian narrative is able narratively to encompass the empty space beyond its own limits. This points in the direction of a metaphysics of kenosis rather than one of creation. This will be no less Trinitarian, of course, but will reflect rather the Trinity in action, transcending itself and engaging itself fully and at risk in the world. It will thus not be a contemplative understanding of Being as object of knowledge, even the knowledge which comes of faith, but will be historical or enacted Being.[170]

Oliver Davies's remarks in the quotation above point out that the trinitarian reflection Balthasar is enacting is not "an object of reflection" but a continuing historical event that mysteriously preserves the integrity of creation.

This ontological mode of Balthasar's, in which he uses trinitarian doctrine to explain philosophical difference, does seem to validate Kilby's concern, i.e., that Balthasar uses the Trinity as an explanatory tool to solve the deficiencies he sees in other religions and philosophies laid out in Chapter One. Paying close attention to the language discussed above should allow one to see that there is Balthasar significantly qualifies his description of super-kenosis. He seems to lack that subtlety when it comes to super-kenosis's ontological implications and his polemics against other philosophies and worldviews.

Conclusion

Balthasar's trinitarian theology considerably deepens the concept of kenosis in the following ways. First, he connects kenosis within the Trinity to biblical revelation. He attempts to find a way to elaborate on this connection, using analogy, negative theology, and his understanding of the saints in order to erect a theology that can not only explain a

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[170] Oliver Davies, "Von Balthasar and the Problem of Being," *New Blackfriars* 79, no. 923 (1998): 16.

real and passionate interaction between God and creatures but also reconfigure our understanding of divinity away from static omnipotence to an event of self-giving love.

Second, in terms of anthropological implications, it is now hopefully clear how the christological and trinitarian doctrines of kenosis open up a real space for human beings to utilize their freedom and seek their own meaning. This trinitarian and christological conception of kenosis is what gives Balthasar a way past the problems of absorption and autonomy discussed in the first chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SAINTS AND KENOSIS

The first chapter established what Balthasar identifies, for the purposes of guiding interpretation, as the outer boundaries of the kenotic motif: the concepts of absorption and autonomy. The next two chapters established Balthasar's understanding of the kenotic motif as it was expressed in the divine manifestation in the Incarnation and Cross (Chapter Two) and also within the trinitarian relations (Chapter Three). These chapters established Balthasar's constructive contribution to the concept of kenosis. The last two chapters will investigate Balthasar's understanding of kenosis and *human* agency. While human agency and kenosis differ from divine agency and kenosis, it is important to Balthasar that human realities always maintain an analogy to the divine.[171] This link, for Balthasar, is, perhaps, most clearly shown in the saints.

Why the Saints?

It is perhaps unsurprising that, like many twentieth-century Protestant scholars, Donald Dawe is unable to connect mystical texts and the saints with theology. In his historical study of the the kenotic motif, these themes were muted. In fact, they barely merited a footnote.[172] Unlike Dawe, Balthasar not only connects the saints and spirituality directly to doctrine, but he does so specifically through the idea of kenosis. For Balthasar the saints represent the "living gospel," something that theological discourse can only

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[171] Balthasar, *GL 1*, 303-304.
[172] Dawe, *The Form of a Servant: A Historical Analysis of the Kenotic Motif*, 144.

clumsily imitate,[173] and a serious study of saints and sanctity is necessary to keep the

lifeblood of the Gospel pumping through dogmatic expression. Saints, not theologians

"are the authentic interpreters of theo-drama."[174]

But the relation between the saint and theological expression should not be taken

as permission for an anthropologically founded approach to doctrine. It is not as if the

whole of human experience exhibited in the saint is normative for theological expression.

Instead, what is most important about the saints coheres around the external application

of christological mission on their lives. This mission, not necessarily the personality or

teaching of the saint, is what is most important. Yet this mission is not a monolithic or

homogenous collection of themes that somehow blots out the uniqueness of each saint.

Each mission, while christologically formed (i.e., bearing the stamp of obedience and

self-giving), interacts with each person differently and makes different demands upon

them.

This approach to spirituality means Balthasar sees an unlimited number of

expressions of kenotic activity while still retaining a central focus on following and being

transparent to Christ.[175] It is similar to the actor finding his or her place within the

narrative of a play. They each have a way of asserting their personalities and skills upon

the project, yet they are working within a narrative that they did not create.

This multiplicity of missions and manifestations reinforces Balthasar's suspicions

of "systematic" or manualist approaches to theology. He equates the kenotic reality with

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[173] Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizbeth of the Trinity*, 26.

[174] Balthasar, *TD 2*, 14. In chapter three I touched briefly on how spirituality and sanctity influenced Trinitarian doctrine for Balthasar. In this chapter, the focus is more on anthropology, i.e. what can the saints tell us about life, happiness, agency, and community, in conjunction with a self-sacrificing mode of spiritual activity.

[175] Balthasar, *GL 1*, 215.

the "sign of Jonah," indicating that the Gospel is a scandalous proposition that is not merely assented to intellectually but requires from the human person its own kenotic response: "Jesus refuses to give a sign in proof of his authority, such as would enable men to recognise him without risk, without committing themselves to him."[176] There cannot be one impersonal system of self-sacrifice that requires a set list of renunciations or that can be performed without uncertainty.

Instead the kenosis of Christ is concretely pluriform, and this is how the saints provide a "deepening of revelation."[177] If theological apologetics can never expect (nor should they try) to succeed in removing faith and scandal from the Gospel, then, as Balthasar sees it, the saints are the best option for constructing an apologetic for the Christian worldview.[178] This focus on the saints allows for a multiplicity of descriptions of the Christian life and it offers a more direct and concrete description of Christianity.[179]

"The Faith of the Simple Ones": Main Themes for Interpretation

In Balthasar's essay "The Faith of the Simple Ones," there is a programmatic passage that provides the essential thematic elements for understanding kenosis and the saints. In what follows, I will exegete this text in order to find the unifying elements in Balthasar's approach to the saints. These features can be seen at work in his discussion of the saints discussed in detail later in the chapter.

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[176] Ibid., 667.

[177] Mark A. Mcintosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 105.

[178] Victoria S. Harrison, *The Apologetic Value of Human Holiness: Von Balthasar's Christocentric Philosophical Anthropology* Studies in Philosophy and Religion (Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic, 2000).

[179] Other scholars have also made use of the saint in their work. One recent example is Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

The same is true of the "images" of the Church's saints, who come from the superfigure of the Cross and are readable only on the basis of the Cross. They, too, always stand, in one way or another, in the focal point of the covenant, at the point where the paths between God and man meet and intersect, and they can do this only in that unconditional obedience that has received various names in the course of the Church's history but has always remained the same: *apatheia, self-abandonment, indifferencia*. This is always the point of fundamental acceptance of the embodiment of whatever God wills and is therefore a place of death (naturally this is the death of Jesus: 2 Cor 4:10), whether this death now expresses itself as the "dark night" (John of the Cross), as "dying in that one cannot die" (Teresa of Jesus), as the readiness to let oneself be shared out in every way (Thérèse of Lisieux), as the "whylessness" of love (Eckhart), or in some other way. Certainly, an elementary love of neighbor will always grow out of this attitude; but the decisive thing is that it does not keep its own measurement in its hand but that the fruitfulness for the world and for humanity of the life that is surrendered to God is ultimately something that God alone determines.[180]

This paragraph encompasses all the major elements needed to understand and develop Balthasar's understanding of the saints and their place in theology and the church.

First is the phrase "the images of the Church's saints." This indicates, succinctly, that the saints and the church stand in relation to one another. In fact, individual saints cannot be understood apart from the idea of the *communio sanctorum.* Both canonical saints and everyone else who participates in Christ are part of the *communio sanctorum* and through it become de-privatized and their personhood is defined in *theological* terms:

Everyone who participates in the pneumatic body of Christ, shared out in the Church, not only becomes a member of the church community: he actually acquires an intrinsically ecclesial quality. Every theological person thus has whole spheres of community that are personal to him, and the interpenetration of these spheres constitutes the reality of the *communio sanctorum* with its mysterious laws whereby each can "be for" others through prayer, initiative and suffering on their behalf.[181]

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[180] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Faith of the Simple Ones," in *Explorations in Theology III: Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 63-64.
[181] Balthasar, *TD 3*, 281-282.

The radical idea that the Church and all its members are not just individual private agents, determining their own lives, but are responding to the invitation to be a part of God's salvific process—a role of "dependent participation" in various strengths—opens up a space "where others can receive freedom to act."[182] This participation creates agency in others. This is the idea of being de-privatized. Balthasar says that, "in a narrower and more intensive sense, it means that every man, insofar as he possesses complete human nature, has access through love and understanding to all that is thought and felt, done and suffered by other subjects possessing the same nature."[183] There is a real sharing of burdens and responsibilities taking place through these "mysterious laws."[184]

The second aspect of this quotation is the description of "the 'images' of the Church's saints as those "*who come from the superfigure of the Cross and are readable only on the basis of the Cross*"[185] (italics mine). This sentence indicates, again, that any theological import that we procure from a saintly life extends only as far as that individual is transparent to Christ: "The authentic saint is the one who always 'confuses himself the least with Christ and who, therefore, can most convincingly be transparent to Christ.'"[186] In other words, the saint is not a separate source of doctrine but a continuation of christological doctrine. The elevation of the saints to theological importance in Balthasar's work grows out of Christ's inclusivity in the Incarnation. Christ's kenotic availability is what allows the saints to act in a similar manner, not by

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[182] Ibid., 271-272.
[183] Ibid., 272.
[184] Ibid., 282.
[185] Balthasar, "Faith of the Simple Ones," 63.
[186] Balthasar, *GL 1*, 215.

mere imitation but by mystically sharing the acting space made available to them through Christ.

In addition to the mystical/sacramental connection between Christ and the saint, the "superfigure of the Cross" also represents a clear theological starting point instead of an anthropological one. Balthasar wants to ensure that an examination of saints does not become tied to universal human desires or a reduction to psychological or philosophical foundations. He is not advocating a turn to the subject in his suggestion that theologians should study the saints. Rather, what remains most significant in the saints is that they are concrete representatives of a theological expression of divine activity, i.e., kenotic love.

The next significant phrase in this quotation is the phenomenon of "unconditional obedience," "*apatheia*," or "self-abandonment." This nexus of words surrounds and gives coloration to the kenotic motif. These ideas permeate the whole history of spirituality and, as Balthasar here indicates, they are the sole point of evaluation of a saintly life. Every saint, no matter the time, culture, or context, must bear the kenotic stamp upon their lives to be considered authentic. Each saint elaborates on this motif slightly differently, allowing for multiple angles of observation, contemplation, and action.[187] It is this variance that allows a fruitful elaboration of the parameters and meanings of kenosis for human agency.

The meaning of a particular saint's life remains at some level mysterious. The saints are not fully accessible to us; the full meaning of their mission is hidden with God. As such, human measurements and methods, understandings of justice, agency, and

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[187] I will pick up these terms in more detail in the next chapter where I will examine the broad themes of Balthasar's spirituality.

happiness will be stretched past their breaking points. *God's* measurement and direction, not only of each saint but also of each theological person, will be the sole director and measurer of any activity, including martyrdom, death, and other difficult situations.

This again, poses a problem for dialogue with those of differing viewpoints from Balthasar. Balthasar claims that an inability to accept this pattern of kenosis as part of the Gospel is due to a lack of commitment to the person of Christ. Commitment and risk are required for understanding the full meaning of the Christian life, and it cannot be examined from an external objective vantage point. Balthasar declares that "Christian existence is always doomed to draw the shorter straw, because there is no earthly scale of measurement which can be applied to its contents. Such a scale of measurement cannot and must not exist, if faith is to remain itself."[188] Faith and kenosis presuppose a certain existential stance toward truth—that it cannot be examined from an external, objective vantage point.

External safeguards, an internal logic, and ecclesial discernment guide us as we discern not only the meaning of saintly missions but also our own individual missions. The proposal that risk and commitment are central to understanding Christian discipleship in addition to God-granted individual missions seems to allow individualistic interpretations kenosis's meaning. But Balthasar recognizes that there is an internal order and logic to his position that, to some degree, can be demonstrated through the saints to those who are willing to see it.

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[188] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics Volume VII: Theology: The New Covenant*, ed. John Riches, trans. Brain Mc Neil C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 529.

The saints are to be assessed by the apostolic authority of the Church. The individual saint is declared to be a model worthy of emulation through a careful process. The Church protects the faithful laity from error by publicly recognizing the saints who have aligned themselves with the Gospel. Yet, even with the addition of ecclesial support, faith requires us to suspend our own ideas of what success and failure, freedom and bondage, death and life, suffering and bliss might mean, in favor of meanings that we grasp as we contemplate God's mission for our lives.

The main premise of this chapter, in terms of kenosis, is that the central pattern of self-giving identified in Christ becomes multiplied and contextualized in the missions of the saints. So, it follows that each saint, to a greater or lesser degree, could reveal how human agency and kenosis might operate in the human realm. It makes sense, then, to examine what Balthasar says about certain saints, in hopes that it will reveal the many possible movements of kenotic activity.[189]

The rest of this chapter will deal with Balthasar's treatment of individual saints: John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Elizabeth of the Trinity. These three provide additional color to the motif of kenosis, because each saint enacts it differently. This discussion will, I hope, allow for a more nuanced picture of kenotic activity.

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[189] It is less important in this chapter to discuss whether or not Balthasar's interpretations of these saints are accurate depictions of their inner lives and more important to how Balthasar makes use of them for the kenotic motif.

John of the Cross and the "Scream of the Vivisected Soul"

John's spiritual way is well known for its emphasis on radical darkness, Neo-Platonic influences, and renunciation of earthly pleasures. If the language of self-annihilation is to be found anywhere in the Christian tradition, John of the Cross would be a likely source. As such, John of the Cross could be one of the best challenges to Balthasar's conception of the positive connection between human agency and kenotic practice.

Despite Balthasar's recognition of the ubiquitous presence of "massive negation" found in the Carmelite's poetry,[190] his understanding of the context in which to situate this experiential "negative" language so that it can be interpreted in positive terms. Calling John's poetry "decisive" for a proper understanding of the saint, Balthasar resolutely argues that all of John's descriptions of dark nights are only in the service of love, that his mystical theology is one of profoundly biblical proportions, and that the trinitarian background to his contemplative worldview enhances the reality of the individual soul. In a provocative and comprehensive passage, Balthasar states:

> We are now a long way from Bonaventure and the whole Neo-Platonic ascent by stages from type to archetype. We are closer to Francis, but closer still to the remorseless sword of the Gospel word, which for the love of the One demands the hatred of everything else. And the sword must pierce to the division of the joints and marrow of the soul, the division of the soul from itself, before the promise of the hundredfold can be fulfilled on earth. To bear witness to this, poetry must therefore begin inside the division, as the scream of the vivisected soul in the middle of the night, in order to end in the song of praise of the soul, even more fully alive at a deeper level, wounded in the fire of glory. It is the fiery arrow of the seraph (John explicitly quotes this) that pierces the souls of Francis

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[190] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics Volume III: Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, ed. John Riches, trans. John Saward Andrew Louth, Martin Simon, and Rowan Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 127.

and Theresa-beyond pain and pleasure, wound and health, life and death.[191]

There are several aspects of this passage crucial to Balthasar's interpretation. What he sees operating in John is not an abstract radical philosophical mysticism but an invitation that stems from the Gospel itself. Clearly, since Balthasar's project is to uphold the worth of self and maintain a relational understanding of the self in light of the liberating power of the Gospel, the language here should raise concern. If Jesus proclaims healing to the brokenhearted (Luke 4), how does a "scream of the vivisected soul" bring healing? If the soul is annihilated, how can it become well? For John of the Cross (and for Balthasar) it is through the resurrection that these experiences of night do not overwhelm.[192] In Balthasar's interpretation, then, what John is calling for is not renunciation in and for itself but instead a transparent attempt to arrive at the depths and pleasures of trinitarian love. For Balthasar, in John the self comes into a new level of reality, more intensely glorious than the first. For this vivisection is not a ruthless and pointless experience but one that results in personal agency, understood as being "even more fully alive at a deeper level." This is an attempt to shed an illusory self in favor of a true self, not an attempt by John of the Cross to annihilate his own personality.

Yet Balthasar is not entirely satisfied with John of the Cross. While John paints a vivid picture of the relationship of the soul with God, Balthasar sees an unfortunate

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[191] Ibid.

[192] Yet as Balthasar notes, we cannot overlook this dark element in John: "nevertheless, this dark universality remains, for one who is only an aspirant, the experience of pure night: privation, annihilation, crucifixion; the experience of the process which John, with St Paul, describes as the stripping and dispossession of the old man and the putting on of the new man conformed to Christ (Eph. 4:24); elsewhere he uses the bold phrase, 'the inner resurrection of the spirit'. at first the night is subjectively death, although objectively it is already resurrection. . . . All the time John stresses that God's light shines unchangingly and constantly, that it is only the unpurified state of those who approach that makes them experience it as darkness and purgatorial torment. . . ." Ibid., 137.

absence of the social, ecclesial, and human element to his worldview: "Where, in the whole of John's work, is the neighbour? Where is the communion of saints? Where is the Johannine criterion for love of God: love of the brother? This is taken for granted and receives no special emphasis, just as the Church in all her visibility is taken for granted."[193] While leaving that area underexplored may have been acceptable in John's own context, Balthasar will not let that be in his own work.[194] This also demonstrates that an individual saint, no matter how great, can only exhibit a partial revelation of Christ.

In sum, Balthasar views the dark night as part of a larger journey into trinitarian love. This love then provides not only an affirmation of the self in terms of a relation with God but also avoids describing the Gospel only in terms of suffering. Yet, as Balthasar noted, John does not provide us a sufficient understanding of a relationality among neighbors, the church, and our enemies. This will need to come from another source.

John's life and mission do reveal a positive aspect of kenosis: For John, renunciations are a way of prioritizing in his spiritual life. His priority is to reach the trinitarian love of God. For him this involves rejecting many legitimate good things in recognition that there is something better.

A kenotic attitude such as this will bear with it a sense of loss, since there are legitimate goods that are sacrificed (physical comfort, rest, family), but it is absolutely crucial to see that, for John, pain is not central to achieving his goal but a by-product of it. This isn't to make light of his spiritual and physical suffering—sometimes it is very

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[193] Ibid., 167.

[194] Balthasar's own sense is that mystical writers such as John need to be read within an ecclesial context that both judges the mystic and stands in need of correction though the mystic. In this sense John's experiences can reach a universal application.

real and overwhelming, making it difficult to see anything else. It is merely to point out

the difference between the spirituality of John and the spirituality of absorption described

in the first chapter. In the absorption model, the physical world and the human body is

illusory or evil, and all who enjoy its fruits are deluded. In the absorption model, pain is

interpreted as the reality of the soul extricating itself from its unworthy material prison.

For John, the pain involved in his spiritual journey is felt because the rejection of earthly

things is rejection of something truly good in favor of something deeper and greater. In

addition, his end goal is not an ontological absorption (which would mean death) but a

union in difference.

The area where John fails us, or at least is silent, is the connection to community

and to the neighbor. John's spirituality lacks an explicit and deep connection to ecclesial

and human relationships and, without an explicit connection to the *communio sanctorum,*

the meaning of the contemplative journey for the entire Church and world is lost. John's

sense of agency and his mission represent a relentless struggle to prioritize full surrender

to God in all things, yet his approach lacks the communal quality that Christian self-

surrender has within it.

Thérèse of Lisieux and the Little Way

According to Balthasar, Thérèse "understood the act of total surrender to the

triune God as the highest possible form of engagement on behalf of the world's

salvation."[195] Right away, we can see that, in Thérèse, there is this explicit ecclesial

connection between her surrender and the wider community. This highest act, again, is

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[195] Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizbeth of the Trinity*, 11. Already here, we can see a greater connection to the ecclesial and earthly realm than what John was able to express.

the phenomenon I am describing as kenosis. So how does this phenomenon interact with

Thérèse's sense of agency and purpose? In order to understand this we will have to

examine her "Little Way," her particular path to full agency and existence.

What is interesting to note here is that her own fulfillment and happiness, while

implicit in her spirituality, is by no means the central piece. In fact, in many places her

own happiness seems barely sustainable. But, in the absence of its overt presence,

happiness is allowed to find its true home. According to Balthasar, the conventional

models of ascent from the more overtly platonic spiritual sources tend to have *eros* as

their driving force. This is the individual's relentless will toward unity, toward love,

toward contemplation of the divine. But for Thérèse, even this eros is stripped away from

her:[196] "The 'little way' that Thérèse now constructs comes from renouncing everything

in Christian love that seems to lend it greatness, power and glory. Love is brought to a

state of weakness in which it learns the power of divine love, of littleness and darkness in

which the greatness and glory of divine love are displayed. The basis of the little way,

therefore is one series of renunciations after another."[197] While an eros-driven spirituality

may not be undertaken to seek greater power or glory, it is definitely undertaken with an

ascending mindset. Thérèse's little way is not ascending but instead allowing herself to

be active in continual renunciations with no attempt to move beyond them. The little way

expresses the kenotic motif in terms of the simple, hidden moments in life when one can

minister to another. Unlike John's poetic vision of the individual and God, Thérèse's

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[196] "The little Thérèse is the first to rid contemplation of its neoplatonic relics." Ibid., 195.
[197] Ibid., 272.

kenotic expression is oriented toward serving others in addition to God with small, concrete acts of kindness.

In fact the aspect that Balthasar most praises is her ability to renounce even self-measurement: "more important even than the renunciation of her strength is her renunciation of progress."[198] This particular moment adds something new to descriptions of the kenotic motif. Obviously Thérèse's actions themselves, small and large, were intended to decrease her "self." Yet, at an even deeper level, it was less about a conscious movement to decrease herself and more a focus on ministering to others, even the divine. In one of her most striking passages she observes that "it is up to us to console Jesus, not up to him to console us."[199] This incredible statement indicates a total focus on God, placing all spirituality in relation to God and not on our own holiness or our own mystical states.

Yet Balthasar points out some shortcomings of her spirituality that, curiously, might lean toward the autonomy approach: her radical disposition toward suffering; Balthasar cautions that at some points Thérèse seems to go over the edge into masochism.

> One may seriously wonder whether Thérèse does not go too far with this line of thought [glorification of suffering] and actually fall into the excesses of 'existentialism'. If so, it arises out of her need to bring all her life into the clear light of consciousness so as to reflect upon it . . . . She is meant to suffer; doubtless she is right. But she seizes upon it so eagerly that there is little room left for God to propose any other destiny. It is, as it were, on her own initiative that she compresses suffering and happiness into a synthesis.[200]

One of the reasons this might fit the autonomy model is that Thérèse seizes on her own initiative in order to suffer and seems to equate suffering with happiness. It is not like the

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[198] Ibid., 276.
[199] Ibid., 288.
[200] Ibid., 312.

absorption model, in which suffering leads to a purification of the creaturely in favor of an ontological fusion with the divine. Instead she confidently pursues a spiritual ideal of her own choosing as the way to maximize her spiritual life. [201]

One of the distinctive features of Balthasar's brand of kenotic activity is the distinction he makes between it and suffering. This is clearly an advantage that Balthasar works from this view. It allows his spirituality to relate to suffering in a way that does not glorify it but does not dismiss it. For Balthasar suffering is perhaps inevitable, according to the biblical record, but it should not be sought out in the name of self-abandonment. Balthasar cautions us precisely at this point of suffering in Thérèse's life that is crucial. Kenotic spirituality is letting go of our own assumptions about what spirituality is and what God is calling us to. The mistake Thérèse made, he reminds us, was to assume that suffering must be God's calling for her. It may not have been her destiny.

Balthasar's spirituality is flexible, truly capable of dealing deftly with various situations because its only constant is the will to obey and the ability to suspect one's own judgments in order to follow God's mission. So what does this description of Thérèse teach us about Balthasar's vision of kenosis? First, he praises her ability to move beyond self-assessment in her spiritual progress. This fits with his allergy to all system building, disdaining it as a way for humanity to attempt to exert control over their relationship to God. The spirituality of kenosis is the alternative to this attitude, and Balthasar sees it at work in her life in a divine way. Furthermore, Thérèse's tendency to always accept or seek suffering breaches the earlier ideal of letting go of self-assessment.

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[201] Ibid.

In her decision to fully embrace suffering, not only did she improperly fuse her happiness with it but she too quickly grasped it as God's will when there may have been another path for her.

Elizabeth "the Vanishing"[202]

Elizabeth of the Trinity represents another great saint in Balthasar's account, and, although her style can at times lean toward what he calls the kitsch,[203] he sees in her a deep earnestness and radical one-sidedness[204] that provide something of merit for the theologian. Like John of the Cross, Elizabeth expresses a remorseless and unapologetic desire to strip everything down to the barest of forms in order to grasp the one central thing, the love of God for his children. Even Elizabeth's own happiness is relegated to the background in this quest.

In terms of kenotic activity, this stripping down is presented eloquently in the theme of self-forgetfulness. She says that "the secret of peace and happiness lies in self-forgetting, in no longer being preoccupied with oneself."[205] This self-forgetting, Balthasar claims, simultaneously becomes for the soul the forgiveness of her sins and a recognition of the overwhelming power and endless scope of grace."[206]

It is acknowledged that all this language is very one-sided and imbalanced. Yet it provides clear access to a truth that otherwise might be muted. Balthasar believes it is a timely reminder to the church.[207] But its one-sidedness means that the radical call to self-forgetfulness in the light of God's love might harbor within it some aspects that need to

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[202] Ibid., 448. This phrase is Elizabeth's favorite name for herself.
[203] Ibid., 378.
[204] Ibid., 377.
[205] Ibid., 448.
[206] Ibid., 449.
[207] Ibid., 425.

be qualified. One of Balthasar's concerns about Elizabeth is her ability to withdraw from the world to such a degree, and he raises the possibility here, just as in Thérèse, that Elizabeth "almost seems to view with a sort of pleasure the wasting and burning her sickness causes her."[208] In both of these instances, Balthasar writes in positive terms about kenosis and spiritualities that he admires, but remains sensitive to the issue of glorifying suffering.

Though he identifies this glorification of suffering as an impulse toward the autonomy model of understanding kenosis, it also calls to mind the spiritual ideal of absorption. Is all this self-forgetting to be taken to mean that a person ceases to exist? In this instance, Balthasar believes this is emphatically not the case that, as in John, only the illusory self is left behind. "The ever-repeated wish to lose herself in God in the Endless One, is thus, *not a metaphysical desire* [italics mine], but a simple movement of love . . . . 'To lose oneself' must be understood here in the sense of the Lord's commandment—in the loss of one's own soul lies the key to entry into the kingdom of love, in which the 'I' indeed, but not a single 'Thou', is lost."[209] I think this means that, according to Balthasar, Elizabeth never requires the true self ("thou") to be turned over to God in a way that annihilates it. The movement of finite love toward one who is infinite is simple. In the process the false self (I) that Paul refers to as the "old man" does become obliterated. This is why Elizabeth feels such freedom and joy in her self-forgetfulness. It is a leaving behind of an illusory version of herself in exchange for one who is fully alive within the presence of God.

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[208] Ibid., 428.
[209] Ibid., 437.

Elizabeth's life exhibits a clearer connection between happiness, agency, and self-surrender than those of the other saints discussed here. She seems more willing to allow the language of happiness to be paired with that of self-forgetfulness. Yet her embrace of suffering and her tendency to withdraw from the world, border on the problematic absorption spirituality[210] Here, the language of happiness, when combined with her view of suffering, poses the risk of a dangerous conclusion, not just for human agency but also for the nature of spirituality in general.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has brought to the fore several themes for the understanding of kenosis, Balthasar, and human agency. First, the saints (and all non-sainted Christians) become persons through participation in the kenotic activity of Jesus within the *communio sanctorum.* This kenotic activity is then passed onward through the Holy Spirit's activity and allows individuals to become true persons. Second, the lives of the individual saints and Balthasar's commentary on them reveal more clearly some of the patterns of kenosis in human agency. According to his interpretation, the saints all undertake renunciations in the name of the love of God. They approach this love in various ways but they do not practice anything that we might call metaphysical self-annihilation, and he is willing to criticize these saints when they veer too close to a glorification of suffering or a hostile view of earthly realities. This points to Balthasar's distinguishing between kenosis and the twin problematic poles of absorption and autonomy. Rather than absorption or autonomy, he identifies these saints' goal as the

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[210] Ibid., 378.

stripping away of the illusory self, which is painful, allowing one to find true agency and happiness.

One question that lurks behind all three saints' attitude of unconditional obedience is the possibility of death as an event that will be experienced by the saints. While not perfectly articulated in Balthasar's description of saints, this theme is obviously connected with kenosis and agency. This is particularly difficult for the contemporary situation because it appears that a kenotic spirituality is inherently driven toward death, as in the case of suffering. Since the saintly life is christologically formed, death is an inevitable part of Balthasar's spirituality. Because he sees the *communio sanctorum* as a continuation of Jesus's salvific work, death will always be a part of Christian experience. Resurrection is also there and it is hidden with the fruitfulness of the saint. For Balthasar the true meaning of the saints and their impact on the world cannot be penetrated fully.

Finally, Balthasar's description of kenosis in the lives of the saints provides both a social dimension to kenosis and an open-ended respect for divergent spiritual paths. In fact his theology demands that each individual receive a specialized mission from God. This means that for Balthasar human agency is achieved in numerous ways and depends on divine guidance to understand how this is best achieved. The saints present a concrete experience of the theme of difference.

CHAPTER FIVE

KENOSIS AND THE SPIRITUAL PATHWAY TO AGENCY

The preceding chapters demonstrated the vital importance of the motif of kenosis in Balthasar's theology. This chapter represents a continuation of that theme within the realm of spirituality. In brief, spirituality will be defined here as Balthasar refers to it: "revelation . . . realized in practice."[211] God's revelation is what creates and defines spirituality. Within the context of this final chapter, then, the relation between human agency and the activity of self-surrender present in the kenotic motif will be investigated in depth. First I will address the relationship of theology to spirituality in Balthasar's preferred mode, focusing on the gospel as the unifying factor and norm over all spirituality. Following this, I will explore themes germane to Balthasar's conceptualization of spirituality—philosophical difference, the scandal over spiritual systems, personalizing mission, and discernment—and how these themes may interact with Christian perfection, self-love, human agency, and human relationships.

The Relationship between Theology and Spirituality

There are three ways of relating the academic study of spirituality and theology. The first way is to separate them completely. This approach has been a viable option since the scholastic era. The assumption of this approach is that spirituality and theology have completely different goals, methods, and authorities. Spirituality centers on

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[211] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Spirituality," in *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 212.

affective experiences, mystical writings, and spiritual practices. From this perspective,

mystics such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross end up as "lyrical poets" leaving

"dogma to the prosaic work of the School."[212] In contrast, theology centers on an orderly,

comprehensive, and rational defense of Christian beliefs. This perspective dominated

Catholic theological centers of study during Balthasar's own time.[213]

Another perspective to spirituality and theology would be to privilege one

discipline over the other. The tension between spirituality and theology was heightened

with the advent of the Enlightenment. Some Christian thinkers, such as John Toland,

treated spirituality as irrational and superstitious. In his attempt to make Christianity

more palatable in the Enlightenment context, he located the essence of Christianity within

the explanatory power of reason.[214] Admittedly, John Toland's approach is a fairly

simplistic example. His contemporary Friedrich Schleiermacher, on the other hand, went

in the opposite direction, identifying the essence of Christianity with the feeling of

absolute dependence. This allowed piety and spirituality to become normative rather than

creedal and propositional dogmatic statements.

The final option, the one Balthasar advocates, is to view spirituality and theology

as mutually beneficial. This approach can contain a wide variety of perspectives yet it is

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[212] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Sanctity and Theology," in *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 192.

[213] Balthasar believed that the neo-scholastic training manuals of his day separated theology and spirituality to their peril: "It is not dry manuals (full as these may be of unquestionable truths) that plausibly express to the world the truth of Christ's Gospel, but the existence of the saints, who have been grasped by Christ's Holy Spirit." Balthasar, *GL 1*, 494.

[214] One example of this approach would be John Toland, *Christianity not mysterious: A treatise Shewing that there is nothing in the Gospel country to reason, nor above it: and that no Christian doctrine can be properly call'd a mystery*, (1702), http://find.galegroup.com.flagship.luc.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=loyolau&tabID=T001&docId=CB132427541&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE. Accessed June 23, 2013.

in many ways a return to the earlier style of the Church Fathers in which "the subsequent separation of theology and spirituality was quite unknown to them."[215] But Balthasar is too erudite a thinker to suggest that we can or should simply return to that earlier mentality. In order to rightly rejoin spirituality and theology, it will take some constructive work. To advance this cause, Balthasar argues that theology and spirituality have to retrieve and explain anew "the objective spiritual medium" that was present in the earlier eras of the Church's history.[216]

Gospel as Norm

This "objective medium," as Balthasar called it, is the gospel. The experience of the gospel is the personal integration of God's revelation. Through the spiritual journey, the disciple discovers a deeper and more fundamental definition of self within the narrative of God's love in the Incarnation. The spiritual journey, anchored in the biblical revelation and investigated through the discipline of theology, brings spirituality and theology together within the depths of God's revelation. There are two important characteristics of the gospel: the hard sayings of Jesus and the proclamation of the good news. They provide the normative test for all spiritual practices. This means that a spirituality based on "good news" and "hard sayings" will retain a paradoxical perspective. On the one hand, the Gospels portray the Christian journey as an easy yoke and promise to liberate captives. On the other, Jesus asks the disciples to leave all they have and share in Christ's sufferings. The Christian is invited to follow Christ through death on the Cross and into Resurrection. An authentic spirituality, then, will reflect this

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[215] Balthasar, "Sanctity and Theology," 182.
[216] Balthasar, "Spirituality," 214.

dramatic existence that connects in the participation of Christ both joy and suffering, poverty and wealth, passivity and activity. The gospel is the narrative framework from which theology, spirituality, and the formation of the self receive their meaning.[217] Christians, following Balthasar's model, "identify our 'selves' not with the isolated acts and facts of our lives but with the meaning they come to represent in being narratively *interpreted.* We can judge past and prospective actions in light of how they further or weaken, enrich or impoverish, the self of one's narrative identity."[218] In spirituality, the Christian appropriates that narrative in order to subjectively adopt "a life story that is genuinely meaningful and fulfilling" based on the biblical narrative.[219]

If the gospel is the unifying medium of theology and spirituality, then kenosis is the primary motif that travels easily from the doctrine of God and the Incarnation into spiritual practices and ethical perspectives. I will show throughout this chapter that for Balthasar, kenosis is the link between the objectivity of the gospel and spiritual practice. The gospel reveals the self-giving patterns of the triune God and then, through the Holy Spirit, places these patterns within the human being, reshaping the previously amorphous spiritual desire into a decisive form:

> from now on the human (and *a fortiori* the Christian) spiritualities can no longer be detached from the ultimate meaning that they have received in the form of

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[217] Balthasar sees the centrality of the gospel in Ignatius of Loyola. Balthasar, *GL 5*, 161. Also in John of the Cross Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics Volume III: Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, ed. John Riches, trans. John Saward Andrew Louth, Martin Simon, and Rowan Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 161. Balthasar also mentions that the law of the gospel is what judges the fruit of each era of Christian thought, Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Fathers, The Scholastics, and Ourselves," *Communio* 24, no. 2 (1997): 352.

[218] Christopher W. Steck, S.J., *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001), 74.

[219] Ibid. Steck's usage of narrative categories may seem to be out of place in regard to Balthasar because who prefers to make use of dramatic categories. While this point of difference merits further exploration, both drama and narrative accentuate Balthasar's belief that the true self to be found progressively unfolds in relationship with the events of salvation as revealed by God.

revelation of Christ: from now on, there no longer exists an abstract general concept for the various forms of spirituality (although it was possible earlier on for such a general concept to exist only in a quite imperfect, analogous manner): rather, their concrete and unique general concept is Jesus Christ, who bestows their only acceptable specific meaning on them out of the unity of his triune love.[220]

This quotation reveals some very concrete outcomes that keep Balthasar's understanding of kenosis from veering into the possibility of self-annihilation or an alienating autonomy. The self-giving event of love, revealed in the Incarnation, becomes for Balthasar a fulcrum that balances the extreme discourses of kenosis. In light of the Incarnation, Balthasar distills four themes of a Christian spirituality of kenosis: the philosophical presupposition of loving difference, kenotic spirituality as a scandal, the enhancement of individual agency through personal mission, and the role of discernment in the spiritual practice of self-surrender.

Philosophical Difference and the Spirituality of Kenosis

This revelatory event is grounded in the philosophical presupposition of difference as the possibility for authentic love. Ontological difference between the divine and human serves to strengthen and clarify the operation of kenosis and its relation to the self: "It is absolutely not true that love requires the abolition of personality . . . how sad it would be if it were to turn out that the beloved only possessed our measure and form!"[221] The ontological difference between God and creatures (and between human beings) is the fundamental safeguard for self-sacrifice that does not result in self-annihilation.[222] Whatever is being asked of the disciple in the spiritual journey it is decidedly not, in

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[220] Balthasar, "The Gospel as Norm and Critique of All Spirituality in the Church," 291.

[221] Balthasar, "The Fathers, The Scholastics, and Ourselves," 335. Kevin Mongrain calls this the "mutual glorification" of humanity in God and places it at the center of Balthasar's theology. Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 28.

[222] I have dealt with this in similar ways in chapter one and in chapter three.

Balthasar's estimation, an exercise in self-annihilation. We are not asked to allow our

individual significance to be somehow absorbed into God. Instead we are invited to

participate with God in finding our own agency. The good news of the Gospel is real and

alive in Balthasar's spirituality. We are being saved, not absorbed.

While philosophical difference might not seem to be a self-evident theme in the

Bible, Balthasar believes it is crucial. This relationship between theology, philosophy,

and spirituality is evident in that Balthasar's discussion of the mystics of the Christian

church falls under the heading of *Metaphysics in the Modern Age* and "Metaphysics of

the Saints."[223] Without a proper understanding of God and metaphysics, spirituality will

degenerate any number of ways. In discussing the spiritual life, one must have a clear

sense of the way in which God and creature relate, and this involves certain philosophical

commitments. Even more, Balthasar mentions that metaphysics is crucial to

understanding the kenotic theme:

> From Augustine *via* Benedict to Francis and Ignatius, this [yielding of self to
> divine love] remains the primal truth which, though unchanging in its essence, is
> constantly illumined in new ways. Nor can it stand indifferently beside
> metaphysics with the latter's question as to the transcendence of reason; rather, it
> casts light on this very question and clarifies it from its own ultimate sublimity.[224]

While this "primal truth" (which is simply the radical nature of Christian love) has

remained, it sometimes became obscured in various ways. One of the positive effects of

the Greek inheritance is that it encouraged *eros* and *apatheia,* a rigorous asceticism

coupled with an urgent desire to connect with God. Balthasar applauds these early

thinkers for keeping spirituality connected to theology. Indeed, Balthasar's whole project

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[223] Balthasar, *GL 5*. This is also where Balthasar studies the theme kenosis, variously called, *apatheia, Gelassenheit, indifferencia.* Balthasar traces this theme of indifference through many Christian mystical writers. Throughout this chapter there will be many references to this volume.
[224] Ibid., 22, 141-205.

of theological aesthetics is based on the beauty of God drawing and shaping our desires.

Yet one of the negative effects is that this cosmological approach leans toward the neo-

platonic idea of absorption, which does not allow much room for the human spirit to

achieve freedom.

Balthasar affirms that Thomas Aquinas's medieval synthesis marshaled the best

of Christian antiquity while providing the conceptual materials needed to construct the

real distinction between creature and Creator.[225] Balthasar believes that Thomas' reliance

on the doctrine of the Trinity for metaphysics is crucial:

> The metaphysics of Thomas is thus the philosophical reflection of the free glory
> of the living God of the Bible and in this way the interior completion of ancient
> (and thus human) philosophy. It is a celebration of the reality of the real, of the all
> embracing mystery of being which surpasses the powers of human thought, a
> mystery pregnant with the very mystery of God, a mystery in which creatures
> have access to participation in the reality of God, a mystery which in its
> nothingness and non-subsistence is shot through with the light of the freedom of
> the creative principle, of unfathomable love.[226]

The philosophical foundation for the difference between Persons of the Trinity ensures

that God's freedom and love remain un-coerced in relation to each other and the world.

Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics thus protects the very passion of God in his

unfathomable self-giving love.

In addition to divine freedom, Thomas's philosophical distinction also preserves

creaturely love and freedom. According to Balthasar, the Creator's relationship with

creatures "is modeled on the archetypal otherness within God" which brings about "a

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[225] Ibid., 12. As with Balthasar's other interlocutors, I will not be addressing the accuracy of
Balthasar's reading of Thomas. The importance for this study is what Balthasar thinks that Thomas
provides him with in terms of constructing his own theological perspective.

[226] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics Volume IV: The
Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, ed. John Riches, trans. Andrew Louth Brain Mc Neil C.R.V., John
Saward, Rowan Williams and Oliver Davies (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 406-407.

positive relationship to God."[227] Balthasar further asserts that Thomas' trinitarian-structured metaphysics protects human flourishing. This allowance and celebration of creaturely freedom found in Thomas

> is beyond the imagination of any non-Christian religion" (including Judaism and Islam), for wherever God (even in the person of Yahweh and Allah) can only be the One, it remains impossible to discover any satisfactory explanation of the Other. In these circumstances, philosophical reflection (which never truly occurred in Judaism or Islam) inevitably conceives the world, in its otherness and multiplicity, as a fall from the One, whose blessedness is only in itself.[228]

But Balthasar also takes Christianity to task, judging it guilty of ignoring Thomas's contribution and averring that this metaphysical lynchpin was lost by the inheritors of the Thomistic legacy. Christian theology and spirituality ended up departing from Thomas's balance, resulting in in two dismal alternatives: placing reason over being (Scotus) or continuing the univocal identification of God with being (Meister Eckhart).[229] The legacy of Scotus, Ockham, and Suarez inevitably end up leading to the emergence of Kantian philosophy.[230] The Kantian path privileges rationality and epistemology over the fullness of being.

In considering Meister Eckhart (the other side of this polarity), Balthasar gives a more mixed response.[231] He sees Eckhart as an intensely radical Christian with authentic experience and a commitment to the kenotic motif (expressed as *Gelassenheit*). But

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[227] Balthasar, *TL 2*, 181.

[228] Ibid., 180-181.

[229] Balthasar, *GL 5*, 12.

[230] This explanation is extremely compressed, but also in Balthasar. Balthasar's discussion of it can be found in *GL 5*. Aidan Nichols also provides an excellent survey of this "*tour de force*" as he names it. Nichols also points to the influence of Gustav Siewerth in Balthasar's assessment of Christian metaphysics. Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar's Aesthetics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 148.

[231] For an excellent in depth treatment of Balthasar's "conflicted" response to Eckhart, see Cyril O'Regan, "Balthasar and Eckhart: Theological Principles and Catholicity," *Thomist* 60, no. 2 (1996): 203-240.

Eckhart's prayerful and exuberant "worshipping heart" used philosophical and theological language that may have been overly confident, which encourages others to "misuse his words and insights for the purpose of its titanic idealism."[232] Balthasar's main problem with Eckhart is not with his use of *Gelassenheit* per se, but his tendency to identify God with being leads to humanity becoming God themselves. Eckhart's authentic experiences are used by others that follow his trajectory to blur or destroy the philosophical difference between Creator and creature. The real possibility of any authentic spirituality of self-surrender becomes a threat to human autonomy, for it leads to the flagrant promethean attempt at the dethronement of God.[233]

Consequently, for Balthasar, a poor understanding of philosophical difference is not just a minor, forgivable intellectual defect. He perceives disastrous consequences for any authentic vision of kenotic love.[234] A metaphysics that can properly declare that God is Wholly Other and yet is oriented toward his creation in self-giving love is a crucial ingredient in the formulation of integrity and freedom of both God and creature. It is this philosophical assertion that makes room for the possibility of a healthy form of self-

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[232] Balthasar, *GL 5*, 41.

[233] Ibid. This flagrant side of the equation can be found in Nietzsche's will to power, where humans achieve god-like status. The more subtle, yet equally rooted in sin, is the Eastern mode where the human being, through ascetic practices realizes that the self is an illusion. To Balthasar, "The creature's yearning cannot be a will to power that would seize possession of God but rather a will to surrender, to let oneself be seized by him." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Christian Meditation*, trans. Sister Mary Theresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 93.

[234] There are problems with Balthasar's alarmist reading of metaphysics and spirituality of course. First, he generalizes. There is simply no way to compress all of theology into such a cohesive narrative. Second, he draws consequences from thinker to thinker, which ends up appearing to blame Eckhart for Hegel's misdoings. Yet, in spite of these shortcomings, I think Mongrain is right that he is looking for a way to capture the essence of the Christian tradition which is the mutual glorification of God and creature.

surrender. In Balthasar's estimation, the importance of this position has been ineffectively grasped intermittently in the history of Christian thought.[235]

The Scandal of the Gospel over Intellectual System

One possible misreading of Balthasar's methodology would be to assume that he is intent on laying a philosophical substrate on top of biblical revelation. But Balthasar argues, in fact, for the opposite claim: the gospel, not philosophy, is what is normative. This means, then, that Balthasar's thought cannot achieve an easy synthesis of various biblical, spiritual, or philosophical categories. To Balthasar this failure to achieve a perfect working system is not a shortcoming to be corrected but an attribute to be praised.

Another way to express the Gospel's role in Balthasar's spiritual vision is through the now-familiar theme of objective revelation over spiritual and ethical systems. The Gospel is fundamentally disruptive to human patterns of spirituality just as the scandal of the Incarnation and Cross disrupted religious belief systems. The Gospel *is* scandal. For Balthasar, part of this scandal relates to the unprecedented nature of the kenotic act that "forms the unique character of Jesus's existence." This unique kenotic character "cannot . . . be traced back to anything that is already known," which means that humanity has difficulty receiving Jesus and he becomes continually a *skandalon,* a "'stumbling stone'"[236]

This normative scandal is exhibited in his essay on "The Gospel as Norm and Critique of All Spirituality in the Church."

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[235] One underlying piece to this discussion is of course, the Trinity. This revelation of God as triune is what allows space to exist between creator and creature in a life-giving way. I discussed this in chapter three.

[236] Balthasar, *GL 7*, 221.

> Were the gospel a philosophy of religion for Everyman, or an abstract ethics for Everyman, then this hardness [of the gospel sayings] would be inappropriate. But the inherent form of the gospel requires that man follow Jesus by staking everything, with ultimate decisiveness, on the one card and abandoning the rest of the card game: 'leaving everything' without looking back, without laying down as a precondition a 'synthesis' between Jesus and saying farewell to those in one's home, between Jesus and burying one's own father, or between Jesus and anything else at all. . . . The criterion, the 'canon,' is that one does not make a synthesis.[237]

Balthasar is saying that these hard gospel sayings cannot be properly integrated within an ethical-spiritual system, for if the call of gospel is systematized, it makes the act of abandoning family, for example, either universally applicable in everyone's spiritual journey or not applicable at all and merely illustrative. This approach to God would mechanize the spiritual life. Either the disciple coldly detaches herself from her family in an almost mechanized technique of self-redemption using self-emptying as a spiritual tool to achieve salvation, or she continues on her way, rejecting any applicability of these sayings as part of the good news of the gospel.

Spirituality, for Balthasar, is not a plan of action to accumulate worldly wealth nor an attempt to somehow become something more than human. It is not an exercise in developing your natural talents, nor is it a system of practices designed to destroy the self. It is simply a choice to obey the disruptive word of God.[238] Unlike in many other versions of Christian journey, for Balthasar this choice occurs at the beginning of the spiritual life. The process of "letting go" inherent in this choice is a form of kenotic relinquishment of the illusion of human-created systems. Humanity, through the choice to

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[237] Balthasar, "The Gospel as Norm and Critique of All Spirituality in the Church," 292.
[238] Choice is a theme that Balthasar found in Ignatius of Loyola. For more information on choice, Balthasar, and Ignatius, see Werner Löser, "The Ignatian *Exercises* in the Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 103-120.

follow Jesus, reciprocates analogously God's own making room for creation. In the choice to follow after Jesus, the Christian makes space for God to define what humanity should look like and relinquishes her definitions of human fulfillment and happiness in exchange for God's definitions.

Assenting to this invitation and opening oneself to have the form of Christ define you is not without effort. It is a death to an old web of meaning and a rebirth into a new one. Hence, the beginning of the journey has a negative, even painful, aspect to it. It is a true renunciation, a loss of moderating viewpoints not only about God, but also one's understanding of the world, others, and the self. The spiritual journey begins in this thicket and the path can only be found "as a result of deliberate and perhaps wearying effort."[239] Instead of a passive "letting be," Balthasar envisions that the kenotic activity of discipleship is something "which is to be actively grasped and carried out [and] must also be actively pursued."[240] The active choice to follow Christ is a major feature of Balthasar's approach to spirituality.

Balthasar discusses the differences between the Rhineland mystics and Ignatius of Loyola to develop his idea of choice in the beginning of the spiritual life. What is made evident in Balthasar's discussion of the Rhineland mystics and Ignatius of Loyola: "For the Rhineland mystics, abandonment came in at the end; Ignatius transfers it to the beginning."[241] In the Rhineland mystics, the implication is that self-abandonment is a mystical event or goal, an attempt to achieve a type of union with God.

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[239] Balthasar, *TD 2*, 306.
[240] Balthasar, *GL 5*, 105.
[241] Ibid.

Two important consequences follow from locating spiritual abandonment at the beginning. First, this keeps Balthasar's use of self-surrender motifs connected to voluntary concrete actions in the pursuit of obedience. Kenotic activity is a process in which we are invited to participate with God for the sake of ourselves and for others. In the Ignatian way, choice and kenotic activity are linked with the immediate participation in God through mission. This gives Christian discipleship a continual sense of God's presence and invites the disciple to be involved in the practice of self-surrender under the directive of the Holy Spirit.

The second consequence of placing kenotic abandonment at the beginning is associated with choice. Balthasar highlights the way spirituality is fundamentally disruptive to human attempts at creating a system of self-salvation and is based on faith, arguing that:

> being carried out of oneself—which is faith, and is brought about by the love of Christ—is nothing else than a clearing of space in oneself for this love, a determination of one's own existence, which allows itself to be conformed to the existence of the crucified in such a way 'that our inclusion in the life of Christ does not only give us an outward direction, but penetrates us from within'.[242]

At the outset of Balthasar's spirituality is a decision to allow God to define reality and, through that, accept what God has for each individual, be it pain or pleasure, in the confidence that, through it all, God will bring the individual into a heightened sense of the real, including a more intense and empowered existence as a human being.

When viewed through the lenses of the scandal of the gospel and the abandonment of self-assessment, Christian perfection is relegated to the background of the spiritual journey. The task at the beginning of the spiritual journey is a choice to

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[242] Balthasar, *GL 7*, 407.

reject these notions: "It is readiness *as* sacrifice—because Christian perfection consists in placing oneself at the disposal of God's entire will and renouncing one's own choice of a way of life."[243] Many spiritualities attempt to describe the Christian journey as an ascent to perfection. For Balthasar, perfection is already given at the outset as grace:

> Thus the soul in grace does not live in a state of indigence advancing toward fullness, but in a state of fullness radiating out into the poverty and darkness of this world . . . . All that was said about the essential constitution of the finite has become or the moment of no importance; for the just man lives by faith, that is, by the gift of eternal life. His acts are performed not as part of his striving toward perfection, but as proceeding from perfection.[244]

The effect of this change in perspective is difficult to underestimate. It virtually eliminates a self-conscious scrutiny of activity and emotions, placing the focus on contemplating the gift-giving God.[245] In this schema, the Christian begins the journey to God from a place of thankfulness and blessing, not human insufficiency, desire, or aching need.

Balthasar's commitment to the scandalous nature of Christian spirituality and the rejection of a human-defined idea of perfection is what leads him to explore the tradition of the holy fool.[246] The saints, as important as they are to Balthasar, suffer from a misinterpretation over the centuries. They become classified as heroes and become "separate candidates for sanctity from the existence of ordinary mortals.[247] When heroism dominates the saintly narratives, the result is either to view grand acts of heroism as the

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[243] Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 172. He also echoes this sentiment in Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect*, 20.

[244] Balthasar, "Characteristics of Christianity," 166.

[245] Barrett believes that this Godward focus creates a tension within Balthasar's work in regard to conscience. In some places, Balthasar is of the opinion that the conscience is often in direct conflict with obedience and obedience is to be chosen over conscience. In other places, Balthasar seems to have a more positive view. See Melanie Susan Barrett, *Love's Beauty at the Heart of the Christian Moral Life: The Ethics of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 175.

[246] Balthasar, *GL 5*, 141-205.

[247] Ibid., 143.

measure of the Christian life or to see the life of holiness as unattainable for the average

Christian. Both of these problems are caused by human beings attempting to quantify and

commodify the spiritual life.

So, where should Christians look to find an example of radical Christian existence

without the desire for measurement? Following the "Metaphysics of the Saints,"

Balthasar delves into the stories of Parzival, Don Quixote, Prince Myshkin of

Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot,* and the paintings of Georges Rouault. There is no single

form of folly: sometimes it takes the form of a wisdom that is beyond this world,

sometimes it is represented as a learned ignorance, sometimes it is used to represent the

simple, the uneducated.[248] The diversity of holy fools appeals to Balthasar's

understanding of mission and the uniqueness of each persons role in God's drama.

But the archetype of the fool is particularly important for this study, not only

because of the diversity of its manifestation but also because, in the retelling of the saint,

a simple obedience and kenotic relinquishment (the central practices of true Christian

spirituality) are often overshadowed in favor of the miraculous and heroic. In the

narrative of the fool, the radical nature of kenosis, of letting all concern of reputation and

human assessment fall away in simple yet outlandish decisions to love. The fool "can

approach people no longer moved by fossilised forms of piety. This form of life is

explicitly described as lying beyond *apatheia,* indeed as a crossing of the frontier of the

measure proper to human nature."[249] When Balthasar describes the fool as "lying beyond

apatheia," he means that the fool, while echoing the motifs of kenosis that lie with the

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[248] Ibid., 157.
[249] Ibid., 146.

Greek worldview, moves beyond the measurements of that system into a deeper realm: "He stands nearest to the saint, often nearer than the morally successful man preoccupied with his perfection."[250] The fool is not meant to replace the saint, but to recover that element of saintliness that Christianity has too quickly glossed over.

A particularly poignant example of the misrepresentation of sanctity for Balthasar can be found in *Don Quixote.* This story challenged the conventional appreciation of "the ideology of the heroic and gallant Christian knight . . . as the living analogy of the saint in his supernatural struggle for the Kingdom of God."[251] Yet, while making a mockery out of that idealized form of piety, Cervantes "was fully aware that it would be precisely in his hero that this out-of-date existence would survive as immortal foolishness. While Don Quixote is 'no Christ-figure,' it is *precisely in his failure* that Don Quixote "becomes the true patron saint of Catholic Action."[252] He "constantly preaches and practises love of enemies . . . . He preaches love on every occasion."[253] The simple perseverance of Don Quixote, his fidelity to poverty, chastity, and obedience juxtaposed with the spectacular failures of his actions reveal the depth of kenotic love in a unique way. "In short, Don Quixote is so much better a Christian because subjectively he makes no claim to sanctity, and because objectively it is never possible, at any moment or in any respect to count his ridiculous doings among the solemn deeds of God and Jesus Christ."[254] In sum, a type of self-surrender that is imbued with the foolishness of love motivates the fool in his purest form. In refusing to be measured, either by himself or by others, the fool is directly

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[250] Ibid., 143.
[251] Ibid., 169.
[252] Ibid., 170.
[253] Ibid., 171.
[254] Ibid., 179.

combating the absorption and autonomy perspectives of spirituality. The fool is always well aware that he is not God and is not attempting to eradicate his creaturely identity. He is not seeking to erase his foolishness, only to expose it humbly to the free benevolence of God.

Another slightly different implication of Balthasar's spirituality, especially in light of his reluctance to embrace a systematizing approach, is the question of human agency. The language of Christian perfection discussed above tends to entail within the Christian community a focus on individual holiness. The affirmation of human agency, while similar, is used in philosophical and theological circles to describe a general set of external conditions in which a human being is able to make free choices. Questions of human agency often come along with discourses on the nature of justice, community, and human rights.

The themes of universal human rights and social justice simply do not capture the imagination of Balthasar. He is so strongly attracted to the scandal and particularity of Christian revelation that his approach seems awkward and unusable for those intent upon securing universal human rights, dignity, or equality for the oppressed. Balthasar has no sense of urgency about creating clear progress toward equality and just societies, at least in terms of a universal language. However, it does not necessarily follow that Balthasar does not care about these aspects of life. The next two sections, on mission and discernment, offer a way to illustrate what rises up from the destruction of human systems and how Balthasar constructs a new answer to what human agency might mean.

Mission and Human Agency

It is essential to revisit the theme of mission to understand how Balthasar's kenotic emphases interact with human agency. Chapter two discussed mission as it relates to Jesus as both human and divine but Balthasar also uses mission to describe human patterns of spirituality. Balthasar argues that "a human individual becomes a person, theologically, by being given a unique vocation and mission."[255] In fact, the deepest, most profound, most essential element of humanity is mission:

> All aspects of man's creaturehood meet in the concept of mission: *his mission to love and to serve,* because love fulfills itself in service just as service fulfills itself in love; *his distance from God and his nearness to God,* because his condition as not-God finds its foundation and fulfillment in his condition of being at a remove from love, as the Son also experienced it is in his relationship with the Father, whereas his nearness to God reveals itself as a nearness of love and hence also of reverence and of service; *his call to autonomous action and self-giving contemplation,* because his action can be more autonomous as his contemplation is more self-giving and receptive, whereas his contemplation finds its purest expression when it is translated into action. Thus the concept of mission suffices to express the full measure of what man is; fulfillment of mission encompasses the whole concept of human perfection. It even replaces it, since human perfection is not in itself self-sufficient and purposeful; it stands in the service of the glorification of the love of the Trinity, which is the single ultimate purpose of creation and to which everything else has been ordered, including man's perfection and his eternal happiness.[256]

Note how Balthasar insists that every aspect of what humanity means coincides with mission. All the questions raised in this study—self-surrender, human fulfillment, autonomy, agency, conscience, Christian perfection, suffering, and joy—all are deeply present within this fundamental category of mission.

More precisely, then, mission is the dramatic transition from being an individual into being a theological person. Balthasar uses the term "individual" to refer to the natural state of humanity, the commonality all human beings share. An individual

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[255] Balthasar, *GL 3*, 271-272.
[256] Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 82.

achieves personhood through accepting and enacting his or her mission. As an

ontological encounter mission comes directly from God to the individual. The implication

here is that mission is not something that arises out of a constellation of natural talents;

mission cannot be discovered by doing an inventory of strengths and weakness. Mission

is the call of the gospel applied uniquely to each individual, with the intention of turning

that individual into an empowered person in the deepest possible way. It is a specific and

unrepeatable calling particular to every human being.

This understanding of mission also serves to guide and structure kenotic activity.

The category of mission is so important that "even the factor of Christian mortification to

the world stands under the more comprehensive sign of mission."[257] Mortification is a

descriptive term for the kenotic motif in spirituality. In other words, the kenosis theme is

sometimes made subordinate to mission because mission brings about personhood in a

more comprehensive manner. The activity of self-surrender and the degree of self-

surrender will be different for each individual as he or she responds to and internalizes

the story of the self that his or her mission offers. So mission is an all-encompassing term

that opens up the possibility for the negative connotations of self-sacrifice to be related to

the larger themes of self-discovery and agency.

One possible concern about Balthasar's conceptions of agency, mission, kenosis,

and personhood could be that kenotic spirituality cannot support a positive conception of

self-love because it advocates self-surrender. If self-love is a necessary part of human

flourishing and Balthasar's kenotic spirituality denies self-love, then it could be argued

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[257] Balthasar, "The Fathers, The Scholastics, and Ourselves," 391-392. What Balthasar means is not that mission is more descriptive than kenosis as a whole, but that in terms of human agency, mission may not always mandate acts of self-renunciation.

that Balthasar sabotages his manifest goal of human flourishing by denying self-love.

Daphne Hampson, for example, argues that, while kenosis is an acceptable practice for

men, it is damaging to women because they do not have a sense of self in the first

place.[258] There are two extreme views of self-love that need to be addressed to avoid

absorption or autonomy. On the one hand, if self-love is rejected as tantamount to pride

or egoism, it would seem that Christian spirituality would fall into the absorption mode of

spirituality. Christian asceticism then becomes a vehicle for hatred of creaturely finitude.

Carried to its full completion, this perspective becomes a vehicle for the destruction of

the self—both spiritually and physically.

On the other extreme, if self-love becomes the arbiter of meaning for the

definition of self, freedom, and love, then the Christian becomes closed off to

experiencing love through others to the extent that human flourishing is defined by the

individual rather than God or the community. The invitation to participate in God-gifted

mission is lost and replaced by self-interest. Ironically, extreme self-love (egoism) results

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[258] Daphne Hampson, "On Autonomy and Heteronomy," in *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996). In this same text, Sarah Coakley responds to Hampson, and while she recognizes the dangers that kenotic language poses, she is also aware of the opposite danger, that of hyper-individualism and egoism. If we say that women as a whole have no use for humility or self-sacrifice, then we are not only making generalizations that do not apply to everyone, but we are cutting off from women a major stream of spirituality and prayer that is present in the Christian faith. For Coakley, Christian feminism offers this conception of empowering kenosis to its more secular counterparts. Underlying this debate was a different conception of what the self is. Aristotle Papanikoloau picked up this debate and focused on the concept of personhood, victims of abuse, and the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. See Papanikolaou, "Person, *Kenosis* and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation," 41-65. He believes that Hampson's approach is individualistic while Coakley rightly hints that personhood comes not from a self-love alone, but from a person being in relations with others. Papanikolaou brings Balthasar into this conversation and argues that Balthasar's understanding of persons and his conception of kenosis corroborates well with the research of scholars and clinicians who treat those who have suffered abuse. Papanikolaou believes kenosis, particularly the kind described by Coakley and Balthasar is the same mechanism that allows victims of abuse to heal and gain agency. Carolyn Chau follows up on Papanikolaou's work in her article, Chau, "What Could Possibly Be Given?: Towards an Exploration of *Kenosis* as Forgiveness-Continuing the Conversation Between Coakley, Hampson, and Papanikolaou," 1-24. She notes a shortcoming of Papanikolaou's approach. In his eagerness to defend Balthasar's use of kenosis he denies the real sense of sacrifice or loss that the term can imply in Balthasar's works.

in death of the self or disempowerment, even while those who follow this path see themselves as increasing in autonomy and power.

The ethicist Darlene Fozard Weaver recognizes these two extremes. It is not enough to merely accept self-love as part of the Christian life, but one must understand its relation to other forms of love: "love for God, self, and neighbor are dynamically inter-related. The costs of failing to note these inter-relations are high. Unduly separating them risks the misconstruing them as competing objects of love."[259] As Weaver implies then, self-love cannot be considered apart from loving relationships with God and neighbor.

Speculatively speaking, while Balthasar might agree with Weaver about the interconnectedness of the various forms of love, any attempt at promoting self-love is problematic for him for three reasons. First, because Balthasar stands solidly within the Christian tradition, he recognizes and affirms that the basic definitions of sin center upon pride and that self-love can easily spill over into something more sinister.[260] He is hesitant to grant space to self-love lest it turn into egoism, which makes self-interest the normative guide of conduct. Thus, a theological approach that formalizes self-love runs the risk of disrupting the balance between God and creature that was established in the Incarnation.

Balthasar's second concern about any privileging of self-love is that it is, in the end, untrustworthy and does not always lead to actual human flourishing: "Faith means to remain in perpetual contact with the source and to have no desire to seek one's own

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[259] Darlene Fozard Weaver, *Self Love and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

[260] See Balthasar's observation of Thérèse on this matter. Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 164. Or, his discussion of Maximus in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 196.

adventure. The greatest adventure after all is God's redeeming action for the world in his Son, and if we follow the Son's course we shall not run the risk of losing ourselves on the slippery paths of self-inverted love."[261] Self-love, when overemphasized, ends up betraying the self, seeking its own adventure, its own way to achieve flourishing based on its own desires.

The third reason that Balthasar is hesitant to emphasize self-love is because he simply believes personhood and true human flourishing is found in a network of relationships. Self-love simply loses all importance as a term "when I learn (in the Son) that I am a 'good' to him, affirmed by him; this is what guarantees my being and my freedom. It is only when I learn that I represent a 'good' and a 'thou' to God that I can fully trust in the imparted gift of being and freedom and so, affirmed from and by eternity, really affirm myself too."[262] In light of God's objective pronouncement of our worth, the idea of self-love seems insignificant. In the end, self-love simply feels too individualistic and small to be of any use. True self-love is a byproduct of that moment when we truly understand what we mean to God. What Balthasar contends is that, within this kenotic spiritual framework, our identity is not threatened by the other, but realized in "a 'we' that transcends" self-love completely.[263]

Yet, if Balthasar contradicts or denigrates self-love, then he has also violated his principle of ontological difference; this would result in a universalizing of self-sacrifice. Weaver believes that, without a positive understanding of self-love, Christianity "may encourage unmitigated sacrifice on behalf of the neighbor, a sacrifice that mutilates the

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[261] Balthasar, *Engagement with God*, 102.
[262] Balthasar, *TD 2*, 287.
[263] Balthasar, *TD 3*, 526.

identity of the person and does a disservice to the neighbor as well. As a contemporary

account of self-love makes clear, to construe God, self, and neighbor as competing

objects of love establishes false oppositions among them."[264] Self-hatred would

undertake spiritual activity with the motivation of self destruction. This activity could

mimic, at least superficially, the heroic deeds of the martyr or charity toward the neighbor

but it would be, on the whole, motivated by hatred of self. Balthasar's theology, though,

would never advocate a mutilation of the person in self-sacrifice. Even with self-love

remaining in the background it is simply not the case that his theology mutilates the

human form. The trinitarian love and the Incarnation provide an alternative emphasis to

self-love that prevents such a problem from arising. Balthasar can acknowledge the

importance of self-love, yet he can acknowledge its very real dangers as well. Self-love

alone is never the answer to the problem of achieving human agency.

In short, while Balthasar acknowledges the presence of a positive self-love and its

role in our spiritual lives, he does not believe that there is any need to emphasize it.

Instead it is to remain "unaccented" lest it turns into something more dangerous.[265] This

area of Balthasar's theology needs more development. Balthasar does not formally deny

the reality of self-love and, indeed, his concern for ontological difference would seem to

support creaturely self-regard. Yet it seems as if he could have done more to explain how

self-love is a positive aspect of the Christian life instead of leaving it unaccented.

Overall, however, Balthasar's reluctance to make use of the terminology of self-

love frees the human person from looking inward to pursue God. In leaving behind a

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[264] Weaver, *Self Love and Christian Ethics*, 8.
[265] Balthasar, *GL 7*, 438.

preoccupation with self in exchange for a personalizing mission, Christian spirituality, in

Balthasar's approach, offers an opportunity for a deeper vision of individual agency.

Each person will have a different path toward fulfillment, a different way of freely

expressing that common imprint of Christ. As Balthasar states:

> the personal 'idea' of each individual finite freedom lies in the incarnate Son in such a way that each is given a unique participation in the Son's uniqueness. His divinity, with its infinite freedom, permits this inexhaustible multiplication of what is once-for-all and unique; thus it also permits each individual freedom to fulfill itself in an utterly distinct manner within the realm of infinite freedom.[266]

God has an "idea" and "name" for each one and has shaped beforehand a path to full

agency for that person. This allows for a great deal of freedom in the spiritual journey.

While admittedly the spiritual life is saturated in the life of Jesus Christ and must be

shaped by him, what each follower does in a concrete situation could potentially be very

different based on the leading of the Father in love. This model of spirituality gives

context to Balthasar's theology and is, on the whole, overlooked by many commentators

that are unconvinced of his project.

Discernment

Thus far I have argued that Balthasar's theology and spirituality are linked

organically through the encounter with the gospel. This allows for the consideration of

the trinitarian and Christological elements of kenosis to flow into Balthasar's spirituality.

The gospel itself, as good news and hard sayings, prevents us from creating a system of

progress that leads us to our own definitions of happiness and fulfillment. Inversely, it

also precludes a system of relinquishments, self-sacrifices, and sufferings as inherent in

Christian holiness. Instead, we are invited to relinquish judgments and live in a kenotic

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[266] Balthasar, *TD 2*, 270.

state of indifference. The appreciation for mission provides Balthasar with a way of discussing the positive nature of the human spirit in his discourse on spirituality. Mission safeguards all that is valuable about the creature from alternative forms of spiritual journeys that end in dissolution of the person or alienation from the rest of humanity.

This final section will elaborate how Balthasar might see mission played out throughout the life of the Christian through the idea of discernment, or more specifically, discernment as the idea of living out mission. Without discernment, the kenotic elements of spirituality, even within the category of mission, would become oppressive. For Balthasar, "the metaphysics of indifference" is foremost "a doctrine of discernment" because a thoroughly Christian instantiation of indifference is always ordered toward "the personal decrees of the Holy Spirit."[267] When the disciple follows after Christ in a spirit of abandonment or *disponibilité* she is primarily in a state of active listening, a readiness to enact the very truths of God in her own life.[268] Balthasar believes this perspective on emptying avoids the rigidity of the Greek and Asian techniques of self-emptying, which extinguish the self rather than preparing the self for action and empowerment.

There are many activities and attitudes that develop this ability to be available to the personal decrees of the Spirit. Yet, Balthasar, like Barth, wanted to avoid techniques of simple progression in the spiritual life. In other words, the process of spiritual discernment seeks out ways to mute our own clamoring fears or desires and to recognize

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[267] Balthasar, *GL 5*, 53. Balthasar also sometimes refers to this phenomenon of discernment as attunement. Other scholars have also used this term in their work, (Christopher Steck, Melanie Barrett). I prefer the word discernment here because it follows closely on the idea of choice, indicating that there are choices to be made in our spiritual lives and not a standardized path. Yet, attunement does offer a reminder that these ethical choices being made are done so through the process contemplating Christ, not merely in deciding between things based on a sliding scale of good and bad.

[268] Balthasar, *TD 1*, 288.

God's call. In relation especially to self-sacrifice, discernment will be absolutely crucial

as a qualifying tool to aid Christians in the employment of kenosis in their lives. As I

have noted above, the Christian obedience to the gospel involves hard sayings and good

news. Or, in Melanie Barrett's more experiential interpretation:

> attunement to Christ instills two dispositions in the believer, one unpleasant,
> arduous and difficult, and the other joyful, hopeful, and trusting . . . . For the
> believer, this unity of dispositions, one positive and one negative, results in a
> variegated emotional life, one that alternates between joy and suffering, between
> felt nearness to God and felt distance from God, and between exuberance and
> dejection.[269]

Balthasar's spirituality is suffused with drama. We experience the gamut of life, and any

spirituality must validly embrace that, especially if this Christian life is to be based on

Jesus's life and ministry. In discernment, the Christian learns to respond to God in the

midst of these dispositions, either to embrace joy or pain. Balthasar makes the following

point about how Jesus used discernment:

> When is it time for Jesus to hide from his enemies and avoid them, and when is it
> time to confront them and surrender into their hands? He knows these times by
> always looking to the Father . . . . In making the decisions required by the needs
> of the hour, the Christian and the Church must ponder and reflect, of course: but
> at the same time they must look up to the obedient Son with humble entreaty, so
> that, through him, they may find the will of God here and now.[270]

In this passage Balthasar's nuanced and subtle approach to self-surrender has Jesus

leaving all his activity up to the Father. This underlying disposition is kenotic, yet, in

terms of concrete situations, kenosis can appear either as a confrontation or as a

surrender. It is not automatically one or the other, underscoring the fact that Balthasar

does not see authentic spirituality as a passive resignation to suffering or oppression.

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[269] Barrett, *Love's Beauty at the Heart of the Christian Moral Life*, 161.
[270] Balthasar, *TD 2*, 86.

Indeed, Balthasar is not offering the Christian a life only of suffering and death and obedience. These things are never goods in themselves; rather, they are determined to be the appropriate action undertaken in love, if and when the Holy Spirit prompts it. On the other hand, Balthasar refuses to base his entire spirituality on the idea of liberation or emancipation. In Balthasar's lifetime, liberation theology was in its beginning stages. He recognized many good things within the spirit of early liberation theology but his main concern was that if liberation theology focuses solely on fighting structural injustice, it could miss the possibility that God might be asking for a different response.[271]

Balthasar focuses on a number of spiritual activities that support a mature ability to discern right action. Two that I wish to highlight in light of my project are a contemplative reading of the scriptures and participation in the Eucharist. These two practices bring "what pertains to the Son" through "the work of the Spirit to form the mystical body of Christ by spiritually universalizing the historical Christ."[272] The kenotic disposition is present in Balthasar's approach to reading Scripture contemplatively.[273] The Christian does not go to the Bible in search of a specific answer, but to learn how to listen:

> The Christian contemplates holy scripture, not insofar as it is man's word, but as God's word . . . for scripture is not some systematic wisdom: it is an account of God's meeting with men . . . in contemplating scripture we learn how to listen properly, and this listening is the original wellspring of all Christian life and prayer.[274]

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[271] The beauty of Balthasar's use of self-surrender then is that it arises from a prior relationship with God. This relationship helps determine what do to in any given situation.

[272] Balthasar, "Word, Scripture, and Tradition," 17.

[273] One of the most common issues related to Balthasar's use of the Bible is his relationship with the historical-critical method. See Edward T. Oakes, "Balthasar's Critique of the Historical-Critical Method," in *Glory, Grace and Culture: The Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Jr. Ed Block (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 150-174.

[274] Balthasar, *Prayer*, 31.

This act of contemplating scripture places us in communication with the Divine. Yet, in

Balthasar's typical fashion, communication with the Divine is a thoroughly human

process. Because of the Incarnation our interactions with God can never leave the

physical, creaturely world behind. The senses and the imagination become very important

in the process of discernment and especially in approaching scripture.[275] "In

contemplation, just as we can never leave the Lord's humanity behind us, neither can we

get 'beyond' the word in its human form. It is in the humanity that we find God, in the

world of sense that we find the Spirit."[276] Balthasar asks the Christian to "be in the stable

at Bethlehem . . . go along on the flight into Egypt . . . place an order with Jesus the

carpenter . . . and so on."[277] The ability to discern right actions now comes from a

constant immersion in the scriptures, forming our imaginations through the Holy Spirit,

who shows us the will of the Father.[278]

The Eucharist is another important practice for spiritual discernment. The

Eucharist is a vital step in the progression of the kenotic motif begun in the Incarnation.

Balthasar provocatively claims that "only the Eucharist really completes the

Incarnation."[279] The Eucharist extends the kenotic economy into the very hearts and souls

of humanity in a sacramental manner.[280] It is the "closest approach to God"[281]As Kevin

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[275] Stephen Fields S.J., "Balthasar and Rahner on the Spiritual Senses," *Theological Studies* 57, no. 2 (1996): 224-241. This article explores how the spiritual senses operate in Balthasar and Rahner, who while different were both sons of a shared Ignatian heritage.

[276] Balthasar, *Prayer*, 9.

[277] Balthasar, *Christian Meditation*, 27.

[278] It is important to note that Balthasar does distinguish between revelation and scripture, unlike some Protestants. It is the "mode of God's self-witness in words" and does not contain the exhaustive collection of God's revelation itself. Balthasar, "Word, Scripture, and Tradition," 11.

[279] Balthasar, *TD 3*, 348.

[280] "For Balthasar . . . the Eucharist itself is a final moment in the kenotic economy, the resurrection moment when Christ, in his offering of himself to the Father, *is* the giving of thanks

Mongrain has argued so well, Balthasar is not necessarily interested in abstract

explanations of the Eucharist but more in the actual reception of it, accepting the mystery

surrounding it.[282] It is a mystical enactment of the kenosis of God through Christ for the

enrichment of the disciple who, in giving thanks for God's kenosis, offers up a self-

sharing love toward others and back to God.

The Eucharist, since it is an extension of the kenotic economy, offers Christians a

way to place themselves in the drama with Christ. In this manner we take up, with Christ,

a eucharistic, self-giving attitude toward the Father, since "the Eucharist is directed to

God the Father."[283] Not only does the body of Christ mystically nourish us and restore the

Christian to spiritual health but, in participation of the Eucharist, the Christian takes on

Jesus's own kenotic attitude of love toward the Father. This watchful and thankful

posture toward the Father is the beginning of discernment.

One final comment is important to understand discernment's place in the interplay

of a kenotic spirituality: interpersonal human relations. Balthasar's kenotic vision of

reality will need to engage concrete situations in life if it is to be meaningful for

Christians. One way to address this relationship between persons is with ethical

reflection, i.e., normative guidance or principles that a person can then apply to various

situations in order to ensure certain values are respected and upheld. In the ethical arena,

how would a person, shaped by the kenotic love of God, discern right actions toward a

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(*eucharista*)." Graham Ward, "Kenosis: Death, Discourse and Resurrection," in *Batlhasar at the end of Modernity*, ed. Lucy Gardner and David Moss (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 41. Ward is partially incorrect here. Kenosis continues on, not ends with the Eucharist. It operates within those who participate in the Eucharist and through the *communio sanctorum.*

[281] Balthasar, *Christian Meditation*, 23-24.

[282] Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 67.

[283] Ibid.

neighbor? If kenosis forms the foundation for all relationships, then Balthasar can argue

that "the Son's self-surrender is the most definite reality possible, and every ethical norm

governing man's concrete action (individually and socially) is only the proclaiming of

this infinite will of God for a finite situation."[284] This is a demanding ethical code "where

the thought of necessity, justice, and the thought of balanced settlement cease."[285] It is

impossible to overemphasize the theme of excessive love in Balthasar's theology, and it

is especially crucial for understanding his view of ethics. Love is a required element in all

forms of kenotic activity but Balthasar allows for radical kenosis to be moderated by the

concrete realities of the moment:

> One can permit self-giving in good conscience only when one is ready, for one's
> own part, to give freely without counting the cost. On this spiritual level, the good
> stands as norm over the giver as well as the [*sic.*] over the recipient (but who is
> also ready for his part to be given in return), and it governs the free consciences of
> both.[286]

I interpret this quotation to be an admission that, if we are not able to give freely or with

full knowledge, we are in a potentially dangerous situation. Self-sacrifice is not a good in

itself that justifies the violation of our consciences. It takes place within a personal

encounter, primarily with God, who directs us and guides us. While we model our lives

off of the radical love of God we also need to discern in practical terms how to approach

any given situation:

> The Christian is fundamentally a man who has been dispossessed. He lives for

God and his fellow men because he knows that he is not the author of his own existence;

thus, in gratitude for his life, he must lead a life of thanksgiving. He gladly does what he

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[284] Balthasar, *TD 2*, 281-282.
[285] Balthasar, *GL 7*, 140.
[286] Balthasar, *Epilogue*, 69.

can and gives what he has. In practical terms there is probably a limit to this openness to God and our fellowmen: we need a personal area in which to recharge our batteries so that we can return to the field of action and expend ourselves once again. But spirituality and existentially this openness has no limits."[287]

So, while he feels the Christian remains fundamentally open to self-giving, Balthasar also acknowledges our creaturely finitude. The human subject needs to recognize the times when he or she needs to withdraw. This is not selfishness or egoism; it is healthy self-love and also love for the other. These admissions, though, are relatively sparse. Balthasar does not often call for moderation, for the recharging of batteries, or withdrawal from self-sacrifice. In fact, it is the opposite. Usually he pushes the extremes of self-sacrifice, encouraging Christians to continually and meaningfully divest themselves of everything. The imbalance in his work is sometimes problematic and leads to misunderstandings. In attempting to show the limitless power of kenotic love, Balthasar often forgets to qualify his statements. This can make him appear guilty of promoting a form of self-annihilation, when really it is a confidence in the divine grace of God and his ultimate goal for all people to walk in the full power of kenotic relations.

Conclusion

Balthasar's spirituality and theology are connected to the objective medium of the gospel. The kenotic patterns found in the gospel become the normative and objective pattern for the spiritual journey. The elements of Balthasar's spirituality described within

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[287] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness: Radio Sermons through the Liturgical Year* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013); Barnes and Noble Nook edition.

this chapter were the necessity of philosophical difference, the rejection of spiritual and ethical systems in favor of the scandal of the gospel, the promotion of individualizing mission as the central feature of spirituality, and the role of discernment in helping the Christian navigate the difficulties of human relationships in a sinful world. The idea of self-sacrifice, in light of these emphases, becomes nuanced; Balthasar is always careful to maintain the delicate balance between the hard sayings and sufferings that the Christian life entails alongside the liberation, joy, freedom that Christ offers. This answer may not satisfy all those who see kenosis as an oppressive mechanism that denigrates the self. Yet Balthasar offers an alternative vision in which kenosis is the only way to achieve true agency. He rejects common forms of measuring agency in favor of the radical nature of love that the Gospel demands.

This study has traced the meaning of kenosis within Balthasar's corpus. I have argued that kenotic love is a comprehensive and normative theme that Balthasar employs in all the main areas of his writings. I have also shown that he intentionally employs kenosis, grounded in divine love, to preserve creaturely agency. I described how Balthasar sees the problem of sin damaging humanity's relationship with God and other humans. In Balthasar's understanding, human systems of religion other than Christianity responded in two possible extreme ways. The first used kenosis without love to annihilate the self. This religious impulse was often accompanied by a metaphysical belief that the goal of the spiritual journey was an absorption of the self into the divine. The other response, in reaction to the destruction in the first extreme, rejected kenosis as a spiritual pattern and understood the divine as a competitor for true agency. This response is an attempt to secure freedom by taking power. I argued that, for Balthasar, this dilemma was

solved in the Incarnation, which restored kenosis to the proper home within triune love, and that, through that restoration, kenosis was revealed to be a vehicle for pursuing a personalizing mission for each and every human being.

For Balthasar, true kenosis is never the obliteration of the self in an ontological sense but only in the sense of an abasement toward the Divine in love. Were God himself not loving, this would jeopardize the creature's ability to achieve agency. This is why the Incarnation has a central position in Balthasar's theology. He understands the Incarnation as a definitive act of love from God that establishes, once and for all, that human beings need not strive for some type of godlike autonomy; that their very finitude is of deep value.

In relationship to the Incarnation I discussed how Balthasar's particular connection of Christology with drama and spirituality opened up a new fertile ground for the motif of kenosis. Since Balthasar believed the Incarnation was the definitive revelation of the divine life, Balthasar deduced that the trinitarian life itself must be kenotic in nature as well. This primal kenosis within the Trinity shapes Balthasar's metaphysics and ultimately provides the framework from which he works out a pattern in which God's freedom and agency do not conflict with human agency but presuppose the possibility of accepting every free act of creatures from a standpoint of love. This divine self-giving love, when impressed upon the human being, provides a mission, a way to become more than a single individual and become a theological person within the community of saints.

The kenotic theme is widely acknowledged in the secondary literature as an important component of Balthasar's theology, but there is not a sustained treatment of the

subject.[288] This full-length study of kenosis offers a thematic entrance into Balthasar's

works. It provides a fresh way of understanding the main themes of Balthasar's thought.

Second, there is an interest in the idea of kenosis in postmodern constructive

theologies.[289] The kenotic motif appears to offer postmodern theologians the ability to

avoid some of the grasping for power that they see operating in modern theology. The

human desire for a system and epistemological certainty produced theologies that ignored

the dark side of human culture (sin) and were also closed off toward the wildness of

biblical revelation (grace). In particular, philosophers and theologians such as Oliver

Davies, Graham Ward, Emmanuel Levinas, Edith Wyschogord, and Jean Luc-Marion

have all taken up kenotic themes in their own theologies and philosophies. Balthasar is an

important conversation partner for those continuing to consider kenosis in postmodern

theology.

Third, this study answers the concern in the various "theologies of liberation" that

focusing on kenosis as a definitive descriptor for the spiritual life means encouraging

disempowered and marginalized people to remain in bondage.[290] Balthasar, I have

argued, clearly makes use of the kenotic motif with the intent of preserving human

agency—which may include seeking liberation—and his thought offers a corrective to a

particular strand of postmodernism that discards kenotic expression completely. His

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[288] Aidan Nichols observes that for Balthasar, "the Kenosis is the supreme expression of the inner-Trinitarian love, and the Christ of Holy Saturday is the consummate icon of what God is like." Nichols, "Introduction," 7.

[289] For example, Oliver Davies, Graham Ward, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean Luc-Marion.

[290] For example, Coakley, "Kenōsis and Subversion: On the Representation of "Vulnerability" in Christian Feminist Writing." Also, Daphne Hampson Sarah Coakley, Julie Hopkins, Janet Martin Soskice, Jane Shaw, Nicola Slee, *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996).

usage of discernment and mission in spirituality provides a space in which kenotic practice could be a spiritually appropriate response to oppression and injustice.

Balthasar's powerful and creative approach to kenosis is both theologically rich and spirituality sensitive. While some aspects of his thought are perhaps overstated and others unaccented, his work offers theologians a wealth of possibilities for the careful and powerful usage of the radical self-offering of God and the radical calling to self-giving discipleship that the gospel portrays.

I began this dissertation by placing Balthasar's kenosis within the context of the contemporary problem of human agency. I highlighted some of the challenges that came from feminist discourse about the topic. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a pioneer in American feminism, famously said, "Self-development is a higher duty than self-sacrifice." This sense that self-development and self-sacrifice are at odds with each other is a significant theme in contemporary culture and also in particular, within feminist discourse. In Christian discourse, when this feminist sentiment appropriately labels abusive power structures within Christian rhetoric, the idea of self-development being antithetical to self-sacrifice critiques spiritualities that focus on self-sacrifice as being patriarchal. In the introduction I mentioned the work of Daphne Hampson as one example. There is indeed an element of this quotation that rings true for those who find themselves victims of the powerful in a way that threatens agency. But what I think I've shown in Balthasar's writings is that agency and self-sacrifice are not mutually exclusive but mutually enhance one another.

In what follows, I wish to offer a cursory speculative *envoi* to the dissertation by suggesting possible connections between Balthasar's theology and others who make use

of kenosis in the contemporary situation. The purpose of this speculative process is not to be exhaustive or even representative. It is merely an exercise in speculation on how Balthasar's work might interact with more contemporary voices that could assist Christian theologians and ethicists as they make use of kenotic language.

In *Saints and Postmodernism* the Jewish philosopher, Edith Wyschogrod**,** argues that in the postmodern situation, moral philosophy must take its cue from the narrative lives of saints that practice "radical altruism."[291] Wyschogrod believes that moral theory at its best is a deeply deficient tool to produce ethical action in our contemporary situation. At its worst, moral theory is susceptible to being used to inscribe violence and power into a grand narrative of "reason" that obscures radical altruism.[292]

If moral theory obscures radical altruism it is the saint that reveals its allure and motivates concrete moral action. Wyschogrod believes that saintly lives are to be interpreted not according to a "normative discourse . . . but much more like interpreting a musical theme."[293] Balthasar, too, has his love of musical references yet this is more than just a passing comment. For both Wyschogrod and Balthasar, the musical theme hints at a moral requirement, something that is not just to be intellectually assimilated on the theoretical level, but *performed*. Moral theory by itself tends to lack this allure to act morally. The narratives of the saints provide this moral invitation that grasps the human being, not merely at an intellectual level, but at a performative level.

Both Wsychogrod and Balthasar desire to move beyond traditional hagiographical methods of interpreting saintly lives and both see the saint primarily in terms of a

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[291] Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, 233ff.
[292] Ibid., xxii.
[293] Ibid., 47.

powerful activity of self-donation. Balthasar refers this activity of self-donation by many names throughout his work but the notions of kenotic love, self-surrender and self-sacrifice are the predominant themes. Wyschogrod deems it "radical altruism."[294] Wyschogrod distinguishes her view from the "common sense" view of altruism. Common sense altruism is in danger of seeing the Other as a way to fulfill the self's desires. The practice of common sense altruism in results in hierarchical modes, for example, helping close relatives first over those with greater need.[295] This criticism of common sense altruism contains parallels Balthasar's own scant usage of self-love within his kenotic framework. The common sense usage of altruism is ordered by some measure of self-interest. If that self-interest becomes the driving force of self-sacrifice, then the relationship with the Other (God or human) is merely instrumental in the self's grasping for wholeness. Wyschogrod forcefully states that "*social theories do not measure altruism but altruism measures social theories.*"[296] This is a serious challenge to those who wish for a more measured interpretation of self-sacrifice that fits within a larger social theory. Balthasar and Wyschogrod are both extremely careful in preventing that from happening in their own work and instead demand a radical form of moral action.

Yet there is a significant difference between the two thinkers. Wyschogrod reduces the saintly life to the practice of radical altruism and jettisons the spiritual, theological, and mystical contexts in which these saints operated. Take, for example, Wyschogrod's definition of saint:

> *one whose adult life in its entirety is devoted to the alleviation of sorrow (the psychological suffering) and pain (the physical suffering) that afflicts other*

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[294] Ibid., 22.

[295] See Wyschogrod's interpretation of Rescher's altruism of common sense. pp. 236-243.

[296] Ibid., 243. The italics are part of the original text.

persons without distinction of rank or group or, alternatively, that afflicts sentient beings, whatever the cost to the saint in pain or sorrow. On this view theistic belief may but need not be a component of a saint's belief system.[297]

This definition has similarities to Balthasar's conception of sainthood. Saints are willing to suffer for the sake of others. In Christian terms, saints are even willing to be damned for others. But Wyschogrod's claim that the act of self-sacrifice can be divorced from the belief system of the saint would be problematic for Balthasar. The reason the saint undertakes the life of self-emptying is *because* of their beliefs, and the divine protects that act of self-surrender with his own prior act. To claim that theological motivations are superfluous to understanding radical altruism appears reductionistic.

In addition, many saints did not always attempt to alleviate the pain of others but instead to find a connection to God within their pain. Wyschogrod's focus on alleviating pain seems too simplistic; her sense of psychological or spiritual pain is a right and true admonishment. It is certainly not necessary to have a theological justification for self-surrender, but it is a significant type of motivator for a large number of saints and, historically speaking, the cultivation of saints has occurred within theistic contexts. Wyschogrod divorces mystical language from the language of altruism. Her dismissiveness of the mystical and theological in saintly lives obscures the activity of the Divine kenosis which inspired them. The Divine is part of the musical score that leads to the practice of radical altruism.

Another important thinker is Sarah Coakley, a Christian feminist theologian. Her collection of essays, entitled *Powers and Submissions* is a particularly relevant attempt toward a contemporary Christian feminist rehabilitation of kenosis. Coakley appreciates

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[297] Ibid., 34. The italics are part of the original text.

the movement of secular feminism but believes a crucial gift that Christian feminists can offer their secular counterparts is a reconstruction of the idea of submission and self-surrender. She says in her first essay of the book, "it will be the burden of this essay, then, to offer a defence of some version of *kenōsis* as not only compatible with feminism, but vital to a distinctively Christian manifestation of it, a manifestation which does not eschew, but embraces, the spiritual paradoxes of 'losing one's life in order to save it.'"[298] Coakley later defines her version of the "bewildering number of evocations" of kenosis as "power-in-vulnerability."[299] While kenosis needs to be refined and clarified, Coakley is an example of a theologian operating from a feminist standpoint that believes kenosis is part of the central mystery of Christian salvation.

Coakley, like Balthasar, utilizes Christian spirituality to describe the kenotic event of love. Coakley believes that it is through contemplative prayer that kenosis becomes a "special form of 'vulnerability' [that] is not an invitation to be battered; nor is its silence a silenc*ing*. . . . By choosing to 'make space' in this way, one 'practises' the 'presence of God' – the subtle but enabling presence of a God who neither shouts nor forces, let alone 'obliterates.'"[300] Kenosis forms the practice of making space for the other in love. This making space does not have to come with the cost of remaining silent or being battered.

Coakley's emphasis and interpretation of the Phillippians passage of Scripture moves in a different direction than Balthasar's, however. She sees the kenosis as related to human actions of Jesus rather than the emptying being a "precondition of the earthly life." This distinction echoes Balthasar's believe that there is not a sense in which divine

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[298] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender*, 4.
[299] Ibid., 5.
[300] Ibid., 35.

attributes have to be stripped away in order for the Son to become incarnate. But Balthasar believes that the Divine is *already* kenotic, already emptying, so that Jesus' human activity is mirroring the prior Trinitarian activity.

Coakley and Balthasar both share a desire to move away from philosophical questions on the two natures of Christ and move into a narrative mode in which Jesus' vulnerability is construed as a strength. However, Balthasar still retains an essentialism in regard to gender that would typify weakness as a feminine trait, albeit, a trait of positive value, not one of detriment. Coakley rightly argues that these typifications result in some problematic understandings of kenosis. In fact, one might argue that Balthasar, in describing receptivity and submission as feminine traits, yet asking all Christians to participate in them, might be attempting to evacuate his own masculinist guilt. This is of course a speculative statement, but is grounded in some real concerns raised by Coakley. Balthasar simply did not have a contemporary awareness of the influence of gender on theological statements. It is indeed a disjunction that others have noticed. Coakley's observations on gender and power provide a way to further refine Balthasar's theology of kenotic love in ways that are more nuanced in relationship to gender and power dynamics in the world.

The last theologian to be considered in this series of speculations of kenosis and Balthasar's theology is Sallie McFague, who has had a distinguished career as a Protestant feminist theologian. In particular I wish to focus on her recent book, *Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint.* This work is structured to address two contemporary issues: first world consumer culture and the destruction of the earth as a result of that consumption. McFague takes the idea of

kenosis, found within the lives of saints (in particular she uses John Woolman, Simone

Weil, and Dorothy Day) to argue that Christian discipleship is directly opposed to

capitalist consumer culture. Like Balthasar, she envisions Christianity's most vital

expression (found in the saints) to be radical self-giving love. McFague wants to reframe

Christian discipleship to move in the opposite direction of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's

notion that "self-development is a higher duty than self-sacrifice." Instead McFague

argues that the "goal of human life" moves "from self-fulfillment to self-emptying."[301]

McFague takes the similar empahsis found in Balthasar on radical self-giving and

interprets it within a global framework and the very real consequences for our world.

Balthasar's own context did not quite recognize the dangers inherent in human usage of

the earth's resources although he did recognize the alienation and individualization of

modern industrial society. The underlying idea found in McFague that extends the

meaning of the kenosis motif is that kenosis helps Christians to enact practices that result

in care for the Earth and for the other by restraining impulse in contemporary society to

find the agency of the self tied to purchases and consumption of resources.

McFague's last chapter in particular lays out a kenotic theology to provide

rationale for why Christians should be concerned with the limited resources and

destruction of the environment. McFague argues that "A kenotic theology is therefore an

incarnational theology, a theology that focuses unapologetically on 'food,' the lowliest,

most basic need shared by all living beings . . .but is a theology that begins with need."[302]

Yet, McFague is not avoiding the divine in order to focus solely on ethical concerns. She

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[301] Sallie McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), chapter 1; Barnes and Noble Nook e-book.
[302] Ibid., chapter 7.

goes on to say that "this model suggests that all flesh, all matter, is included within God (as God's 'body') but that God is not limited to this body, to matter. Here, God is understood to be 'more than' the body, more than the world, but intimately, radically, and inclusively identified with it."[303] This connection with food and this argument that matter is part of God's body is foreign to Balthasar's conception. I suspect that Balthasar would see this mode of thought as a blending of the real distinction between creator and creature that Balthasar worked so hard to maintain in his theology. Yet, McFague's suggestion that God is bound up with the fate of the earthly "in a network of physicality, vulnerability, and need" is not biblically or theologically sound. It collapses divine kenosis into a complete powerlessness and is in danger of losing the difference between the creature and creator. Although McFagues's notion of a "universal self" would cause Bathasar some concern, if we let this radical language stand and interpret it in an apophatic manner similar to what was suggested in Chapter Three, it might allow Christians to truly grasp the value of the created order, something that Balthasar was very concerned about in his own way.

McFague's approach offers value in that she frames ecological and consumeristic concerns in terms of very real and necessary Christian spiritual practices. We are systematically destroying our world and we are unwilling to accept the effects of the capitalist system on our souls and the souls of our brothers and sisters. McFague also improves upon Balthasar in the area of religious dialogue. It holds some value as well in her willingness to extend the dialogue with other religious traditions in the hopes of a more inclusive and cooperative approach to caring for the earth. Balthasar's arguably

[303] Ibid.

Christian triumphalist reading of the ideas of autonomy and absorption as errors inherent within the other world religions religions is problematic. These are two areas in which Balthasar did not provide a great deal of input.

Nevertheless, my one main initial criticism of McFague's work in this book is her doctrine of God. In describing God almost exclusively in terms of weakness with little disconnect from the earth, she threatens to undo some of the most important aspects of Christian theology: the belief in a God who creates from freedom, and through that freedom, gives himself willingly to those who rejected him. God's divine self-surrender is not just part of the world process but a freely given gift.

Wyschogrod, Coakley, and McFague provide a sampling of the important ways that kenotic language can retain its biblical and theological center and bear fruit within contemporary theologians' scholarly work. Wychogrod's work highlights the saintly and the ethical. Coakley highlights the issue of gender and spiritual practice. McFague expands kenosis to include a response to ecological concerns. Balthasar's own work in kenotic discourse is richly varied and provides an important source for contemporary theologians concern with forming new ways to understand God's divine self-gift and the human response.

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