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So That Love May Be Safeguarded: The Nature, Form, and Function of Obedience as a Heuristic Device for the Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

Daniel Paul Burns
Loyola University Chicago

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SO THAT LOVE MAY BE SAFEGUARDED:
THE NATURE, FORM, AND FUNCTION OF OBEDIENCE AS A HEURISTIC
DEVICE FOR THE THEOLOGY OF HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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DANIEL P. BURNS

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To Christi, Matthias, and Sophia
Obsculta…pervenies. Amen

- St. Benedict of Nursia
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ABSTRACT

Hans Urs von Balthasar’s literary body of work is enormous. His style is erudite and often abstruse. As a result, it is often difficult to systematize and arrange his work into coherent and consistent categories. This dissertation offers the singular category of obedience as a heuristic device to help render the entire von Balthasarian corpus more understandable. For von Balthasar, the word “obedience” is multivalent and rich in meaning. It cuts across all aspects of human relationships, of human relationships with God, and even God’s relationship with Himself. This dissertation claims that the meaning of the word “obedience” is central to virtually every claim von Balthasar makes in his vast literary corpus.

I will thoroughly explicate von Balthasar's presentation of obedience by explaining obedience from what I call "obediential vectors." I call them vectors because they are, essentially, the four primary ways one can approach the notion of obedience in von Balthasar’s theology. The claim here is that, if one understands these four vectors of approach then one will have a comprehensive and complex understanding of, not only von Balthasar’s teaching on obedience, but on von Balthasar’s entire corpus. These four-fold vectors are (1) Christological obedience, (2) Trinitarian obedience, (3) obediential love, and (4) active receptivity as obedience. The first vector demonstrates the central role of obedience in the Christ-event. The second vector shows how the first vector must be located in the Divine relations themselves. The third vector, demonstrates obedience’s
relationship with self-sacrificial love where it is discovered that obedience and love are virtually synonymous terms. The fourth vector demonstrates the role obedience plays in every relationship between persons, be they Divine persons or human persons by using the notion of active receptivity as the necessary posture to perceive both form and splendor.

After the development of the four vectors, I develop how obedience manifests itself in von Balthasar’s theological anthropology answering the question: “how must we, as humans, obey?” Finally, I will outline how the scholar can use the category of obedience to interpret any text of the Christian faith by explicating a hermeneutic of obedience.
INTRODUCTION

THE LIMIT TO WHAT IS INTENDED, THE TITLE OF THIS WORK, AND
ESTABLISHING SOME NECESSARY PRESUPPOSITIONS

This dissertation will be about obedience as the preeminent form of Christian love as understood by that giant of 20th Century Catholic theology, Hans Urs von Balthasar. According to him, Absolute Love has been revealed, and it is beautiful. Beauty is revelation. This revelation is what von Balthasar calls Divine Glory. Furthermore, for divine beauty to be perceived it must have form; it must be embodied. Controversially, the proper posture for perceiving beauty, according to von Balthasar, requires what he calls “active receptivity” as a form of obedience. Von Balthasar has two relations for how active receptivity and, thus, obedience is exercised: the God/human obediential relationship (i.e. theological anthropology) and the God/God (i.e. intra-Trinitarian) obediential relationship. I propose that, since these relationships provide the theological foundation of our relationships with each other, a fruitful and complex theology of obedience may be built upon a close study of both of von Balthasar’s models of obedience; fruitful because obedience is love and love, by its nature, is fecund; necessarily complex so as to apply to the manifold circumstances in which relationships between persons present themselves. I will do this by explicating both relational models
use of the term “obedience,” showing how the God/human model (theological anthropology which will be dealt with in chapter four) is grounded in Christo (chapter one), essentially making intra-Trinitarian (chapter two) love the precondition for both models and, therefore, the precondition for obedience of any sort. I will then attempt to show that von Balthasar’s intra-Trinitarian model may be fruitful soil in which to build a relationship that reclaims the category of obedience.

Recognizing the integral relationship between personal love relations in God and humans leads us to the fundamental conclusion of this dissertation, namely that a comprehensive understanding of von Balthasar’s presentation of obedience is, in fact, heuristic for understanding von Balthasar’s entire corpus. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s literary body of work is enormous. His style is erudite and often abstruse. As a result, it is often difficult to systematize and arrange his work into coherent and consistent categories. Therefore, this dissertation offers the singular category of obedience as a heuristic device to help render the entire von Balthasarian corpus more understandable. For von Balthasar, the word “obedience” is multivalent and rich in meaning. As I have already mentioned, it cuts across all aspects of human relationships, of human relationships with God, and even God’s relationship with God’s own self. Therefore, given the immense von Balthasarian corpus, it became ever clearer to me that the meaning of the word “obedience” is central to virtually every claim von Balthasar makes.

In order to provide a systematic presentation of a theologian who famously defies systemization, I will thoroughly explicate von Balthasar's presentation of obedience by explaining obedience from what I call "obediential vectors." The purpose of these
obediential vectors is to demonstrate that the word obedience is rich and multivalent enough to be heuristic for all of von Balthasar. I call them vectors because they are, essentially, the four primary ways one can approach the notion of obedience in von Balthasar’s theology. The claim here is that, if one understands these four vectors of approach then one will have a comprehensive and complex understanding of, not only von Balthasar’s teaching on obedience, but on von Balthasar’s entire corpus. These four-fold vectors are: (1) Christological obedience, (2) Trinitarian obedience, (3) obediential love, and (4) active receptivity as obedience. The first two are person-centered in the sense that they involve a relationship that can only be had between persons, in this case, the persons involved are Christ in both of his status, the other Persons of the Godhead, and mankind as the benefactor of divine revelation in Christ. The second two obediential vectors, while fundamentally involving a relationship between persons, are concerned less with the subject itself and more with the state of the subject. In other words, they concern themselves less with the being of a person and more with the manner of being of a person. I will further explain this later. The first three vectors will comprise the first three chapters of this dissertation while the fourth vector will be developed at the beginning of the fourth chapter. I will map out the basic claims of these chapters now.

In chapter one I will discuss the role of obedience in the person of Jesus Christ in his “emptied state.” In chapter two, I will discuss how the foundation of obedience discussed in chapter one must be located in the Divine relations themselves. In chapter three, I will discuss the role of obedience in von Balthasar’s notion of self-sacrificial love (the properly Christian form of loving) where we will discover that obedience and love
are virtually synonymous terms. Furthermore, the importance of loving in this way is magnified by the fact that this love is *commanded*. All Christians must love in this way. The commandment to love God and neighbor represents the low water-mark of Christian observance. In chapter four, I will discuss the role that obedience plays in every relationship between persons, be they Divine persons or human persons by using von Balthasar’s notion of active receptivity forming the necessary posture to perceive both form and splendor. Furthermore, now that we have a nascent understanding of the role that obedience plays in von Balthasar’s theology, I will develop in chapter four how obedience manifests itself in von Balthasar’s theological anthropology answering the question: “how must we, as humans, obey?” Finally, in the conclusion, I will present some summary concluding remarks and outline how the scholar can use the category of obedience to interpret any number of authoritative texts of the Christian faith by explicating what I will call a hermeneutic of obedience. In sum, chapters one through three and the beginning of chapter four (The Testimony of Beauty in Obedience: Active Receptivity) will give us a complex working definition of obedience. The bulk of chapter four, lengthy as it is by way of comparison, will apply the definition of obedience to human relationships with God and other humans.

Related to the core purpose of this dissertation, that of showing how obedience is heuristic for von Balthasar, I also hope to point out the potential value of using von Balthasar’s theology of obedience as a heuristic device to point toward the meaning, value, and viability of a notion of obedience for any number of ecclesiastical institutions. Therefore, during the course of this dissertation, I will attempt to outline a few basic
applications of von Balthasar’s thought on obedience to specific institutions or settings, but, having said that, I view my primary task as one that does the constructive theological work that could under-gird practical applications.

This dissertation will limit itself to a study of the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar as he has presented himself in his many books and articles. I state this because, while I recognize that von Balthasar's thought, famously, is a delta made fertile by many unexpected tributaries, I will not attempt to discuss these many influences here. I intend to take von Balthasar's thought as a complete project, not dissecting it into individual parts. As a result, the presentation of the obediential vectors will tend towards some repetition as I take the same work or article and discuss it two or three times but by emphasizing a different vector. I hope the reader will indulge this necessity.

In the end, I will have presented a complete definition of obedience and that definition will be virtually synonymous with self-sacrificial love (chapter three). The kind of obedience Christ showed to the Father is not an obedience given in fear of retribution, but, rather, because the Son loves the Father and holds the Father’s will, and its completion, as the most precious of all things (chapter one). In fact, the obedience shown by the Son to the Father is constitutive of the Son’s very existence, just as the will

1 In chapter two I will attempt to nuance an article by Guy Mansini which is critical of von Balthasar’s Trinitarian Theology by highlighting the role obedience plays in the intra-Trinitarian processions. In chapter four, after I discuss form and splendor, I will demonstrate how form and splendor and the nature and essence of love inform how we can judge sacred art. I will do this by critiquing Edwyna Sandys’ *The Christa* from the perspective of Divine form and Splendor and the unnecessary self-glorification of divine love. Furthermore, at the end of Chapter four I will give one more attempt to apply my thesis: I will discuss how the obediential value of von Balthasar’s theological Anthropology can be applied to the monastic vows of obedience, stability, and conversatio morum.
the Father has toward the Son is constitutive of the Father’s existence (chapter two). For von Balthasar, as we will see below, this necessitates the role of obedience in creation. The principle human applicability of these considerations shows that each and every person who puts on Christ must demonstrate obedience of this sort, not only to the Father, but to the Church founded by Christ for the express purpose of showing His love for all mankind (chapter four). But we have a long way to go before we can make that argument and spell out the various privileges and responsibilities of each party involved. As I said above, this will be done in chapter four when we discuss theological anthropology. But, as none of this can be known without first being revealed to us by Jesus Christ we will first discuss von Balthasar’s Christology.

**Why Must Love Be Safeguarded**

I think I should include here a brief explanation of the title of this dissertation. In this section, I will shed more light on the problem this dissertation proposes to solve. Many years ago, I was in formation to become a Benedictine monk. The most significant part of that formation was to read, study, reread, and re-study the Rule of St. Benedict, written in the early Sixth Century. Many things about the Rule struck me, but there was one single phrase near the end of the Prologue that I would continually return to:

Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to **a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love (conservationem caritatis)**.²

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The reason this struck me is that I did not understand how strictness, and the obedience it implied, protected and conserved love. This was further complicated by the fact that modern scholars of the Rule of St. Benedict are far from unanimous regarding what, precisely, St. Benedict meant by the word “obedience.”

Terrence G. Kardong, O.S.B., arguably one of the most influential contemporary commentators on the Rule of Benedict, authored an extensive commentary on the Rule entitled simply Benedict’s Rule. In his treatment of the fifth chapter of the Rule, On Obedience, he begins his overview by admitting that the impression of obedience given by Benedict is problematic to the modern reader “since it seems to call for absolute, unquestioning submission to an all-powerful authority.” He then begins to outline the five major sources Benedict used to create his chapter on obedience: (1) The Rule of the Master, (2) The Pachomian Koinonia, (3) St. Basil the Great’s monastic commentaries,

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4 Ibid., 113.

5 “The Rule of the Master…is now known to be a work of the sixth century. Aside from all hypotheses, this dating is certain from the manuscript tradition alone…This puts it quite close in time to the Rule of Benedict, assigned to the early or middle part of the sixth century both by the testimony of St. Gregory the Great and by internal evidence. Only a close comparison of the two rules can show which is earlier; it is now generally agreed that the Rule of the Master came first.” Taken from the Introduction of The Rule of St. Benedict, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B., 79.

6 St. Pachomius founded one of the first cenobitic monasteries in Egypt in the Fourth Century. He was regarded as the founder of a distinct movement of monasticism which pursued a common life for its own sake and not as a mere preparation for the eremitic life. Source: the Introduction of the Rule of Saint Benedict, ed. Timothy Fry, 24.
(4) John Cassian\textsuperscript{8} and (5) Scripture itself. These varied sources and their often diverging opinions of obedience have resulted in complicated and, perhaps, contradictory, claims made by St. Benedict on obedience. This multivalence of meaning renders it difficult to interpret exactly what Benedict meant. Is obedience military-like and unhesitating? Or, perhaps, is it more like an attentive listening to God? And to whom is the monk obedient? The Rule? God? The Abbot? The dictates of his own heart as inspired by God?

Kardong does not attempt a synthesis of the various diverging claims made by Benedict’s Rule. He simply points them out and then points to the Cross as a possible solution to this problem.\textsuperscript{9} This dissertation will use the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar to spell out a theology of obedience that cannot avoid a detailed explication of a theology of the Cross.

The second major monastic scholar who discusses monastic obedience, upon whom even Kardong relies heavily, is Sr. Aquinata Böckmann, O.S.B. Her text, \textit{Expanding Our Hearts In Christ: Perspectives on the Rule of Saint Benedict},\textsuperscript{10} makes very similar moves to Kardong’s Commentary; indicating divergent sources which complicate interpretation. However, while pointing out the differences between the

\textsuperscript{7} St. Basil the Great’s commentaries are directly referenced by name in the last Chapter of St. Benedict’s Rule.

\textsuperscript{8} John Cassian’s Institutes and Conferences are the only works, besides St. Basil’s, which St. Benedict directly refers to by name.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 118.

Master’s chapter on obedience and that of Benedict’s she indicates that, while Benedict makes much of slavish military-like obedience, he makes room for the monk to “judge, to decide, and then to ‘follow’ what is beneficial to the other person. (The Rule of the Master) does not allow such freedom.”\(^\text{11}\) Böckmann then points out that Benedict’s is a community based on \textit{caritas}. The obedience demanded by Christian love is a type of obedience wherein all parties have a responsibility to love. The abbot, in demanding obedience, does it as an act of charity by freeing the monk from his own self-will. The monk, in obeying, does it out of love for the abbot’s fatherly role. Each monk obeys the other out of recognition of Christ in the other; a recognition that can only lead to the response of love.\(^\text{12}\) However, Böckmann is hesitant to indicate how this type of obedience synthesizes with the more strict military-like obedience also given in Benedict’s Rule. This dissertation will provide this synthesis by using the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar in a detailed explication on the nature and essence of love.

The third, and perhaps greatest, contemporary monastic commentator is Fr. Adalbert de Vogüé, O.S.B. His work, \textit{The Rule of Saint Benedict: A Doctrinal and Spiritual Commentary},\(^\text{13}\) indicates two divergent streams of thought on obedience in the Rule of Benedict: (1) slavish, immediate obedience to the abbot as in the Rule of the Master, (2) reasoned, loving obedience of one brother to the other as in the monastic

\[^{11}\text{Ibid.}, \text{63.}\]

\[^{12}\text{Ibid.}, \text{62-63.}\]

\[^{13}\text{Adalbert de Vogüé, O.S.B., The Rule of Saint Benedict: A Doctrinal and Spiritual Commentary (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications) 1983.}\]
commentaries of St. Basil.\textsuperscript{14} De Vogüé concludes that the inclusion of these two streams of thought have “deprived Benedict of a reasoned presentation of obedience and its foundations.”\textsuperscript{15} However, he admits that obedience in Benedict’s Rule provides a theology of obedience that is far richer than that of either the Master’s or of St. Basil’s. He then tells us that he will not attempt an explication of this theology or defend his presuppositions.

In all three of the above examples, a prejudice for obedience in our aforementioned God/God model is clearly manifested. It is my contention that this fails to keep the divergent presentation of obedience in Benedict’s Rule in healthy tension. I discovered that the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar is broad enough in scope to synthesize and make sense of the complicated theology of obedience present in St. Benedict’s Rule. Not only this, but, in the process of using von Balthasar to make sense out of the Rule’s presentation of obedience, I also discovered that obedience is absolutely fundamental to understanding von Balthasar himself.

Simply put, the entire Christian tradition’s presentation of obedience is as at least as complicated and multivalent as the Rule of Benedict’s. Is Christian obedience military-like in its precision and speed or is it reasoned and loving filial obedience which makes room for self-expression? The answer is simple: both. But the answer’s explanation is complex. This dissertation is devoted to providing that answer. In any

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 105-106.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 106.
case, by reading von Balthasar, I now know why obedience safeguards love: to be obedient is to love.

**Establishing Presuppositions: Basic Concepts for Understanding von Balthasar**

Before we dive into the primary considerations of the dissertation, some of von Balthasar’s theological presuppositions must be spelled out in order to set the framework for the other topics covered herein: (1) von Balthasar’s approach to Christology in general, i.e. is it from above or below or neither; (2) what, precisely, does von Balthasar mean by the word “mission;” and (3) How does von Balthasar view the relationship between philosophy and theology? These three presuppositions are some of the more important considerations that form the groundwork upon which von Balthasar builds his theology. As a result, it is necessary that we come to a precise understanding of these presuppositions before we address the various areas of his theology below.

**Presupposition One: Von Balthasar’s Christological Starting Point**

The important question here is: Who must Jesus be to behave as He did? To answer this question is to assume that we can make accurate statements about what Jesus did and how he behaved, which brings us to a preliminary consideration of von Balthasar’s point of departure regarding Christology. It has become popular in academic theological circles to label this, that, or the other Christology as either “from above” or “from below.” Christologies from above start with the being of the second person of the Trinity and then go on to point out that, now that we know who he is from eternity, we

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can discuss what he did/means/signifies regarding his earthly existence. Christologies from below have the opposite approach. They first look at what Christ did/means/signifies during his earthly existence and only then ask the question of who Christ is eternally to have behaved in that way. Given our preliminary question, namely, whom must Jesus be to behave as he did, then, it seems that von Balthasar will pursue a Christology from below. But the reader would be wise to be cautious here. Von Balthasar indicates this when he says:

In putting the question in this way we are pursuing a ‘Christology from below.’ We are not asking...about the contents of Christ’s knowledge, let alone the kind of personality he had, but about the conditions that made it possible for what empirically took place in him; thus we keep an eye open for the possibility that an answer may eventually come from a ‘Christology from above,’ that is, from something that goes beyond all the anthropological facts and all the events of salvation history to date.\(^\text{17}\)

Therefore, Von Balthasar’s approach baffles our attempt to neatly classify him. He fundamentally avoids the “above” or “below” distinction by beginning with the notion that Christ is sent in such a fundamental and absolute way that his mission coincides with his person, so that both, taken together, constitute God’s exhaustive self-communication.\(^\text{18}\) In other words, the God that you see here below is the God from above.

Recognizing the fact that von Balthasar’s theology will not be categorized as being from above or below is fundamental for the purposes of the dissertation. As sound dogma has established, the Person of Jesus Christ is the fullness of what can be said


\(^{18}\) Ibid.
about both God and man. Therefore, his act of obedience is an action to be found in both
God and man by virtue of the communication of idioms\textsuperscript{19} that resulted from the
hypostatic union. Since obedience is an act of the Divine person, an act constitutive of
the Second Divine Person,\textsuperscript{20} the unity of the Person is what makes obedience in Jesus’
human nature fully integrated with obedience in his divine nature. He is the obedient
Second Person who is a union of divine and human natures. This is what guarantees the
integration of his human obedience and divine obedience.

Presupposition Two: Von Balthasar’s Understanding of Mission

It is difficult to overestimate the impact that the notion of “mission” has on von
Balthasar’s theology. It is a sort of “meta-vector” which encompasses the other four

\textsuperscript{19} “The communication of idioms is a technical expression in the theology of the
Incarnation. It means that the properties of the Divine Word can be ascribed to the man
Christ, and that the properties of the man Christ can be predicated of the Word. The
language of Scripture and of the Fathers shows that such a mutual interexchange of
predicates is legitimate. The source of the communicatio idiomatum is not to be found in
the close moral union between Christ and God as maintained by the Nestorians, nor in
Christ’s fullness of grace and supernatural gifts, nor, again, in the fact that the Word owns
the human nature of Christ by right of creation. God the Father and the Holy Ghost have
the same right and interest as the Son in all created things except in the human nature of
Jesus Christ. Thus the Son by Assumption has made His own in a way that is not theirs,
i.e., by the incommunicable property of personal union. In Christ there is one person with
two natures, the human and the Divine. In ordinary language all the properties of a
subject are predicated of its person; consequently the properties of Christ’s two natures
must be predicated of his one person, since they have only one subject of predication. He
Who is the Word of God on account of His eternal generation is also the subject of
human properties; and He Who is the man Christ on account of having assumed human
nature is the subject of Divine attributes. Christ is God; God is man.” Taken from:
Anthony Maas, "Communicatio Idiomatum" \textit{The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 4} (New
York, Robert Appleton Company, 1908) 5 Feb. 2011

\textsuperscript{20} As we will discuss in Chapter Two.
vectors defined in the introduction. As a result, it would be helpful at this point to consider at some length precisely what he means when he uses the term “mission” as applied to Jesus Christ specifically and to mankind in general.

Victoria Harrison’s article on the phenomenology of human holiness in von Balthasar describes mission as having a twofold aspect for von Balthasar: (1) one’s mission in life is not self-given, as is more commonly thought; and (2) the individual sent must carry it out under the guidance of his own free agency. Consider the following quote:

The concept of ‘mission’ contains two elements. First, there is the relationship to the one who sends, who is present in the mission itself but is not identical with the one who is sent. Second, there is the mission’s future prospect; it must be carried out with the human energies of the one who is sent, and, since he is free, its implementation will under certain circumstances need to be considered, planned and tested.

Regarding the first aspect, von Balthasar insists that it is, in fact, impossible for one to give himself a mission. “Someone may have an unshakable inner conviction that he must do or propose something, but he cannot say that he has a mission. No one can give himself a mission.” Furthermore, not only can no one possibly give himself a mission,

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21 (1) Christological obedience, (2) Trinitarian obedience, (3) Obediential love, (4) Active receptivity as obedience.


23 Ibid., 428.


knowledge of one’s talents in no manner indicates the nature of one’s mission:

So free, indeed, is this election that the new act of God is completely independent of all that is natural in man – neither the existence nor the nature of the new call can be determined or evaluated on purely natural premises. Far from being a necessary precondition for this grace-filled call, the creature’s whole nature is, in fact, inconsequential to it.26

In his typical way of ending a lengthy, abstruse argument with a brief statement of blunt clarity, Von Balthasar ends this particular point with the question: “After all, who has ever had a natural aptitude for the Cross?”27 This hints at something that we will learn later on, namely that notion that all missions find their source in some aspect of Christ’s mission.

Though this will be discussed at some length later, it would be helpful to give a significant quote that spells out precisely how it is that mission gives the individual a “form.”

This “form” of the Christian, which is at the same time pure grace from the Father, the shape of man’s existence as a member of the mystical body of Christ, and ultimately the human being himself in all his concreteness, yet in the context of redemption – we can speak of this as man’s mission. He is to commit his entire nature to the service of this mission; here in this dedication, this worship, it will enjoy its particular, its absolutely personal fulfillment quite beyond its natural and imperfect abilities. It is the mission which, without fail, enables man’s nature to go beyond its own powers and yield much fruit. It also enables man at last to come to an understanding of himself (in faith), since the mission itself is christoform, exhibiting the character of the Word, the Logos. In obeying his calling a person fulfills his essence, although he would never have been able to discover this, his own archetype and ideal within himself, in


27 Ibid., 397.
his nature, by descending into the center of his natural being,…by studying his predispositions, yearnings, talents, his potential.\textsuperscript{28}

This lengthy quote confirms Harrison’s first criterion, namely, that one’s mission is not self-given nor can that mission be derived from contemplation of one’s own natural talents.

Let us now move on to discuss Harrison’s second criterion for the bestowal of mission, namely, the fact that a mission must be exercised by a free agent, by someone who is capable of grasping his own freedom and placing it at the disposal of God. In his touching article “Who is Man?,”\textsuperscript{29} von Balthasar echoes the Second Vatican Council by characterizing man as a searching being. Once a man recognizes that he is loved he is faced with the remarkable question: Why do\textit{ you} love me? Which is followed by the staggering question: Why am I precisely\textit{ I}? The answer to this question does not come from within, but, rather, by being addressed from without. I cannot self-identify me, because all I would come up with is that I am the comic result of yet another act of sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{30} Is this all that Adam knew when he saw all the animals pairing up together? That he did not have his sexual counterpart? No.

This man cannot know what a human encounter is, nor can he postulate it. According to the tale, the answer lies dormant within him, next to his heart; but first the rib must be removed from him and placed over against him as a living “Thou” by God’s creative act.\textsuperscript{31}


\textsuperscript{29} Han Urs Von Balthasar,\textit{ Explorations in Theology Volume IV: Spirit and Institution} (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995) 21.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 20.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 19.
The answer to Adam’s question is quite literally beneath his nose. So the question remains: “why am I precisely I?” The answer comes from being introduced to a living and personal other. But for Adam, this living and personal other had to be brought about by a miracle of creation at least as stupendous as his own. Eve, now having been drawn from his side, allows Adam to recognize himself. Recognizing himself, he is now able to grasp his mission. Because it is God that drew Eve from Adam’s side it must be God, not the individual, who will bestow a mission upon a person.

Regarding the second of Harrison’s criteria, we note that man must exercise this God-given mission as a free agent, capable of considering, planning, and testing differing aspects of the mission given while at the same time being obedient to the original commission of the sender.\textsuperscript{32}

If both of these two aspects come together in good faith, namely (1) having received your mission from God, and (2) accepting and living your mission as a free agent, personhood is achieved. For von Balthasar then, being given, accepting, and performing a mission is constitutive of human personhood. The bestowal of personhood upon the subject could constitute a radical departure from the man he was before.

There are cases where a man’s natural endowment is known and presupposed, but the mission that comes to him from God is not added \textit{per accidens} to this original identity; rather, it is given a preeminence over it so that his life and being heretofore seem to be instrumental, leading up to what he is to be (and, in the mind of God, has always been). This is quite

\textsuperscript{32} Harrison, 434.
By virtue of his creation a man, any man, is pre-potentiated to concretize his relationship to God by having an actual encounter with God (in prayer). The fruit of this encounter is the consciousness of a personal calling or mission which is so profound that personhood itself results from the encounter.

Moreover, as indicated above, all personalizing missions share in the particular form of the mission of Jesus Christ. Here all the plural forms of human existence find their unity. Therefore, theological anthropology, for von Balthasar, is a secondary enterprise whose precepts are entirely based upon an analysis of what the humanity of Jesus Christ looked like. Humans are considered true theological persons the more they closely resemble Jesus’ humanity. If humans are made more human the more they resemble Christ and if Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection are, for von Balthasar, the most superlatively fundamental moments of the mission of Christ, wherein God’s love is preeminently known, then the highest form of Christian love would be (since the passion cannot be repeated) prayerful reflection on this Passion and liturgical participation in this Passion. Charity and social justice must flow from this reflection and are secondary to it. Later on we will consider exactly what permits Jesus’ unique mission to be particular enough to belong to one man but universal enough that all men

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34 Harrison 434.

35 Ibid.
should have a share in it. But first we must discuss the last presupposition, namely the relationship between theology and philosophy, or alternately, the relationship between faith and reason.

Presupposition Three: The Centrality of the Cross and the Relationship Between Theology and Philosophy

In his contribution to the debate over whether or not there is a Catholic philosophy, von Balthasar warns that it is too often the case that a man attempts to put himself in the position as judge over the content of faith and reason:

…if the Christian were capable of deciding as an individual human being how far the competencies of reason go and how far the competencies of faith and of the Church’s authority go, and what percentage of his strength and his time he ought to dedicate to the one sphere, what percentage to the other – then both spheres would be relativized in favor of the private conscience and the private evidential character, and the human person himself would stand as the synthetic element, not only between both, but secretly above both. He would then know how to attain the mixture between the Christian dimension and the “orders of creation” which was appropriate to himself or to his time or to the world in general, and the divine revelation would be devalued to a partial element within an ultimately anthropological totality. 36

So von Balthasar’s concern here is less that the Christian subordinates theology to philosophy, but, rather, he subordinates both to his capricious judgment. What, then, is the appropriate ordering? How shall the Christian navigate between the Scylla of scientism and the Charybdis of angelism?

Even if nature has its own regular laws and reason its own evidential character, still these laws and evidential characters can never appear as a final authority over against grace and faith. Their autonomies remain

relative and stand as such always at the disposal of the final authority which belongs to the divine revelation, and to its plans and directives. As Christ remains Lord even over the laws of nature, which he is able to break when his work and the glorification of God requires this, and as he gives his Church the power “to do still greater works than he himself did” (Jn 14:12), so too his Church takes captive all the thoughts of men in order to place them at the service of Christ (2 Cor 10:4-5). It is not only a part of the world that is redeemed by the Lord on the Cross and laid at the feet of the Father; rather, the whole of Creation is to be recapitulated in him (1 Cor 15:24-28). And thus it is not only a part of the human spirit that is laid claim to for faith: rather, the entire reason, with all its evidential characters, is placed at the disposal of faith.37

Apparently, the only sure road a Christian can take regarding the relationship between faith and reason is to confront the world with Christ and Him crucified. No neutral ground exists upon which a Christian may stand and from which he may judge either faith or reason. “The entire greatness of the Christian situation will be grasped only when both sides (faith and reason) are taken seriously, while rejecting every synthesis of world and Christianity that is not carried out on the far side of the Cross and the descent into hell in the “new earth,” the redeemed creation.”38 For the Christian, original sin is the looming specter that complicates our attempt to find a neutral ground between faith and reason. Reason is either made purer by grace and love, or it is obscured by the Sin of Adam and by personal sin.39 Baptism is our best and greatest hope to purify our reason. Not only this, but, if philosophy truly is the love of the highest wisdom, then the Christian philosopher cannot as a matter of faith, content himself with reason’s reflection

37 Ibid. 148-149.

38 Ibid. 149.

39 Ibid. 152.
on nature. Revelation, as given to the Church, is higher than the conclusions of reason’s reflection on nature. Even the pagan philosopher’s study of beings will eventually lead him to study Being itself, and the study of being itself will lead to a search for God.

Von Balthasar will go on to say that the greatest advancements made by Christian Philosophers were all done as a service to theology. As such, the Christian philosopher’s greatest and most original achievement is to break open all finite, philosophical truth in the direction of Christ and then to clarify the transposition of that philosophical truth into the Christian milieu. Von Balthasar insists that we must do this, not only with Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, but also with the philosophers of every age, including modern and post-modern systems. He says:

Too much has changed since that time (ancient and medieval philosophy), not only in the customs of life, but more deeply in the customs of thinking and experiencing themselves, for it to be possible simply to measure today’s spirit against the criteria of an earlier spirit. And if it is true that no period has been useless in relation to eternity, but has its own voice in the choir of what does not pass away, then one will not wish to miss the voice of today’s period there.

The trick now, as it ever was, is not to be seduced into thoughts and systems that are truly foreign to Christianity. Our only guard against this is faith in Christ and worship of him. Christ is the Truth “and the forms of human truth lie in living circles around him, at a greater or lesser distance. Thus it is never possible to grasp hold of the midpoint itself:

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40 Ibid. 154.

41 Ibid. 172.
the only relationship to it is one of adoration and of faith.”42 Which brings us back to an important theme of this dissertation: to understand von Balthasar’s theology, one must understand it as an attempt to confront the world with Christ and Him crucified. Christ’s obedience unto death is the reason he is given the “name which is about every other name.” There is simply no other point from which one can consider Christianity, and, therefore, all of creation except by loving obedience (love and obedience are the same thing, as we will explain) to the way in which God is self-revelatory.

Now that we have come to an understanding of von Balthasar’s theological methodology by understanding his theological starting point, category of mission, and the basic way in which he views the relationship between faith and reason we must now proceed to explicate the main body of the dissertation. Therefore, we will proceed to chapter one and discuss the central role obedience plays in von Balthasar’s Christology.

42 Ibid. 163.
CHAPTER ONE
CHRISTOLOGICAL MISSION

We must first turn our attention to the Person of Jesus Christ. Here we will demonstrate how obedience functioned in his life. It will be necessary to discuss several different aspects of von Balthasar’s Christology in order to answer the question: In what ways was/is Jesus Christ obedient? Thus we will explore two considerations: (1) Jesus’ mission as personhood and (2) Jesus’ mission consciousness as coming from both the Father and Mary and how the Holy Spirit is the mediator of both. By developing these two considerations we will conclude that both the manner of Jesus’ coming, the reason for his coming, and his knowledge of having come are intimately wrapped up in the notion of obedience. As we will find out, Jesus IS his mission. To have a mission, to be sent, is to be obedient to the sender. If Jesus is his mission, then he is preeminently the One Sent. As such, obedience to the Father is constitutive of his very being. In this he is different than every other human being.

Consideration One: Jesus’ Mission as Personhood

In what follows, I will spell out in detail how it is that Jesus is a person with a mission. In fact, his person and mission are precisely the same thing. We will discover that the mission of the Son of God on earth is, fundamentally, an act of obedience to the Father which finds its ground in the Son’s very procession from the Father in eternity.

Being concerned about the historicity of the Christian faith Balthasar begins in
scripture and finds there the all important definition of mission as taken on by Christ

First, he asserts that the mission of Jesus is qualitatively different than the mission of any of the prophets before him.¹ Paul speaks continually of Christ “being sent” from the Father.² The persistent notion of Christ being from the Father and preexistent with the Father makes it very clear that Christ’s “being sent” is vastly different than any other Old Testament figure. This is made clear in the Parable of the Husbandmen which is told in all three synoptic Gospels.³ The following is Matthew’s account:

33 Hear another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went on a journey.
34 When vintage time drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to obtain his produce.
35 But the tenants seized the servants and one they beat, another they killed, and a third they stoned.
36 Again he sent other servants, more numerous than the first ones, but they treated them in the same way.
37 Finally, he sent his son to them, thinking, 'They will respect my son.'
38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and acquire his inheritance.'
39 They seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.
40 What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?'
41 They answered him, "He will put those wretched men to a wretched death and lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the proper times." ⁴

¹ Von Balthasar, Theodrama Vol III, 150.

² 5: Romans 8:3-4. that God sent "his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin and condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.”

³ Mt. 21, Lk. 20, and Mk. 12.

Here is a radical distinction between the servants that the landowner sent to gather the produce and the final decision the landowner made to send his own son. This is not simply a difference of rank in the sense that the servants are of a lower status than the son, the evil husbandmen understand that through the death of the son, not only will they be left alone, they will become like the landowner. They will be raised in dignity. Jesus is making a clear association here between the prophets of old (including John the Baptist) and himself. By the Father’s decision to send the Son, and by the Son’s acceptance of that mission the stakes are much higher.

The Son’s Obedience to the Father is His Mission

The notion of sending is also closely associated with the notion of coming in the sense that Jesus’ coming is to bring about an ultimate saving event in his own person. Now, if Christ is sent (passive) someone must do the sending (active). That person is clearly the Father. “The intimate relationship between the One sent and the One who sends him takes the form of obedience within the Father’s act of surrender.” This means that the Father must take responsibility for Jesus’ whole existence on earth and establishes Jesus’ purpose from the very beginning, namely, the salvation of the world. Here we see an explicit aspect of obedience. The Son in his coming obeys the Father who has sent him. Because the Father sent him, the Father must take responsibility for what is wrought in Jesus Christ. This points to the fact that the one to whom obedience is owed cannot exercise that authority arbitrarily or according to whim. He has a

5 Von Balthasar, *Theodrama Vol III*, 152 Mt 9:13, Mt. 5:17, Mt. 10:34, Lk. 12:49, etc.
6 Ibid., 153, Italics mine.
responsibility to the person who is obedient. This responsibility is, essentially, an act of love.

Not only does Jesus, being sent, have knowledge of the sender, but his knowledge of himself coincides with his knowledge of his being sent. Evidence of this arises from his own statements about his knowledge of his mission. In the Gospel of John he says, “For this reason the Father loves me because I lay down my life.” Can it be that the person of the Father loves the person of the Son from all eternity only because this person was identified with his mission? Von Balthasar’s answer is a qualified yes, because, as will be shown, Christ’s missio is a modality of His processio from the Father. This relationship of identity between missio and processio is more than simply a function of God’s omnipotence, in the sense that only God’s being can be identified with His purpose. The relationship between mission and procession is a function of what it means to be the Son of the Father. It is a function of the Logos’ identity. It is the particular way in which the Son possesses the Divine nature. The Son’s procession/mission is constitutive of his person. We will see that the conditions for the possibility of the Father surrendering Jesus is that the Father always, already exists as “having-given-himself.” Furthermore, and as a result of the previous statement, the mission of Jesus has no conceivable temporal beginning. Here von Balthasar distinguishes between Christ’s status exinanitionis (emptied state), which is his earthly incarnational being, and His status exaltationis (exalted state), which is his pre-Incarnational and post-Resurrectional

7 Ibid., 153.
8 Ibid., 156.
being. This distinction is necessary in order to identify the operation of an economic Trinity (*status exinanitionis*) which is grounded by an immanent Trinity (*status exaltationis*).

The Trouble With Person and Nature

Here it is most clear that Hans Urs von Balthasar has attempted to re-cast traditional theology. In what follows we will see a direct result of Presupposition #3 given in this dissertation’s introduction, namely his position on the relationship between philosophy and theology. He agrees with many others that the historical discussion of “persons” and “natures” is confusing and fraught with controversy. Furthermore, he attempts to navigate the difficulties by insisting that the problem is theological, *not* philosophical; that, above all, personhood must be defined theoretically if it is to actually grasp the personhood of Jesus Christ, i.e., what we have said above about mission consciousness as personhood.

His starting point is theological anthropology. All living beings “share in a specific nature that is identical in all individuals, but they do so in a way that, in each instance, is unique and incommunicable.”

Paradoxically, while a given species is inclusive, the individuals who comprise that species are exclusive. A human being knows *that* he or she is human, but do they know *who* they are? Too often in the response to the question “who are you?” a mere list of family and place names or occupations is given. But these answers merely comprise a sketch of “whatness”. This is

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9 Ibid., 204.
10 Ibid., 204.
to say that under that particular definition this individual raised under different circumstances would become a being altogether different.

In addition to von Balthasar’s other well known sources (i.e. Patristics, the mystical experience of von Speyr, art, and literature), particularly important to our present task is the influence of various strains of contemporary German psychology. While he was still a doctoral student, Balthasar came to know the Christianized psychology of the Catholic convert Rudolf Allers. It was Allers who persuaded him that, while roles are vital to the identification of selfhood, this identity is not simply the summation of roles. It was thus that our theologian developed a theological anthropology that places a great deal of weight on the human person’s ability and desire to play his role but only against the backdrop of his God-given mission.11

Another way of answering the question “who are you?” is what von Balthasar calls the interpersonal path. This is the way a human comes to know himself by his relationships with others. Do these others regard him as a person of value, or contempt, etc.? In this case one’s identity is trapped in provisional relationships that could be improved or withdrawn completely. Balthasar points out that due to this entrapment there is no need “in this complementarity of the generic and the individual” to introduce the concept of person.12 What we need is a way to concretely establish the individuality of a particular human nature that is not as subject to the arbitrariness of human relationships. This is where presupposition #2 in this dissertation’s introduction cashes

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out. Only by being given a mission from God does a given instance of human nature become a person.

Others can claim to be persons only in virtue of a relationship with (Jesus) and in dependence on him. In the case of other persons, we cannot speak of an identity between the “I” and the mission, as it exists in Jesus; but we can say that their conscious subjects are endowed with a part or aspect of his universal mission.\(^{13}\)

**Person as a God-given identity**

Not the *what* but, rather, the *who* of the conscious subject is insecure. The above answers to this question are no guarantee that this individual and unique *who* is not perennially in danger of being sacrificed for the sake of some larger totality.\(^{14}\) In other words, individuality is always at risk of being subsumed by generality. The only guarantee (or rather guarantor) of *who-ness* is the Absolute Subject, God.\(^{15}\) As we saw in Presupposition #2, when God addresses a conscious subject and imparts to the subject a mission, that being becomes a *person*. In the case of Jesus Christ, not only is he given a mission, but he *is* his mission. This complete unity between mission and existence can only be manifested by Divinity. God the Father addresses the Son as God and begets Him as Divine Mission. By the fact of the Son’s generation he is obedient to the Father within the Father’s act of begetting (remember, the mission of the Son has no conceivable temporal beginning). The Son’s mission is a modality of his procession. The Father, in generating the Son, gives him his mission, the Son, in turn is obedient to the Father’s

\(^{13}\text{Ibid., 207.}\)

\(^{14}\text{Ibid.}\)

\(^{15}\text{Ibid.}\)
commission; therefore Jesus Christ is a person.

As we have already discussed, von Balthasar points out the failure of the history of philosophy to truly describe the relationship between nature and person. He puts forth the view that, first of all, the historical discussion of persons and natures is confusing and fraught with controversy. He cites the prevailing scholastic formula of *Persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia* (The person is an individual substance of a rational nature) is a definition that leaves us unfortunately caught between the general and the particular. Von Balthasar posits that if this were the case then, in violation of Chalcedonian Christology, Christ must have a human person because, by all appearances, Jesus operates as a unique, individual, and incommunicable human. Furthermore, as we mentioned above, he states that the problem is theological, not philosophical:

> All these speculative endeavors to distinguish philosophically the concept of the person from that of the conscious subject are nugatory if the task before us is to define theologically the personal being of Christ (and hence the personal being of others in Christ).

By “theologically” von Balthasar means that the solution to this problem must be based

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16 It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to treat the history of the development of person and nature regarding Jesus Christ. Please see Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition I: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon* (London/Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975).

17 A definition given to us, famously, by Boethius.

18 The tension between the “general and the particular” runs throughout von Balthasar’s theology and will be explained later on in this dissertation.

upon divinely revealed truth, not on human reason, nor even on reason’s reflection on revealed truth. This is an interesting and highly nuanced position to take concerning not only the data of both reason and revelation, but also how it is we come to know this data. Only God can define a conscious subject in its qualitative uniqueness. To arrive at a theological conclusion regarding the person of Jesus Christ is beyond the competency of philosophy.

So, in order to explicate precisely what theological personhood is, our theologian turns to the archetypal instance in which God bestowed on a subject the two things that mark true personhood: (1) who a subject is, and (2) why that subject is there. In Jesus of Nazareth, the archetypal instance, these two marks of personhood are identical.

This is what distinguishes him from other subjects who have thus been personalized by being given a mission (like the prophet). Jesus acts accordingly; he does not communicate a divine plan but speaks as the personal Word of God. In Christo, however, every man can cherish the hope of not remaining a merely individual conscious subject but of receiving personhood from God, becoming a person, with a mission that is likewise defined In Christo.20

The Natures of Christ: Analogia Entis and mission consciousness

Now our theologian addresses the question of Christ’s natures. Between human and divine nature there is a great abyss. As the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 said, any similarity between God and creation only discloses a greater dissimilarity. “The fact that the person of Jesus Christ bridges this abyss without harm to his unity should render us speechless in the presence of the mystery of his person.”21 This is the Analogia Entis, one

20 Ibid., 220.

21 Ibid.
of the most fundamental concepts used in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Jesus Christ cannot be humanized to the point of reducing his divinity nor divinized to the point of reducing his humanity. Both extremes would destroy all soteriology. The paradox of the analogy of being must be constantly affirmed. Since it is the Divine Person of the Logos who took to himself a human nature it must be that Person which is the embodiment of the *Analogia Entis*. It is only possible to posit qualities of the one nature to the other because they are unified by Person, not by nature. The divine person of the Logos assures that the divine and human natures are undivided and unconfused.

The union of the two natures has often been explained in terms of either the human nature being lifted up into the divine nature, or the divine nature condescending to the human nature. How can this be possible given that anything these two natures have in common only disclose a greater dissimilarity, according to the definition of *Analogia Entis* given at the Lateran IV? This can best be done by the explanation that Jesus experiences his human consciousness entirely in terms of mission. Not only does God wish to take the part of sinners, but God wishes to reveal all of His attributes as well: anger, grief, weariness, etc. Jesus Christ simultaneously brings to light the truth of humanity and the truth of humanity as God sees it. But this happens concomitantly

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22 Ibid., 221.
23 Ibid., 222.
24 Ibid., 224.
25 Ibid., 225.
26 Ibid.
with Jesus’ primary duty, which is not to give himself as the highest example of the human species, but only to do the Father’s will. As we have indicated above: Christ was sent to obey.

The next point of *Analogia Entis* is that Jesus reveals God at the behest of the Father *not* the Trinity. His mission was given to him by the Father and he is empowered by the Holy Spirit. But this does not limit Christ’s freedom. He knows he must live for his mission to be totally free. Balthasar compares Christ’s freedom to an artist who is compelled to create works of art yet is never so free as when he does. Again, Balthasar insists that Jesus’ personal freedom is identical with his mission *which has no conceivable beginning.* “There is no intervening factor between his acceptance of the Father’s mission and the decision to send him.”

Here our theologian takes up the issue of *Theopaschism:* the idea that one of the Trinity has suffered. If it is possible that one of the Persons of the Godhead accepted suffering and death to the point of God-forsakenness than it is not something foreign for God to feel; because, as indicated above, Christ’s being sent by the Father is a modality of his proceeding from the Father. The kenosis affects Him as Eternal Son of the Father

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
31 Ibid., 226.
32 Ibid.
not merely as the human Jesus. But one still cannot posit an alteration in God. Rather the Kenosis is one of the infinite possibilities available to free, eternal life. Any human experience of feeling is included and transcended in what it means to be God. The Son “lays up” and gives to the Father’s keeping the “form of God” he has received from him. The result is that Christ is forsaken by the Father on the Cross due to this infinite distance.\textsuperscript{33} This very infinite distance, the \textit{Analogia Entis}, recapitulates the sinner’s mode of alienation from God.\textsuperscript{34}

\textbf{A reinterpretation using obedience}

We must now explicate a phenomenology of obedience based upon the above. One ought to keep in mind that we are trying to explore a notion of obedience that can be used as a heuristic device to better understand the von Balthasarian corpus. In the following, I will interpret the above difficulty with the terms person and nature through the lens of obedience. In such a way, we will come to a better understanding of the foregoing.

First, the posture of the Son to the Father from eternity is a posture of obedience. According to von Balthasar, this establishes the necessity of obedience in the created order. Obedience to something by someone will always be necessary as this is the order of the cosmos. Understanding that the Son is obedient to the Father from all eternity is fundamental for this dissertation and will be the primary topic of chapter two. As such, in Jesus’ case, his very awareness of his personhood comes to him as a mode of

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 228.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 228.
obedience both in his *status exaltationis* and his *status exinanitionis*.

Secondly, the Son obeys the Father out of the Father’s act of surrender. This act of surrender is the very procession of the Son. This is Balthasar’s “super-kenosis” of the Father, wherein the Father gives all the Father is in generating the Son. What this tells us is that the condition whereby the Son obeys the Father is that the Father has always and completely given himself to the Son. Thus, even in obedience the Son is equal to the Father in dignity and glory. In this case, obedience plays itself out between two equal parties, thereby preserving the co-eternity of the Son and the Father. Along with the Father’s sending is the Son’s acceptance of the mission, an acceptance that does not imply meekness but, rather, the exercise of true freedom.

Thirdly, The mediating function of the Holy Spirit provides the space for freedom of expression within the Son’s act of obedience. The Holy Spirit is the love between Father and Son whereby obedience can be exercised creatively. Obedience sets up boundaries that provide the conditions for the possibility of freedom and choice to be exercised. I will save the precise explication of how the Holy Spirit does this for chapter two on the intra-Trinitarian obediential relations; for now it will suffice to say that the Spirit operates *over* Jesus as “that-which-needs-to-be-obeyed,” but also operates *in* Jesus as the “freedom-to-be-obedient.” Because of this Jesus will not be paralyzed by inaction due to lack of direction. Seen in this way, obedience is a mode of freedom.

Seen in this light, Jesus’ existence in and for his mission is an unconditional existence in *poverty, chastity, and obedience*, insofar as these three modes of life guarantee exclusive freedom for mission, a mission that is not given once for all but is revealed and can be realized in a new and surprising way by the Holy Spirit at every moment. These
modes of life interpenetrate; chastity is a form of poverty, and poverty facilitates and is a form of obedience…

Von Balthasar gives us further nuance on the topic of the evangelical councils when he states that the vow of obedience is, in fact, the highest vow because it contains the other two:

Since the Lord redeemed the world by his perfect and loving obedience (Phil 2:7), and since, in the state of the counsels, all that is promised is contained in the vow of obedience, the vow of total obedience would seem to be the preeminent form of participation in the redemption, in the continuation of the obedience of the Cross.

More will be said regarding our obligation to obey in the third chapter on obediential love and at the end of the fourth chapter when we consider obedience to the Marian Church.

Consideration Two: Jesus' Mission Consciousness as Coming from the Father and Mary and Mediated by the Holy Spirit

Jesus’ knowledge is knowledge of mission. It is impossible to posit that the Father would use the death of the Son to reconcile the world if the One who died was unaware of its significance. Jesus Christ is one with his mission as the One Sent. This means that in the human consciousness of Jesus there must be something that goes beyond the limits of normal human understanding if his mission is to have universal

35 Ibid., 182.
36 Von Balthasar, the Christian State of Life, 255.
37 Von Balthasar, Theodrama vol III, 164.
significance. Everything in Christ, his mind, intelligence and free will is oriented
towards mission because, as we have said above, mission is a modality of his procession
which has become humanly expressible by virtue of the hypostatic union. Balthasar
posits this mission-consciousness to such an extent that it replaces the Beatific Vision.
He states that Christ has no vision of the Father but rather receives this mission via the
Holy Spirit. The awareness of his mission is indirect vis-à-vis the Father.

Balthasar states that Jesus’ prayer life is essential in the performance of his
mission. Through prayer Jesus receives knowledge of the various stages of His mission.
Quite apparently, he does not know these stages in their entirety but they are to be
implemented step by step according to the Father’s instructions. This, von Balthasar
insists, brings one to speak of the “faith” of Jesus. He admits that one must be very
careful in positing faith in the Savior. This refers to Balthasar’s exposition on
anthropology and personhood. The conscious subject receives his mission by coming to
faith (much more will be said on this later); but Jesus Christ has always had, and indeed
is, his mission. In the performance of his mission he utterly abandons himself in
obedience to the Father who guides him and in whom the Son has complete trust. Such is
the faith of Jesus.

Here von Balthasar takes up a position against Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas insists

38 Ibid., 166.

39 To be explained further in chapter two.

40 Ibid., 170.

41 Ibid., 171.
that Jesus Christ was never taught anything because it would be beneath his dignity.\textsuperscript{38} Rather, Christ learned by reflecting upon nature directly and refused any mediatory information. However, if Christ's mission (and hence his innermost concern) is as divine and eternal as the God and Father who sends him, the Person of Christ must be as eternal as the Father's purpose and decision. In that case, in the absence of any other instance, it is not clear how the Incarnate One can receive and execute the knowledge to make this decision in pure obedience: for, just as eternally, it is his own decision too. If we are to understand this, we must first start with the purely human conscious subject.\textsuperscript{43}

Balthasar now speaks out of the benefit of modern psychology. “Unless a child is awakened to I-consciousness through the instrumentality of a Thou, it cannot become a human child at all.\textsuperscript{44} A fundamental aspect of his Mariology is inserted here. In Christ’s case, as has already been shown, his I-consciousness is identical with his mission-consciousness. If it requires a Thou to awaken an I-consciousness then, in Jesus’ case, the Thou (Mary) would have to have a truly special relationship with him. However, it is not appropriate to say that Jesus came to know his mission from any outside source because it, being identical with his being, would have had no conceivable beginning. All that would be necessary is an initial awakening of his mission-consciousness.\textsuperscript{45} This would have been easily caused by Mary imparting to the Child the

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 174.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 174.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 510.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 175.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 176.
religious traditions that looked toward the fulfillment of Israel’s hope. This awakening could only be done by Mary, for only she would be able to impart a pure and infallible understanding of the faith, being without sin and completely docile to the Spirit.  

In this way we can understand why even Jesus prays, leaving room for the operation of the Holy Spirit, who shows him the Father's will, which is his mission. The Spirit presents him with the Father's will in ever-new ways and with ever-greater clarity, even though he already has this will within him in the form of his readiness to obey.

Before we proceed to chapter two, let us review where we have gone thus far. In our first consideration we discussed Jesus' mission as personhood. There we discovered that Jesus mission on earth is exclusively a modality of his procession from the Father in all eternity. In a manner analogous to the way which God gives each of us our mission, the Son is given His mission by the Father and is thus begotten of the Father. The category of obedience helps us understand this difficult point by pointing out that we can talk about the very procession of the Son from the Father as personalized obedience itself. In other words, unconventionally, we see, our theologian inserting obedience into the very procession of the Son from the Father, he personalizes the procession by pointing to its obediential character. But for the Son to obey, it first belongs to the Father to give himself completely to the Son. I have mentioned this above, but more will be said about it in the next chapter.

46 Ibid., 175-176.

47 Ibid., 510.
Our second consideration concerning the manner in which Jesus was awakened to his mission consciousness we learned that the only way that he could discover and perform his mission is by being docile to spirit acting both in him and on him and by obedience to Mary who was commissioned to impart to him a faithful understanding of the Jewish messianic tradition.
CHAPTER TWO
TRINITARIAN OBEDIENCE

Where We Have Been and Where We Are Going

We began this treatment of von Balthasar’s theology of obedience with his Christology because it is only in Christ that God is revealed as Triune. The Christian faith understands plurality in God only on the basis of Jesus Christ’s own behavior and attitude. In Jesus Christ alone is the Trinity opened up and made accessible. This provides a decisive vindication of a defining principle for von Balthasar, namely, that theological persons cannot be defined in isolation from their dramatic action. We know about the Father, Son and Spirit, as divine ‘persons’ only in and through the figure and disposition of Jesus Christ. Thus we can agree with the principle...”that it is only on the basis of the economic Trinity that we can have knowledge of the immanent Trinity and dare to make statements about it.” And again

As we penetrate the consciousness of Jesus - as it expresses itself in his words and deeds, in his unique claim and his humble submission - we encounter the radiance of the mystery of his own divinity and of God’s self-subsistent tri-personality. And the concept that includes both is that of 'mission.'

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1 Ibid., 508.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 508.
4 Ibid., 515.
So, phenomenologically speaking, we could not discuss obedience within the intra-Trinitarian processions before we spelled out obedience in the one who revealed the Tri-Personal God, namely, Jesus Christ. However, as we pointed out above at some length, Jesus Christ could only behave as he did because his mission is a modality of his very procession from the Father. Jesus Christ is obedient to death on the cross only to the extent that the Son is obedient to the Father from all eternity. So now we will turn to von Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology to find out how obedience works within the eternal relations of the Trinity itself.

Two fundamental considerations must be discussed: (1) How can it be said that the Father requires the Son’s obedience, here will be discussed von Balthasar’s theology of super-kenosis; and (2) What is the role of the Spirit in the Son’s obedience to the Father. This second consideration will deal primarily with von Balthasar’s notion of Trinitarian inversion. By dwelling on these two considerations, we will discover the role that each Person of the Trinity plays when we view the intra-Trinitarian processions from the vector of obedience. Specifically, the role the Father plays is, of course, the one who must be obeyed, but only to the extent that He has surrendered everything to the Son; thus establishing the virtue of humility as essential to the person who is obeyed. The Son is obedience itself. From all eternity he is the one whose freedom is defined as being what the Father wishes. The Holy Spirit’s role in this is necessarily twofold: (1) the Spirit is the Father’s Divine commanding, and (2) the Spirit is the Son’s availability or
indifference\textsuperscript{5} to the Father’s command. After discussing the processions in this way, we will end this chapter with a fairly lengthy demonstration of my thesis to this point, i.e. that a comprehensive understanding of von Balthasar’s entire corpus could be better achieved by familiarizing oneself with the role of obedience in his theology. Toward that end, I will take Guy Mansini’s well-known article “von Balthasar and the Theodramatic Enrichment of the Trinity”\textsuperscript{6} and argue that, had Mansini given more consideration to von Balthasar’s theology of obedience, he would have much less to criticize.

The primary task of this chapter is to demonstrate the absolutely fundamental role obedience plays within the very constitution of the Trinity itself. As I mentioned above, the two constitutive elements that will have the most bearing on the topic of obedience is von Balthasar’s understanding of \textit{superkenosis} and Trinitarian inversion. Having said that, one will notice that the section responding to Mansini comprises the bulk of this chapter; this is so because I think that the main thesis of this chapter is better demonstrated by responding to the concerns of a noted theologian whose critiques represent the fairly mainstream arguments against von Balthasar’s Triadology.

\textsuperscript{5} The word “indifference” in this case does not mean that the Son is indifferent to the Father, but, rather that the Son is indifferent to the commands of the Father in the sense that the Son stands ready to do the will of the Father whatever that will may be. Now, within the intra-Trinitarian processions, the will of the Father is simply that the Son is begotten.

Consideration One: How Can it be Said that the Father Requires the Son’s Obedience—Answer: Superkenosis

According to von Balthasar, the ground of Trinitarian life is the Super-Kenos of the Father. Borrowing a term from St. Thomas Aquinas, this is the Father's notional act⁷, or the "event-like" attribute of the Father's person which necessitates the relationship he has with the other two Persons of the Trinity.

However, separating himself from classical scholasticism, von Balthasar insists that saying that the ground of the procession of the Son is the Father's innascibility does nothing to indicate why the First Person of the Trinity must generate a second. Innascibility does not make the Father necessarily self-diffusive of his own substance, which, according to the Eleventh Council of Toledo, the Father must be:

He is therefore the source and origin of the whole Godhead. He himself of his own essence is the Father, who in an ineffable way has begotten the Son from his ineffable substance. Yet he did not beget something different from what he himself is: God has begotten God...⁸

Therefore our theologian says we must:

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⁷ ST Pt. I, Q.41, Art.1: “I answer that, In the divine persons distinction is founded on origin. But origin can be properly designated only by certain acts. Wherefore, to signify the order of origin in the divine persons, we must attribute notional acts to the persons.

Reply Obj. 1 Every origin is designated by an act. In God there is a twofold order of origin: one, forasmuch as the creature proceeds from Him,… belongs to His essence. Another order of origin in God regards the procession of person from person; wherefore the acts which designate the order of this origin are called notional; because the notions of the persons are the mutual relations of the persons…”.

discern the meaning of "fatherhood" in the eternal realm when we consider the Son's task, which is to reveal the Father's love...: such "fatherhood" can only mean the giving away of everything the Father is, including his entire Godhead (for God, as God, "has" nothing apart from what he "is"); it is a giving-away that, in the Father's act of generation - which lasts for all eternity - leaves the latter's womb "empty": in God, poverty and wealth (that is, wealth of giving) are one and the same.  

Von Balthasar postulates that the separation (Cross and descent into Hell) and union (Resurrection and Ascension) of the paschal event are grounded in the separation and union within the eternal intra-Trinitarian event of divine life, where the Father does not cling to his divinity, but "in an eternal super-kenosis, makes himself destitute of all that he is and can be so as to bring forth a consubstantial divinity, the Son." He recognizes that in this primordial "separation" of God from God, lies, from all eternity, the space for all the contingencies of human freedom. This intra-Trinitarian event of God's love always and already contains within it the infinite distinction and distance within unity that grounds all the modalities of obedience and love, of compassion, and even of separation motivated by love and all the risks inherent in the creation of truly free human beings. This super-kenosis of the Father is the property of the Father that grounds both of the other processions. The Father exists as self-diffusive. The Father possesses the divine essence as “Given.” He is given in the sense that the Father is the one who gives Himself completely and totally, once and for all, in an eternal “now.”

What the Father gives the Son in generating him is the perfect, indivisible Godhead, which he, the Father, possesses. But the Father possesses it insofar as he begets before thinking about it; he possesses it only as given away...he

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9 Von Balthasar, Theodrama Vol III, 518.

10 Ibid.
remains eternal Father only insofar as he has eternally given over to the Son all that is his, including his divinity. The same applies analogously, to the Father and the Son in connection with the production of the Holy Spirit, who otherwise could not be the coeternal God.¹¹

So the Father’s notional act, the event-like attribute that defines the way a particular person of the Trinity possesses the divine essence, that grounds the begetting of the Son is not the Father’s innascability, but, rather, the fact that he exists as given in the way mentioned above.

Thus we have the answer to our first question; how can it be said that the Father requires the Son’s obedience? The Son obeys the Father out of the Father’s act of surrender. The Son quite literally owes his very personhood to the Father’s being given to him by the Father’s own self. How can this be and where is obedience in this?

In his recent article,¹² Bruce Marshall, in a generally critical analysis of von Balthasar’s super-kenosis, says that von Balthasar is not satisfied to say with the scholastics that the human obedience and kenosis of the Son to the Father is enough to effect our redemption but, rather:

In order to be adequately “grounded” in God, or to have sufficient saving depth, the economic event of the Son’s human obedience, his kenosis as a human being, must manifest a preexisting kenosis which belongs to the Son as God. It is not yet enough, moreover, to see the kenotic event in God as only the free decision of Father, Son and Spirit that the Son will assume human flesh and death for our salvation. The only adequate ground of the Son’s human obedience is a kenosis which just goes with


being the eternal Son, a kenosis interior to the very procession by which he exists as a person distinct from the Father.\textsuperscript{13}

This super-kenosis thus has two poles, on the one side is the Father completely given to the Son, and on the other side is the Son allowing himself to be begotten. The Father is the initiator, while the Son remains an active participant. Recall that in the Introduction to the dissertation, in our presupposition two on mission as a basic concept, we outlined precisely these two poles as the necessary features of having a mission: (1) that it is given to you by someone else, and (2) that it is performed within the freedom of the one commissioned.

In von Balthasar’s explanation of the procession by which the Son is “filiated” we can see the absolute ground and foundation of what it means to have a mission, and that this mission is constitutive of personhood. The very person of the Son receives this personhood from the Father, but also, from all eternity, freely agrees to be filiated.

Additionally, inherent in this procession is not only a fundamental unity, but, also a distance since it is a true procession, a true “going-out-from”, the distance between the two poles of Father and Son is the ground, the condition for the possibility of the Incarnation, Cross, and descent into hell. So, in Jesus Christ’s status exinanitionis he experiences the will of the Father in two ways, both of which correspond to obedience: (1) he obeys the Father’s will out of love because he and the Father are so closely unified, and (2) he obeys the Father’s command when the Father’s “love hides and formalizes

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 26-27.
himself into a purely demanding will.”14 Here we see that obedience out of love, i.e. the kind of obedience given to someone to whom you are closely unified is only a different side of the same coin as the kind of obedience which results from a docile attitude toward a demanding will. The kind of self-sacrificial love shown to us by Jesus Christ insists that both of these kinds of obedience must be given to the beloved depending upon what the beloved requires.

Now the kind of obedience shown here will become clearer further on in this dissertation, but we can say something about it now. The kind of love that the Father shows the Son in giving over the divine essence so completely is, essentially, self-sacrificial love; the analogous form of self-sacrificial love that Christ will show us on the Cross: “I do only what I see my Father doing.” In our third chapter on obediential love we will discover that this form of love is a modality of obedience.

**Consideration Two: The Role of the Spirit – Answer: Trinitarian Inversion**

Our theologian has developed a term called *Trinitarian Inversion*. This is the notion that in Christ’s *status exinanitionis* the traditional order of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) is somehow “switched” to become Father, Holy Spirit, Son.

In the freedom whereby he affirms his mission, the obedient Son can be completely one with the Father who freely sends him. But at the point of distinction between the Father’s purpose and the Son’s obedience, we discern an essential poise, an essential communication between Father and Son, which can only be the operation of the Holy Spirit.15

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He means simply this: that in all creedal formulas, Christ’s Incarnation was not done by his own power, but rather he was a passive\(^\text{16}\) agent to the activity of the Holy Spirit as guided by the Father. As a result, the Incarnate Logos is brought forth by the action of the Holy Spirit overshadowing the Blessed Virgin, while within the Trinity Itself, the Spirit is brought forth by the Father and the Son. Not only at the moment of Incarnation does this inversion exist, but also throughout Jesus’ earthly life. Scripture testifies often to the mediational role that the Spirit takes in reference to the Father and the Son.\(^\text{17}\)

In this subsection we will explore in greater depth the ramifications of Trinitarian inversion and its fundamental role in determining the kind of obedience Jesus Christ shows the Father. In doing this we will discover that the operation of the Spirit during Jesus’ earthly ministry is, in fact, a function of obedience, and that viewing it as such renders an admittedly difficult subject more understandable.

As shown at length above, we cannot say that Jesus Christ obeys as a man but does not obey in his divinity. He obeys in both of His natures because obedience is meaningful and necessary in both natures.\(^\text{18}\) In the economy, we see this obedience as an operation of the Spirit.

The Spirit operates in two ways during Jesus’ earthly ministry: (1) on Jesus, and (2) in Jesus. The first is an economic expression of the Logos’ immanent procession

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\(^{16}\) I use the word “passive” here to indicate simply that, by the language of our creedal formulae, it seems that the Holy Spirit was that active agent. Later on, in chapter four, we will see that passivity, in this case, is actually “active receptivity” which is a notion discussed briefly in the Introduction to this dissertation.


from the Father, the second is the economic form of the *filioque*. In what follows, we must continue to keep in mind our two-fold constitutive elements of being given a mission, and, thus, being a person.

If Jesus is to be obedient to the Father during his earthly ministry he must let the Father’s Spirit take the lead. He must be docile to the Father’s Spirit. However, if the Son is to possess the freedom necessary for this act to be salvific, the Spirit that proceeds from him, the Son, is to be in harmony with the Father. This is essential if Jesus’ obedience is to be always spontaneous, filial obedience and if his Yes to the Father is ultimately, that is, at the divine level, to rest on the equal-ranking initiative, now transformed into an indifference that is ready to embrace whatever the Father wills. The Son’s availability is such that it in no way preempts the Father’s will; rather, it leaves the Father complete freedom to take any direction he wishes and is ready to accept it as the direct, the newest expression of his will.  

Recall, once again, the two defining characteristics of what it means to receive a mission: (1) that it be given by another, and (2) that it be acted out in freedom. Here you can see that the Spirit’s primary function during Christ’s *status exinanitionis* is to exercise both of these roles: the one is over Jesus, the other is in Jesus. The immanent Trinitarian ground for this economic expression is that the Spirit’s authority over Jesus is by virtue of the Spirit’s procession *a Patre* while the Spirit’s action in Jesus is by virtue of the Spirit’s procession *filioque*.

**An Attempt at Application: Mansini on von Balthasar: The World’s enrichment of the Divine**

Now, the time has come to offer a case study of how attending properly to the role
obedience plays in von Balthasar’s theology will lead one to come to a different, more precise, conclusion regarding a specific point of conflict one might have with von Balthasar’s work. The key thesis of this dissertation is to show that a reading of von Balthasar’s literary corpus can be rendered more understandable if one attends to the role obedience plays in his theology. In other words, the category of obedience can be used as a heuristic device for systematizing his theology.

In what follows, I will take a well-known article by Guy Mansini20 critiquing von Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology and show that, if Mansini had approached von Balthasar’s theology from the vector of obedience he may have had much less to critique. My goal in this section is to demonstrate that Mansini misunderstands the Super-kenosis because he views it terms of materialistic and ontic categories, instead of categories that emphasize obedience and love. He does this because he fails to properly attend to the dramatic aspect of von Balthasar’s theology.

We will discover that Von Balthasar says precisely the same thing that St. Thomas Aquinas says regarding the Divine intelligence, i.e., what does the Divinity know about us? It is just that von Balthasar does not approach the question from the vector of knowing, but rather, loving. Love is a modality of obedience (which I will demonstrate in chapter three), as such we will understand von Balthasar’s position more precisely by viewing it from the vector of Divine obedience and not, as Mansini does, from the vector of Divine Intelligence.

Mansini begins his criticism of our theologian by stating his similarities with the

traditionally safe theology of Thomas Aquinas. The questions are: How does God understand us, does God know and love us, and does he do this without prejudice to his transcendence? Regarding St. Thomas Aquinas, Mansini says:

Saint Thomas’ understanding (of the foregoing questions) is as follows. The primary object of divine understanding, which is an infinite act of understanding, is the divine intelligibility, an infinite object. Finite intelligibility is a partial imitation of the divine intelligibility. In understanding himself, God necessarily understands all possible ways he can be and is imitated. Such understanding adds nothing to what he already understands – himself; nor would the absence of such understanding deprive God of anything he in fact has.

Therefore, God’s understanding of the contingent world is enfolded within, and secondary to, his understanding of himself, so, similarly, for von Balthasar the Father’s gift of the creation of the universe is already contained in his always-surpassing gift of himself to the Son which constitutes the Son’s begetting. Thus, for both the Father and the Son, if the world did not exist, that would be no diminution of the knowledge of God nor the ever-increasing richness of the personal intra-Trinitarian exchanges. In this regard, the world is a non-necessary way that the persons within the Trinity actually increase one another.

The formal similarity of Balthasar to Thomas, says Mansini, is that both integrate a divine act relative to a finite reality into a divine act relative to a divine reality. However, Mansini has great difficulty with the following quote from the last words of

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21 Ibid., 514.

22 Ibid. Mansini’s source for this is the Summa Theologiae I,q.7,a.3; q. 14, a.4.

23 Ibid., 515.
What does God gain from the world? An additional gift, given to the Son by the Father, but equally a gift made by the Son to the Father, and by the Spirit to both. It is a gift because, through the distinct operations of each of the three Persons, the world acquires an inward share in the divine exchange of life; as a result the world is able to take the divine things it has received from God, together with the gift of being created, and return them to God as a divine Gift.²⁴

What von Balthasar seems to be saying is that in the created finite’s action of being drawn into the Trinitarian life, God receives not only createdness, itself a gift of God, but also an additional gift which is to be understood as an ever greater giving back to God the gift of God’s own love which the gift receives in taking part in the divine conversation. But here is the important part, since this additional gift is a divine gift; any increase implied by its being given to God by created freedom is situated within the already internal increase in God; specifically, within the increase due to the Son’s ever greater self-gift to the Father. Mansini’s difficulty is that he does not see how the world can be distinct from God and yet be generated within the first or second processions. The processions distinguish persons within a single nature, not distinguish natures.²⁵

In classical Thomistic style, Mansini offers this correction to what he terms as Balthasar’s confusion. That which accounts for the distinction of the world from God is not that the world is generated in the generation of the Son or in any other relation ad intra but that the distinction between the world and the generation of the Son is


²⁵ Mansini. 513. Here he is giving the argument of Thomas Dalzell in his work Dramatic Encounter, 210.
understood and willed to be distinct. Knowing and willing are common to all three persons. Thus, Mansini argues, St. Thomas’s teaching does not suggest the note of efficiency that von Balthasar’s does and, additionally, the distinction pointed out by Aquinas is the only way that the distinction between *ad extra* and *ad intra* is preserved.26

Mansini rightly places Balthasar’s theology in that modern dilemma of “choosing between the God of the philosophers and the God of myth.”27 A God involved in the world and acts and reacts as an actor within the world drama is mythic. However, a transcendent divinity, accepted in purely philosophical terms seems religiously inadequate.28 These two ways of viewing God demand the following questions (1) Is God plus the world more than God is in God’s self? And (2) if we believe in the static God of classical western philosophy, do we matter to God? Are we and our freedom real? Von Balthasar seeks to bridge these two by showing how the world is included within the Trinitarian relations. If creation really does matter to God, if created freedom can really dialogue with God, if the Christ-Event can affect the interior life of God, then “the reality of God must be such as to be an ever more increasing event of Trinitarian exchanges.”29 The world is not located outside God, and relative to the immutable,

26 Ibid., 516.

27 Ibid., 502. In this he actually is quoting v.B. himself.

28 By way of illustration, years ago my spiritual director and professor of modern philosophy, commenting on why there is such a high attrition rate among Catholic seminarians in the early years of their formation once told me, “Young seminarians are disillusioned when they are forced to affirm that God is ipsum esse subsistens when all they want to do is love the Baby Jesus.”

29 Mansini, 508.
impassionate, and eternal divinity of God, for in that way it can never be said that the world matters to God in any relevant way.\textsuperscript{30} Rather the world must be located, not in divinity as such, but within the personal relations of the Trinity itself. In this way alone, according to von Balthasar, can we say that the economy really affects something in God in that the economy can, perhaps, influence God in some way, but not exercise causal force; and say at the same time that, since this effect would exist anyway, God remains transcendent in the way required by philosophy.\textsuperscript{31}

As we have already discussed at some length, Christ is sent in such a fundamental and absolute way that his mission coincides with his person, so that both, taken together, constitute God’s exhaustive self-communication.\textsuperscript{32} This sending can be understood by the term “distance,” particularly in view of the Cross. On the cross, including the descent into hell, the full distance of the Father from the Son is revealed. The Holy Spirit who continues to unite them does so in a way which appears precisely as this distance.\textsuperscript{33} This distance, so visible to us on the cross, contains the presupposition of an infinitely larger distance between Father and Son, i.e. processio.

It is only from the Cross and in the context of the Son’s forsakenness that the latter’s distance from the Father is fully revealed; when the unity

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 509.

\textsuperscript{32} Balthasar, Theodrama vol III, 150.

\textsuperscript{33} See the material on Trinitarian inversion above. The Spirit appears to exist alternately procedit a patre or filioque separately during Christ’s emptied state.
between them is exposed the uniting spirit, their “We” actually appears in
the form of mere distance.\textsuperscript{34}

The Father’s generation of the Son within the Trinity can be characterized as the first
divine kenosis which underlies everything else. In it we see the utter self-giving of the
Father to the Son. The Father lets go of his divinity, empties his own being in the
generation of the Son.\textsuperscript{35} The absolute otherness of the Father from the Son is eternally
held open and eternally bridged by their common Spirit.\textsuperscript{36}

The phrase “the Father’s act of surrender,” however, discloses the difficulty with
von Balthasar’s identification of Christ’s missio with his processio. This difficulty is, of
course, the notion of the super-kenosis of the Father. As von Balthasar states:

\begin{quote}
Inherent in the Father’s love is an absolute renunciation; he will not be
God for himself alone. He lets go of his divinity and, in this sense,
manifests a (divine) Godlessness (of love, of course). The latter must not
be confused with the godlessness that is found within the world, although
it undergirds it, renders it possible and goes beyond it.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

And again,

\begin{quote}
God the Father can give his divinity away in such a manner that it is not
merely “lent” to the Son; the Son’s possession of it is “equally
substantial.” This implies such an incomprehensible and unique
“separation” of God from himself that it includes and grounds every other
separation – be it ever so dark and bitter.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory: Volume IV: The

\textsuperscript{35} Gerald F. O’Hanlon, S.J., \textit{The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} Von Balthasar, \textit{Theodrama: Volume IV}, 323-324.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 325.
Taken on the understanding of these passages alone, Bertrand de Margerie\textsuperscript{39} points out that von Balthasar must be ignoring the condemnation of Joachim of Fiore in the Fourth Lateran Council. The words of that council are as follows:

No one can say that the Father has transferred his substance to the Son in begetting him, as if he had given it to the Son without keeping it himself; in that case it would have ceased to be substance. It is therefore clear that the Son in being begotten has received without any diminution the substance of the Father and thus the Father and the Son have the same substance.\textsuperscript{40}

According to this dogmatic statement, a statement that I believe von Balthasar would not wish to contradict, there can be no talk of the Father giving anything that he does not also keep for himself. De Margerie insists that von Balthasar has unwittingly fallen into a conception of Divinity that is overly materialistic.\textsuperscript{41} The Father, in generating the Son, does not lose his omniscience, or knowledge of himself.\textsuperscript{42} Furthermore, Margerie reasons, John’s Gospel and the Catholic faith are diametrically opposed to speaking of the Father and the Son in terms of separation and distance, even during the passion. Even on the cross there is in God and between the Persons of God infinitely more interrelation and interpersonality than between human persons; and this because of their ineffable

\textsuperscript{39} Bertrand de Margerie, “Note on Balthasar’s Trinitarian Theology” *The Thomist.* 64 (2000): 127-130.

\textsuperscript{40} David Liberto, ed., *A Trinitarian Reader.* (New Orleans: Notre Dame Seminary, 2003), 206-207.

\textsuperscript{41} I humbly disagree with de Margerie on this point. Please reference the following section regarding Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology. Von Balthasar is not overly materialistic, but merely suitably phenomenological in his approach.

\textsuperscript{42} de Margerie. 128.
If this is true then, given the following quote, our theologian’s soteriology completely breaks down:

It is the drama of the “emptying” of the Father’s heart, in the generation of the Son, that contains and surpasses all possible drama between God and a world. For any world only has its place within that distinction between Father and Son that is maintained and bridged by the Holy Spirit.

If there can be no emptying of the Father’s heart there can be no communication between God and the world. There can be no redemption.

The Vector of Obedience and Love: Correcting Mansini

I will now attempt to demonstrate that, had the category of obedience entered the debate there may have been resolution to the problem that Mansini has with von Balthasar’s treatment of the Divine Processions. The scholars I have been quoting from, while making their case convincingly, have, I believe, misinterpreted von Balthasar’s intent. I will begin by discussing what I see to be von Balthasar’s starting point, and, following this I will attempt to show the possible validity of all the propositions that have previously been criticized by giving what I see to be von Balthasar’s own views. During the course of this defense I will introduce and use the theological phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion and use his thought on idol and icon and his thought on saturated phenomena to further break open the differences between von Balthasar and Mansini.

The most fundamental notion, as I see it, in understanding the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar is to understand what he means by obedience. In light of this, I offer

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43 Ibid. 129. It this last sentence he quotes Walter Kasper’s Le Dieu des Chretiens.

He asserts that we can know the theological persons of the Trinity only in reference to their Dramatic action. This means that we know that the Father, Son and Spirit are divine, exclusively, through the action of Jesus Christ. Only on the basis of the economic Trinity can we know the immanent Trinity and “dare to make statements about it.”

So what do we know through the action of Jesus Christ? Primarily, and without indicating the multitude of scriptural references, we know that Christ was sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to do the will of the Father. We also know that Christ died on the cross, stayed dead for three days, and then rose again, once more by the power of the Holy Spirit. This tells us three things: (1) Christ’s posture to the Father is one of obedience because Jesus came to do the will of the Father. This necessarily implies an obediential attitude vis-à-vis the Father, (2) Christ’s action on earth necessitates the power of the Holy Spirit (which, as we showed above in this chapter in Consideration #2, manifests itself primarily in terms of obedience, and (3) there is an unimaginable distance between Christ and the Father if, as Lord and giver of life, he died.

This is what we know economically about the Trinity. However, the economic Trinity is not the same as the immanent Trinity, the later “grounds and supports” the former. Something in the immanent Trinity provides the conditions for the possibility of the economic Trinity to be revealed as such. In other words, God’s actions in the world are grounded, in an analogous manner, in the operations of the Trinity ad intra. If we see

a distance and abandonment by God of Christ on the Cross, then that distance and abandonment must have an analogous form in the immanent Trinity. It may not be “experienced” by God as abandonment or distance, but it does provide the conditions for the possibility of abandonment and experience – even sin – to exist in creation.

Von Balthasar asserts that it is the super-kenosis of the Father that grounds and supports what we know of the saving action of Christ. The Father’s divine self-diffusiveness, prompted by love, which I have already explained in this chapter above, is corresponded by the eternal thanksgiving and obedience of the Son. This thanksgiving and obedience is so absolutely complete that the Son’s mission to the point of the cross is already contained within his procession. Christ’s cry of dereliction on the Cross is always already contained in his procession from the Father, a procession where presence and absence are two sides of the same coin. In the words of von Balthasar:

God is not, in the first place, absolute power, but absolute love, and his sovereignty manifests itself not in holding on to what is his own but in its abandonment – all this in such a way that this sovereignty displays itself in transcending the opposition, known to us from the world, between power and impotence. The exteriorization of God (in the Incarnation) has its ontic condition of possibility in the eternal exteriorization of God – that is, in his tri-personal self gift.46

In correction of Margerie, and Lateran IV’s, concerns: the Father does not give all that he is in such a way that he retains none for himself. God’s essence does not become univocally kenotic, “such that a single concept could include both the divine foundation

of the possibility of Kenosis, and the Kenosis itself.” As stated above, the Father possesses the divine nature as “given.” The Son possesses the divine nature as “received.” The divine power is so ordered that it can make room for and maintain this self-exteriorization to the utmost point, like that on the Cross. Christ can obediently give all on the Cross because the Father has given everything to him. The kind of obedience made explicit in the Great Kenosis hymn in Philippians 2 can only exist if the analogous form of this obedience exists within the intra-Trinitarian processions, as the material I have presented above in this chapter demonstrates.

Regarding the difficulty outlined above concerning his mission corresponding to his procession and the resulting Trinitarian inversion, von Balthasar does not draw a univocal relation between the Logos’ procession and mission. His mission is a modality of his procession, it is not the procession itself. It is the way that procession reveals itself in creation. Again, there is an analogous relationship, a relationship of similarity, not a relationship of univocal identity. His mission is grounded by his procession from the Father. They are not the same event. Though, obviously, the procession had to happen in order to provide the conditions for the possibility of the mission.

However, the correspondence of the Holy Spirit’s role in the mission of Christ and how that relates to the procession of Christ is a problem that, I believe, still needs to be resolved. If the Holy Spirit can have no role in the eternal procession of the Son, then how can it be said that Christ’s mission is even analogous to his procession when his mission requires the action of the Holy Spirit? The answer, once more, lies in the difference between the immanent and economic Trinity. Immanently, the Holy Spirit
proceeds from the Father and the Son as from one principle. However, I contend that, economically, what is, in fact, a single movement of the First and Second Persons is perceived by us to be two separate movements. The *procedit a Patre* is a function of the Spirit’s being over Christ; i.e. the Father demanding obedience, while the *filioque* is a function of Christ freely choosing to obey.

Regarding Mansini’s concern that von Balthasar takes the world into the Divine relations; it seems to me that Mansini is doing one, or both, of two things. First, I think he misinterprets what our theologian means in this regard. Within the distance allowed by the procession of the Son from the Father there is room for all the possibilities of created freedom. Mansini’s concern that the world is generated within one or the other processions from the Father is to misunderstand the cosmic schema in which Balthasar places the world drama. The Father begets the Son in love; it is this begetting that provides the conditions for the possibility for God to create at all. The Father’s self-exteriorization immanently in generating the Son is the necessary precondition for him to be able to create in absolute freedom.

The second way in which Mansini may misinterpret von Balthasar is that he insists on falling back upon Aquinas’ intellectual model of the Trinity. Very simply put, I do not think Balthasar is conversant with this model. A critique of his Trinitarian theology using this model would be comparing apples to oranges. Being concerned about the historicity of the Christian faith, Balthasar seeks to begin with an economic Christology and then proceeds to an immanent Christology. In other words, we wishes to theologize based, first of all, on obedience to how God is self-revelatory. The intellectual
model of the Trinity does not satisfy the requirements of explicating a living and personal God. We must note that the issue of intra-Trinitarian processions arises in Balthasar in a very definitely theological context, and moreover within a Christology and theology ‘from above’ in which the philosophical component is respected and given its due but in which the theological retains a certain priority and normativity. Von Balthasar will not let the theological dog be wagged by the philosophical tail.

Very basically put, if Mansini would understand the Super-kenosis, not in terms of materialistic and ontic categories, but, rather, phenomenological dramatic categories that emphasize obedience and love (they are the same thing, as we will show later on) Mansini would not have so much to critique. We must also point out that von Balthasar does not conflate the economic Trinity into the immanent Trinity, however we must assert that for God to act as He did in the economy there must be some analogous precondition in the intra-Trinitarian relations. God, the whole Trinity, does enter into the play and does still remain God.

Jesus Christ presents himself consistently as the definitive "interpretation" of God the Father: the Father has not disappeared into Jesus Christ; the Father remains the point of reference from whom Christ comes; on this basis, he speaks and acts; he takes his bearings from the Father; and it is to him that he returns. Jesus wants to be understood as "the truth" only in this context, that is, as the Father's perfect unveiling and manifestation in the Son.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Von Balthasar, Theodrama III, 506. Emphasis is mine. I did so to point out, once again, the fundamental role of obedience in Jesus Christ’s earthly existence.
Jesus Christ is able to become immanent in the world drama without surrendering his transcendence above and beyond it.\textsuperscript{48}

Jesus wants to be understood as "the truth' only in this context, that is, as the Father’s perfect unveiling and manifestation in the Son. Moreover, this cannot be the subject of external, neutral contemplation; if we are to grasp it, we must have been admitted to the sphere of the Holy Spirit, that holy intimacy between the Father and the Son; we must have been granted a share in the divine Spirit. Only in this way does Jesus Christ present himself to the world's understanding.\textsuperscript{49}

furthermore,

If the Divine Ground, the Father, is really and exhaustively expounded in the incarnate Son, it means that, while the sacred mystery is publicly proclaimed, it does not cease to be a mystery; we always need consecration, the gift of the Spirit, the "eyes of faith," if we are to discern the unveiled mystery.\textsuperscript{50}

By this the necessity of viewing the Christ event theologically, rather than philosophically, is confirmed.

**Von Balthasar and Phenomenology: Making more sense of obedience in the Trinity**

Von Balthasar is not the only worthy thinker who has done recent scholarship on viewing God primarily in terms of love and not being. We can go elsewhere, notably the thought of Jean Luc Marion, to further explicate von Balthasar’s position. Jean-Luc Marion’s mind is delta made fertile with tributaries. He is a recognized expert on Descartes, and had Jacques Derrida (a deconstructionist) as a teacher. Interestingly

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 508.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
enough, he also had Etienne Gilson (a Thomist) as a teacher. A phenomenologist with deconstructionist and Thomistic sympathies (among others I am sure), his thought is rich, if not complicated, and pregnant with meaning.

This brief section will deal primarily with a discussion of Marion’s phenomenology of Icon and Idol as, in my estimation, it comes the closest to forming where Marion and von Balthasar’s thought intersect. Within this explication will be descriptions, as I understand them, of how Marion applies his phenomenology to the theological task of conceptualizing God as love. In many cases, one will see similarities to von Balthasar’s assertion of viewing the Trinitarian processions from the phenomenological perspective of dramatic obediential love, not merely from the ontological perspective of being and intelligibility as I believe Mansini does.

Jean-Luc Marion’s book *God Without Being* is centrally concerned with this: In an attempt to conceptualize God, philosophers and theologians have constructed the idol of “being” and put God into that idol in a similar manner Procrustus uses his bed. Marion accuses the concept of “being” as only capable of hitting the “low water mark of divinity.” Marion defines the purpose of *God Without Being* as:

Attempting to bring out the absolute freedom of God with regard to all determinations, including, first of all, the basic condition that renders all other conditions possible and even necessary – for us, humans – the fact of Being. Because, *for us*, as for all the beings of the world, it is necessary “to be” in order, indissolubly, “to live and move” (Acts, 17:28), and thus eventually also to love. But *for God*, if at least we resist the temptation to reduce him immediately to our own measure, does the same still apply?...If, to begin with, God is love, then God loves before being, He

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only is as He embodies himself – in order to love more closely that which and those who, themselves, have first to be.\textsuperscript{52}

That God “is,” according to Marion, is the least we can say about Divinity. God “is” for us, \textit{pro nobis}. That we say that God is is a concession God makes to the fact that we must exist before we can do or be anything. It seems to me that this train of thought represents a significant shift from the thought of the likes of Mansini who, being the good Thomist that he is, would likely assert the primacy of God’s being as the best and most noble thing we can say about Divinity.\textsuperscript{53}

Recognizing that all thought requires conceptualization, Marion proposes that conceptualizing God as Love or Charity or Gift prevents us from turning that conceptualization into an Idol. There is, for Marion, something inherent in the idea of “Love” that thwarts all attempts at it becoming an Idol.

God saves the gift (of love) precisely inasmuch as he is not, and does not have to be. For the gift does not have first to be, but to pour out in an abandon that, alone, causes it to be; God saves the gift in giving it before being.\textsuperscript{54}

Clearly, this sentence provides support to von Balthasar’s own theology of the Superkenosis. The Father exists as having-given-himself. He is not existence primarily, he is given.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, Introduction, xx.

\textsuperscript{53} Having said that, Marion insists that his project is a vindication of the way in which Aquinas viewed “being.” Marion lays his charge of idolatry, not at St. Thomas, but Heidegger. I wonder how many Thomists agree?

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 3.
According to Marion, this concept is an icon. It is thus that Marion gives us his phenomenology of the Idol and the Icon. The idol and the icon do not indicate two kinds of beings as much as they do a “manner of being for beings.”55 This is partially because it is the vision that distinguishes between the two – what is icon for one can be idol for another.

What is characteristic about the idol is that it fills the gaze. The idol is the ultimate function of the gaze, and fills its intentionality.56 The idol is so dazzling that it freezes the gaze, stops the gaze, such that the gaze cannot pass beyond it. The idol is a “first visible” for the gaze. After this first visible becomes visible, there will be no labor to go beyond it to see something else, whatever that might be. This betrays what Marion calls “an essential fatigue” on the part of the gaze. When the gaze finally finds its idol, it exclaims “This is what I have always been looking for!” The gaze has found its goal, and so will not strain beyond its goal.57 The goal has become visible, and so anything beyond that goal (the one true God who is invisible) will not be sought.58 Thus, Marion forms an axiom: the invisible becomes invisarble59 – in other words, what was aimed at by the gaze (the idol) ensures that nothing else (whether true or not) will be aimed at (invisable).

55 Ibid., 7.
56 Ibid., 10.
57 Ibid., 12.
58 Ibid., 11.
59 Ibid., 13.
Further implications can be drawn from this phenomenology. If the idol was what-was-aimed-at by the gaze, then the idol is a function of the gaze itself. The gaze, in a sense, has constituted the idol. When the gaze beholds the idol, it actually beholds itself like Narcissus beheld himself in the pool. Thus, the idol becomes something other than itself, when it is actually suffering from a surfeit of itself. Vanity comes full circle. Thus, what is represented is not the divine but rather a “low-water mark of the divine” – only what the flesh has experienced of the divine. “When philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names “God.” This concept functions exactly as an idol.”

Mansini, in his critique of von Balthasar, sets the divine intelligence up as an idol and, because Mansini pours his intentionality into this idol assumes that von Balthasar does the same and then accuses von Balthasar of setting up divine drama as an idol. If that were the case, then Mansini’s idol of intelligibility is, admittedly, a better idol than von Balthasar’s because it does hit the low water mark of divinity. However, I argue that von Balthasar is not setting up an idol, but, rather, sets up an icon in the concept of obediential love.

According to Marion, The category of “being” has reduced divinity. Philosophy has given preeminence to conceptualizing God primarily in terms of ultimate being. It is from this conceptualization that theology received its uptake. Philosophy has established the criterion by which God will be named. God thus becomes thinkable under

60 Ibid., 14.

61 Ibid., 16.
philosophy’s accord and by philosophy’s nature. Therefore, the concept of “being” is anterior to the concept of “God.” According to Marion, categories of being thus render themselves idolatrous.62

The icon, on the other hand, does not reduce the gaze to the visible. The icon suggests something beyond it, like an invisible hand pointing beyond itself. An icon has a gaze itself, insofar as the one who gazes finds himself not only beholding but beheld.63 An icon cannot be constituted solely by the intention of the gazer, but must be permeated (and, perhaps, perforated) by the intention of the other. Because the gazer is not wholly aware of what (or who) beholds him, the counter-gaze of the icon is always infinite.

Thus, the gaze of the icon opens to a distance that can maintain not only contemplation but veneration. Unlike the idol, which needs the gaze because it is essentially constituted by the gaze, the icon needs only itself to appear. It does not arise from the gaze, but “opens the eyes of the frozen gaze as one opens a body with a knife.”64

To me it seems that Marion insists that humans can conceptualize God iconically in an analogous way to traditional theology’s explanation of the difference between the Persons of the Trinity, i.e., via personal relation which manifests itself primarily in terms of gift or love. The Father does not know the Son as “being” but rather as the one who receives love, the Son does not know the Father except as one who gives love…the two

62 As I understand it, this is precisely von Balthasar’s critique of philosophy in the theological enterprise. I have indicated this in Presupposition #3 in the introduction, but I will say a little more about it in chapter three.

63 I will demonstrate how this last phrase is also understood by von Balthasar by his understanding of active receptivity at the beginning of chapter four.

64 Ibid., 23.
know the Spirit as the Love between them. However, to preserve this analogy, we can only conceptualize this love as being given to infinite excess. It is this excess that prevents the concept of love or gift from becoming an idol.

More, however, remains to be said about the difference between idol and icon. I will now explicate: (1) the invisible mirror of the subject which constitutes the gaze at the idol and (2) the visible face of the transcendent of the Icon. The idol is an invisible mirror of the subject in that the gaze of the subject, in a sense, conceptually devours the idol. The gaze renders the idol invisible by replacing it with the subject. The idol becomes the gaze. In this way, it acts like a mirror. In terms of conceptualizing God as ultimate being, being becomes this invisible mirror of ourselves. According to Marion, it is blasphemy to limit God by insisting that the greatest thing we can say about God is that God is grounded in undifferentiated being. This makes the concept of being anterior to thinking God.

However, in terms of Thomistic theology, I would like to explore how Marion will avoid conceptualizing God in terms of being by replacing it with the concept of love or gift. Marion argues that effect precedes cause. Marion does not make this claim metaphysically – he makes it phenomenologically. As for Thomas Aquinas, even he indicates that there might be an “appearing” (i.e., a “given”) without being. Esse itself appears as an accident.65 Not only this, but the incidents of our experience, which provide the substance of the experience, arise to our experience (Anamorphosis) as the

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“accident[s] of the accidents.” Even Aquinas agrees that we never experience a substance. We experience accidents. But the incidents that occur based on our perception of the accidents are like “accidents of accidents.” The sun, for example, has a certain substance. My mind is the one that can think of substance by inferring it from its accidents, though it does not experience it directly. But the salient point remains to be made. Can I not experience a sunrise or a sunset in entirely new ways, depending on how it “arises” to me – and experience it differently (as an incident) at each moment that the sun is ever given to my experience? It is this kind of incident – this givenness – that Marion re-names “substance.” This substance does not refer to being, but rather how this substance is given and perceived by me. It is perceived precisely as given. It would be an easy thing to import our understanding of von Balthasar’s superkenosis into the category of givenness as substance, for this is precisely how I think von Balthasar conceives the first person of the Trinity ultimately as given.

One need not see with the eyes of faith to verify that such experiences are possible. An atheist as well as a believer can experience just such a moment of excessive beauty in nature, in art, or in the eros between lover and beloved. But the believer – indeed, the theologian – can see that through Marion’s rigorously phenomenological analysis of givenness, a place for transcendence has been prepared. Love, not being, is the phenomenon par excellence. Whether that love imposes itself on me through another person, human or divine, is an open question. What matters is how this experience is given to me, and whether my gaze is idolatrous or iconic. Both gazes, in a sense, can

66 Ibid., 165.
render what Marion calls a saturated phenomenon. This is a phenomenon which the
gazing subject can receive and understand in a multitude of ways either at once or at
different times; like experiencing the heat of the sun, or the fact that the sun makes the
sky turn colors.

The idolatrous gaze, however, cannot see beyond the idol itself – the idol stops
the gaze from moving beyond it. Thus, it is impossible for me to truly see it as a given,
for I see only what I bring to the experience, not what the experience brings to me. This
cannot be called love. But the icon offers a metaphor by which the given phenomenon
gazes back at us. We are aware of a presence that we cannot explain – perhaps even a
mystery? This presence of which we are aware, this Icon, is the visible face of the
invisible. Invisible because it constantly refers to another than itself, an other than
merely the gaze which grasps it.

Where this intersects with von Balthasar is that, viewing God phenomenologically
as love which is given is similar to von Balthasar’s attempt at viewing the intra-
Trinitarian processes as a dramatic encounter. If we view the intra-Trinitarian relations
as such it becomes the saturated phenomena *par excellence* given the ever increasing love
of the divine exchanges.

To conclude chapter two I offer the following. If obedience is the way that God
has decided to be self-revelatory in creation, then, von Balthasar has contended,
obedience must have an analogous expression in the intra-Trinitarian processions
themselves: “…his very existence itself is a result of his mission and thus of his obedience.”

In answer to the concerns of Mansini, namely that von Balthasar makes the fatal error of blurring the distinction between God and creation by saying that the world is generated in the space provided by the procession of the Son from the Father, we concluded that Mansini’s fears were unfounded based on the assertion that von Balthasar approaches his Triadology from the perspective of love as dramatic encounter, not (as Mansini does) from the perspective, divine knowing or ontic categories. Understanding Marion’s phenomenology of givenness made this correction clearer because, through it, we have learned that thinking God is possible, perhaps even preferable, by not using metaphysical categories (concerned as they are with natures and persons) but with phenomenological categories that emphasize viewing our experiences of God as a saturated phenomena. Viewing God thus authentically attends to the way God is self-revelatory in a way that does justice to the lived experience of praying Christians. Furthermore, viewing God in this way can only be called obedience. Obedience is how we will understand the intra-Trinitarian processions, not only from our perspective as obeying, but even from God’s perspective as it is the only way that we can understand the relationship of the Father to the Son because that is the primary way the Son has revealed the Father to us (Philippians 2).

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In the next chapter, it will be important to keep these Trinitarian considerations in mind as they will form the ground for how we can talk about how freedom and obedience are united in love.
CHAPTER THREE

OBEDIENTIAL LOVE

In the Trinity as revealed by Christ, the two things are proclaimed simultaneously; it is as Father, Son, and Spirit that God is involved with the world, for its salvation - for the doctrine of the Trinity has profoundly soteriological significance; but it is as God that he is thus involved. He does not become 'love' by having the world as his 'thou' and his 'partner'; in himself, in lofty transcendence far above the world, he 'is love' already. Only in this way, in complete freedom, can he reveal himself and give himself to be loved. This is the only way, therefore, in which theo-drama can be ultimately a personal, not a natural, event, something that does not undermine dramatic encounters between human beings but under girds them and makes them - for the first time - truly and authentically personal and significant.¹

Preliminary Considerations: God is Love

I chose the above quote from many wonderful candidates because it highlights several factors foundational to understanding the nature and essence of love: Love is the mutual indwelling tri-personal Godhead, complete in and of itself, dwelling in the Eternal Halls of Inaccessible Light. Love is the life of the Supreme Essence. But this fully transcendent God, totally satisfied with knowing and loving his own essence, condescended to create and become immanent in His creation. Thus every action in the economy is under-girded by the drama of a loving God. This provides our foundation for

the assertion that, if mankind is to be true to its nature, it must be true to its creator. There is something of the Creator in us, God’s image and likeness in us should be manifested in this most wonderful way, namely, to love like He does.

Therefore in what follows we will explore the topic of Love. We will discover that love is, in fact, the highest form of obedience. Or, rather, that obedience is the highest form of love. In order to demonstrate this we will examine that the decision to love is an act made in perfect freedom which is, essentially, a free decision to bind your freedom in obedience to the beloved. Moreover, like all of our obediential vectors, it finds its ultimate source within the intra-Trinitarian processions themselves.

The implications of this for the intra-divine Logos are that he is not the image of the Father simply as a static unit. Rather, he co-executes in his own mode the dynamism of the Father and just so far becomes at the same time the expression of the whole Trinity. Or, to put it in another way, the Logos represents the entire Trinitarian love in the form of expression. Here, as in many places, von Balthasar will evince his patristic roots. What, for the 2nd century Logos theologians, was the expression of the Father’s reason or word, is, for von Balthasar, an expression of the Father’s love in creation. This a priori reflection on the intra-Trinitarian life can and must be verified a posteriori in light of the Economy of Salvation. In other words, the way God appears to be in creation (a posteriori) must have its ground, its verification, in the Divine Life (a priori). This verification is possible if the Son's mission is understood as the continuation of his

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3 Justin Martyr, Ignatius of Antioch, and Irenaeus of Antioch to name of few.
procession in the world as we outlined in the first and second chapters. So, let us examine the inextricability of freedom and obedience.

Love: Where Freedom and Obedience are United

Von Balthasar most completely construes the nature and essence of obediential love in the book *The Christian State of Life*. As a result, I will give a close reading of the major points of his chapter entitled “The Calling to Love.” Thus, the order and mapping of the sections that follow will be guided by the order in which the material is presented in *The Christian State of Life*. Also, our understanding of obedience will be further nuanced when we learn that, in perfect Christian love, obedience and love are virtually mutually exchangeable terms. Von Balthasar begins by discussing the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor and points out that it is, in fact, a commandment. Each and every Christian *must* love in this way. Von Balthasar dedicates this section to defining love. The next section on obligation and choice points out that, even though love is the very height of self-sacrifice, it is, for that reason, the greatest exercise of true freedom. The third section discusses the notion that, since self-sacrificial love participates in God’s own life, the decision to love is permanent and irrevocable and, therefore, takes the form of a vow. The fourth section departs from *The Christian State of Life* to discuss that irrevocable self-sacrificial love, which is a form of loving proper only to Divinity, can be exercised by a human being who is docile to grace. Also in section four is another brief demonstration of my thesis; namely that if one understands the role obedience plays in a Divine and human act of loving, then it renders von Balthasar’s controversial theology of the Descent into Hell more understandable and,
perhaps, less problematic. In the final part of this chapter will be a shift in emphasis as we move from a discussion of love’s nature and essence to a conversation of the role that love plays in divine revelation and the Church’s evangelization. We will do this by discussing von Balthasar’s little book *Love Alone is Credible.*\(^4\) In this work, we will discover that the only thing that ultimately makes Christianity believable is to perceive the Christ-event as the unnecessary self-glorification of Divine Love. This makes Christianity credible because love is self-convincing. It has its own appeal to which we as humans are fundamentally attracted.

**The Great Commandment**

Von Balthasar begins chapter one of *The Christian State of Life* by quoting Matthew 22: 36-40:

> Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments depend the whole law and the prophets.\(^5\)

Without love even the perfect observance of the Decalogue is meaningless and useless.\(^6\) However, the difficulty with the commandment just quoted is that it is, in fact, a commandment. It is the low water mark of Christian service. Complete and total self-surrender of everything that you have and are to God and neighbor is required of even the most marginal of Christian. As difficult and unbelievable as that sounds, the command

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\(^6\) Ibid., 25.
given to us by Christ is unconditional and does not take into consideration our actual ability to do as the commandment insists.\textsuperscript{7}

Furthermore, the command to love one’s neighbor is no longer secondary to love of God, as it may have appeared in the Old Testament, because the measure of the love of neighbor is none other than the Cross of the incarnate God.\textsuperscript{8} If we love our neighbor in a Christian way we love God in him, for in Christ both divine and human natures are joined in one person.\textsuperscript{9} The command to love is universal and unequivocal. It makes no allowances. It encompasses and makes demands upon everything in our nature – thy whole heart, the whole soul and thy whole mind.\textsuperscript{10}

As it is stated, this commandment takes no heed of our human potential for observing it. All that is important is that it be observed; how this is to be done is a second question with which the first is not concerned. If we are unable to observe it by our own strength, God will not fail to give us the means to do so. But one thing God will not do: he will not accommodate his great commandment to our human insufficiency. For he knows there is only one thing that love cannot endure: to have limits set to it.\textsuperscript{11}

Von Balthasar continues to explain that, since love has its origin in God, it must be always active and fruitful, like only divine life can be.\textsuperscript{12} After having said this he utters a

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} John 13:34-35 “This is my new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid.
\end{flushright}
very important phrase for the purposes of this dissertation: “Love can breathe only in the spaciousness of the beloved and in its own unlimited capacity for growth.” The important notion indicated here is that love can only exercise its limitlessness under the conditions that the beloved places upon it. So there is even a definitive aspect of obedience in the sovereign freedom of true love.

How so? Two contradictory notions must be held in tension: (1) love is conditionless, and (2) love has conditions. Love is conditionless from the perspective of the lover. The lover can place no conditions on the beloved in terms of how much love the lover will give or how that love will be shown the beloved. The lover is required, is compelled, by love to completely abandon himself and be obedient to the beloved in the way the beloved wishes. However, the beloved can place conditions on the limitlessness of the love given to her by the beloved, in the sense that the lover must love the beloved in the way that the beloved wishes. Therefore, the lover must attend to, has a duty to be obedient to, the way the beloved wishes to be loved. The analogous expression of this in the intra-trinitarian processions is that the Father (the lover) is compelled to love the Son (the beloved) by giving the Son everything the Father is. The Son requires that he be equal to the Father, as a result, the Father must give the Son everything. Remember obedience is grounded in the Trinity out of the Father’s act of surrender, out of the Father’s poverty and humility.

This is where freedom comes into the picture. What appears as duty or obligation for the one who does not love is, in fact, a choice made in the most perfect expression of

13 Ibid.
freedom.\textsuperscript{14} Obligation is a word that pure love does not know; or rather its obligation is always a choice.\textsuperscript{15} Love is ready for any sacrifice so long as the one thing necessary is not forbidden to it: to love.

Von Balthasar’s crucial explication of this principle obliges quotation \textit{in extenso}:

\begin{quote}
We are not asking here whether this is the nature of human beings or whether and to what extent they are capable of loving in this way. Our concern here is with the nature, the pure essence, of love itself. And in every purest expression of it, we encounter anew the mystery of self-giving. For the sake of the beloved, love would gladly renounce all its possessions if it could thereby enrich the beloved. It would gladly accept gifts if it knows the beloved would find happiness in the act of giving. For love, even receiving is a form of self-giving. Love adorns itself, not to be beautiful for its own sake, but to appear beautiful to the beloved. Hence it will just as readily deprive itself of all adornment if by this means it can adorn the beloved. Love chooses to forget itself for the sake of the beloved and to remain present to the beloved only so long as the beloved desires the presence of a living and personal other. If we truly love, if we live only for love, we set apart in ourselves no private domain that is withdrawn from love and the service of love. We cannot perceive of love as a merely penultimate good of our spirit, cannot reserve for it a circumscribed place in our soul, cannot assign to it but a limited portion of our strength. We have only one desire: to bestow on the beloved our whole person and all our powers. We will henceforth have no other rule or law of life that that which we receive from the beloved. We will regard it as our greatest \textit{freedom} to do, not our own will, but the will of the beloved. We will treasure it as our greatest riches to possess nothing but what the beloved bestows upon us. We will esteem it our greatest fecundity to be but a vessel held in readiness for every fructifying seed of the beloved.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Therefore the spirit of love, its very essence, is self-gift, but not only that, it is only the gift that the beloved wants to receive. Consequently the decision to love is a choice made

\begin{footnotes}
\item[14] Ibid., 28.
\item[15] Ibid., 28.
\item[16] Ibid., 29.
\end{footnotes}
in the most perfect expression of individual human freedom. I will not be me for myself, but I will be me for the beloved. Given the above quote, our working definition of love is this: **The free choice to give your freedom the form of un-freedom for the sake of the beloved.** We have now come to the point alluded to several times in this dissertation thus far, namely: love is a form of obedience which is simultaneously the truest exercise of freedom. In love, freedom and obedience are perfectly united.

Let us note well that this kind of love leaves no room for anything like freedom of privacy. The lover can set aside no part of himself where the beloved has no access. In another book von Balthasar says this:

> In the Godhead, therefore, individuality and community have a common origin, for here there exists so intimate a community that the Persons co-inhere perfectly in one another; they constitute in fact a communion of the purest kind and are only distinct in order that the one may live for the sake of the other. Thus here the principle of individuality - the inviolable prerequisite for any full communion - totally excludes any idea of what we in a world of finite beings would call "private."  

If human obediential love is to model Trinitarian love, then any claim we have to privacy or to liberty that excludes (or exists over against) the needs of the other has no purchase. For von Balthasar we exist as individuals only so that we can exist as community for the other. As such, in a community of love, there can be no thought given to any strict right of private property, for in a community of love each would be overjoyed to give to all whatever they desired.

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17 Ibid.

Furthermore, the radicalism of this kind of love admits of no law. All laws are
subsumed, fulfilled and transcended in the one law of love. Because love is compelled
by no necessity and because it is the one thing necessary, necessity and freedom are
united in it. Nothing is more compelling than love and no one is freer than when
compelled by love. However, where love grows cold, law flourishes. We are no longer
compelled in freedom by love but ordered by obligation to law. The more we remove
ourselves from the innermost core of love, the more the commandment to love acquires
for us a negative character and becomes a prohibition.

Obligation and choice: The role of Freedom in the decision to love

Love is the fulfillment of the law, so the demands of law are fulfilled and
superseded by love, therefore it is possible to fulfill the law at the same time as living
beyond the law. This is a truism. If we always behaved according to love we would not
need the law. Law is for the unjust, the un-lover.

The form of the law changes, then, in the measure in which we approach
or withdraw from love. Indeed, the very structure of our ethics changes as
we draw near to or away from love. If we draw away from love, the
command to love, in which all other commands are fulfilled, disintegrates
into a multiplicity of individual commandments that function separately
according to the situation in which we find ourselves.


20 Von Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 30. I wish to state that I understand that von
Balthasar is not unique in his understanding the law/love dichotomy in this way. The
“law of love” idea is ancient in the Christian tradition – St. Paul, Aelred of Rievaulx, etc
– that love involves obedience to the will of the beloved and that Law in its real truth is
not externalized compulsion but free giving to the Lawgiver. I explore this in von
Balthasar because it is a fundamental step in understanding how true love unites freedom
and obedience.

21 Ibid., 33
Furthermore, if we decide to make the law of love the measure of our lives then, von Balthasar tells us, we receive a fundamental benefit: the many, many individual demands that love will make of the lover will meld into one seamless unity:

The parts become integrated; the horizon of eternity shimmers though ethical time. The more we come to regard the action of love as definitive and as end in itself, the less likely we are to lapse into the indifference of a time that is punctuated by individual directives. The commandments resolve themselves into unity, thus rendering superfluous the distinction we have drawn between “obligation” and “choice.”

So the sense of limitation that one experiences by the lifelong exercise of the onerous tasks, the relentless self-sacrifice in tasks both large and small, demanded by true love is superseded and forgotten in that one free decision to love. As a result, all of the things that seem to limit my freedom are, in fact, expressions of the greatest freedom: the original free choice to love. Here we see clearly that obedience to the commandment of love, rather than limiting freedom, gives the exercise of freedom its proper and most noble milieu.

Love’s proper milieu is, of course, nothing less than a Trinitarian mystery. All of the individual instances of Jesus Christ’s obedience to the Father have their ultimate source in His one eternal procession from the Father. “Since the Son has no other wish than to fulfill every wish and will of the Father, he has bridged the gap between ethical time and loving eternity.” The commands given to Christ by the Father are eternal

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22 Ibid., 34.

23 Ibid., 35.
counsels that the Father communicates by way of generation (filiation) not by precept, not by law, but by love and self-gift.\textsuperscript{24} The form of obedience taken by the Son vis-à-vis the Father, which is the form of loving self-surrender, does not come from the difference between command and non-binding wish, does not come from the difference between duty and counsel, but, rather from what it means to be God.\textsuperscript{25} Jesus’ loving obedience shows the innermost source of God’s love. Henceforth, this type of love is to be the model for all Christian love and self-surrender.

The Decision to Love is a Vow to Which One is Obedient

At this point we see this kind of loving obedience take the form of a vow.\textsuperscript{26} Out of pure love the lover gives his freedom the form of un-freedom. Like the Son in his relationship to the Father we will let our free choice to take a vow become an obligation. Also, just as in the kenotic incarnation, the Son gave his divinity the form of un-divinity. We, in taking vows, will give our freedom (the most divine thing we possess) the form of un-freedom. That the Son should underwrite the risk of creation by his death on the cross is a function of his eternal obedience to the Father.\textsuperscript{27} As we considered above, His mission, like His procession, has no conceivable beginning.

This, in his incarnated form, was a free decision made by the Son in love to the Father. The Father in his turn embraced this free offering of love with as much love as

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 37.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 36.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 37.
the Son in embracing it. In the Son’s incarnated form he experiences his own free
decision to undergo the cross and the Father’s free decision to accept the offer as a
command. Since the Spirit is nothing less than the loving freedom that flows between
Father and Son it becomes clear how love itself is most liberating and most demanding.

We cannot conceive of what love would look like outside of this Trinitarian
mystery. In Christ, there is no difference between love and obedience. Therefore, the
disobedience of the one who loves to even the least wishes of the lover is far more
serious than the disobedience of the one who is far from love.

If obedience is self-surrender to the beloved, then the vows we take are eternally
binding because love cannot tolerate being loved "for a time." As soon as love is truly
awakened, the moment of time is transformed for it into a form of eternity. In this
context the Keys of the Kingdom given to Peter with their power of losing and binding
can be seen in a positive light. The vows we take in our sacraments and our rites are
eternally binding. The Church is able to bind so effectively that, those who want to

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 38.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 39-40.
bind themselves freely in love, their will to love is recognized and ratified forever in heaven.  

Only love can claim the sovereign right of binding everything to itself in order to free it. Therefore, love’s relationship to our words “duty” and “counsel” is one of complete transcendence. The difference between duty and counsel are only seen from the perspective of imperfect love, i.e. where law flourishes.

Divine Obedience and Human Obedience: Heaven Comes to Earth… and Hell?

Given everything that Christ is and given everything that Christ received from the Father, it becomes clearer how it is that mere humanity is able to participate in this obediential love. Jesus Christ, being the reified Analogia Entis itself, expands the

34 Ibid., 39.

35 The word counsel here has its proper definition in what the Catholic Church calls Her evangelical counsels, i.e. the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. They are called counsels because they are, in fact, good advice that does not necessarily need to be taken in order to live a good Christian life. Here the word counsel is placed opposite the word “commandment.” Following commandments are necessary for living the Christian life, i.e. one must follow the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor to be a good Christian. However, one does not have to follow the counsel to sell all you have and follow Jesus. Counsels represent “going above and beyond the call of duty,” or supererogation, as it were. The Evangelical Counsels exceed normative Christian observance because they require their adherents to give up what, in justice or by nature, belongs to them. Poverty demands that I give up the property that is rightfully mine. Chastity demands that I give up the fecundity I have by nature. Obedience demands that I give up my right of self-determination and place it in the hands of another.

36 Ibid., 39.

37 “Reified Analogia Entis” refers to the notion that Jesus Christ, in His incarnation, has performed that remarkable feat, proper to God alone, in which he was able to bridge that mighty chasm between divinity and creation, any similarity between which only discloses a greater dissimilarity (Fourth Lateran Council), without damage to His metaphysical integrity.
supra-horizontal love of the Intra-Trinitarian relations vertically downward onto the plane of human existence. Our measure of what it means to love must be, can only be, what it means for the Son to love and be loved. To say that love is the communion of Christians is not simply to enunciate an abstract principle; rather in the Christian communion of love we share in a personal act of God himself, the tip of which may be seen shining in the person of Christ, but which in its depths contains the interpersonal life of the Blessed Trinity and in its breadth embraces the love of God for the whole world.

Let us look first at the pattern of Christ’s saving work. His earthly life runs a horizontal course from his Incarnation and his birth to the moment of his death. Then comes a sharp break, a drop; "He descended into Hell." He arrives in the realm where time and space are nonexistent, whereas for us (on Holy Saturday), chronological or surface time continues. Then from the timeless, space-less darkness of hell, the power and the glory of the Father resurrects him "on the third day' and raises him vertically to the horizontal plane he had left, lifting him whole and entire, body and soul into the eternal life of the Godhead. Such a pattern of life (if we may call it this) embraces a compass infinitely and incomprehensibly vaster than that normally reckoned to be the scope of an ordinary human existence. It spans the whole of time and extends beyond this into an eternity of two kinds. The first of these is the timelessness of the underworld, where all dimensions of time are lost and where all is reduced to a timeless "point of death"; and the second is what we may call "time which has no end; where the doors are flung open on to an expanse of eternity that stretches endlessly in every direction (a difficult notion indeed to describe adequately.\(^88\)

The above quote indicates three horizontal planes: two eternal and one temporal. The two eternal horizontal planes are the ones he indicated, (1) the timelessness of death and hell, and (2) the expanse of loving eternity in heaven. The vertical dimension which cuts through all three horizontal dimensions is, of course the person of Jesus Christ: the

reified analoqia entis (c.f. footnote #37 in this chapter). If, as we discussed above, the Son’s very procession from the Father is a mode of loving obedience, then the Son’s presence in all three vertical vectors must also be a mode of loving obedience. On the temporal plane of creation, the mode of obedience is kenosis, and, ultimately, the cross. On the eternal plane of hell, the mode of obedience is alienation and abandonment. On the eternal plane of heaven his obedience takes the form of filiation. By referencing the section on Marion’s philosophy of saturated phenomena, we can see that the Son’s procession from the Father is a saturated phenomena *par excellence* in the sense that it can be viewed from these many different angles based upon how it is given to us, but the fact that it is, in fact, *given* (Marion’s redefinition of essence) does not change. In this way God’s immutability is protected.

Here we come to understand better, by the category of obedience, what von Balthasar means by his controversial theology of Christ’s descent into hell. If the Son’s very procession from the Father, i.e., if the Son’s unique way of possessing the one divine nature is seen from the category of obedience than it becomes clearer how that obedience can appear in different modes depending on what is required by his mission.

**Love is Self-Convincing**

A chapter devoted to von Balthasar’s theology of love must necessarily discuss at some length the absolutely integral part love plays in Christian evangelization for von Balthasar. He gives us a brief glimpse at his theology of Revelation and evangelization in his book *Love Alone is Credible*. Any discussion of von Balthasar’s theology of love would be incomplete without mentioning this book. The book argues that Christian
theology can only be perceived and understood in terms of the self-glorification of Divine Love.\(^{39}\) Love alone makes Christianity credible. By his own admission this monograph is a condensation of what von Balthasar set out to do in his seven volume work *The Glory of the Lord*. Since *Love Alone is Credible* is von Balthasar’s acknowledged synthesis of *The Glory of the Lord*, it’s approach to love and obedience offers an excellent entry into my claim that obedience can serve heuristically for von Balthasar’s entire corpus.

In the first two chapters, von Balthasar identifies the critical failures throughout the history of theology to render Christianity understandable. He reduces the various approaches to two methods: the cosmological method and the anthropological method. The cosmological method, used primarily from the Patristic Age to the Renaissance, sought to justify Christianity by showing how it was the answer to all human questioning. It proved to be inadequate because it sought to apply the use of reason in a quasi-Gnostic fashion to promulgate individual mysteries as things to be believed, but these mysteries, according to Balthasar, “are nothing more than conditions for the possibility for the perception of love in Christ.”\(^{40}\) This method does not, in itself, make Christianity credible. It only provided a center of unification for all the world’s philosophical methods. In the modern and contemporary ages, the anthropological method, replacing the cosmological method by rejecting metaphysical ontology and absolutizing the


\[\text{40} \text{ Ibid., 105.}\]
polarity of faith and reason\textsuperscript{41}, is mortally flawed simply because it seeks to make human nature the measure of Divine possibility.

The bulk of the book devotes itself to explaining what von Balthasar calls “the third way of love.” All human philosophy and human experience falls silent when confronted with the most fundamental belief of Christianity: the scandal of the Cross. That God would become human and, not only that, take an aspect of humanity that is most dissimilar to God, i.e. powerless and, ultimately, dead, is an event that cannot be explained by philosophy or anthropology but can only be understood as Love. We must understand Christian revelation in terms of the self-glorification of Divine love or we will simply fail to understand it at all.\textsuperscript{42}

Balthasar’s proposition, which he states as theological certitude, is that when we are genuinely honest with ourselves we perceive that we do not possess this kind of love. We can, however, recognize it as love because, through the grace of God, human nature has been given a pre-apprehension of love. This kind of love, which he calls Agape, is \textit{not} a human love. Any attempt to explain it as such will result in love’s failure. It will fail because to explain agape in human terms is to make God something other than Wholly Other. This, in turn, would lessen the inconceivable immensity of the kenotic sacrifice of Christ which would finally result in rendering Christianity unexplainable, incredible, and insane. If God is something less that totally and Wholly Other then it is

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 35.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 60.
conceivable that Christ’s sacrifice could have been done for reasons other than the unnecessary self-glorification of Divine Love. Love alone is Credible.

His central theme is this:

It thus becomes clear that faith is ordered primarily to the inconceivability of God’s love, which surpasses us and anticipates us...Love alone is credible; nothing else can be believed, and nothing else ought to be believed. This is the achievement, the “work” of faith: to recognize this absolute prius, which nothing else can surpass; to believe that there is such a thing as love, absolute love, and that there is nothing higher or greater than it.\(^43\)

This talk of Faith in the context of love, and the staggering marvel that we are loved thus by God, segues into our fourth chapter on form and Splendor by showing how us how it is we are to perceive the divine reality. Love, and the obedience that it engenders, is attractive. It requires no explanation to be convincing. All mankind can see this form of self-sacrificial obediential love and recognize it instantly for what it is, namely, beautiful.

\(^43\) Ibid., 101-102.
CHAPTER FOUR

OBEDIENCE AS THE RESPONSE TO BEING GIVEN HUMAN PERSONHOOD

The Testimony of Beauty in Obedience: Active Receptivity

I began this dissertation by mentioning von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. I will now return to a discussion of our theologian’s use of the terms “form” and “splendor” and then explicate how these words inform us on obedience in the mode of active receptivity. I will put forth an understanding of obedience as attending to the self-revelatory form of the beloved. Precisely, through this mode of obedience, a mode that leaves room for freedom and love, the Logos obeys the Father. I will rely heavily on Christopher Steck’s monograph The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs Von Balthasar¹.

In this section we will discuss two aspects of obedience: (1) obedience as active receptivity and (2) obedience as distance. We will discover that, understood within the singular category of obedience, the necessary distance between perceiver and perceived provides the conditions for the possibility for freedom and liberty to be exercised on the part of the perceiver. He is not merely a slave to the phenomena perceived, but, rather, must maintain a distance, a reverential distance, from the thing perceived. So, the mutual testimony of beauty between both perceiver and perceived manifests the splendor shining

through the form of the perceived, but that same testimony of beauty is also the particular posture, or “angle”, by which the perceiver perceives. In other words, the testimony of beauty in an act of perception between persons does two things: (1) it attends to the splendor of the other, and (2) it implies the necessary distance between two persons that make perception possible.

Obedience and Active Receptivity

*Form* indicates an external manifestation of a subject’s inwardness or intimacy. *Splendor* indicates the radiant “light” from the inner depths of a subject. Out of splendor form appears. That form, because of splendor, radiates beauty from within itself, occupies a central place in Balthasar’s aesthetics. As such the “object not only communicates itself, but in doing so, it manifests a power that affects the perceiver with wonder before the free gift of that which appears.” The ultimate ground for this type of self-expressive relation is the Trinity. “The finite person bears the stamp of the imago trinitas, which means that it can only be and become a person by relating to the other persons it encounters on its way through life.”

In an encounter between persons, this type of relationality shifts the focus from the subject to the object. One is forced to attend to the “thou.” This attention is termed “active receptivity.” It is called thus because the perceiving subject while attending to the “thou” in a non-controlling way also gives himself to the object while at the same time receiving the object’s gift of self-expression. Furthermore, the testimony of beauty

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2 Ibid., 15.

3 Ibid., 17.
in this exchange prevents conflict and tends toward mutuality.

Obedience enters this paradigm as a mode of freedom. As we discussed above, Jesus’ mother imparting to him the tradition that looked forward to Israel’s hope in a savior wakened Christ to his “mission-consciousness”. Also, as discussed above, the human (including Christ) is awakened to knowledge of his freedom and autonomy by virtue of witnessing his distance from and dependence on “other.” Attending to the other, which can only be a form of obedience, forms the very basis of the recognition of our own freedom. Obedience, seen in this way, can never be characterized as “over-against” but instead provides the conditions for the possibility of our freedom to be exercised.

Obedience as Distance

The term “Distance” is a heuristic device regarding form, splendor and Glory. Von Balthasar indicates that the condition for perceiving form in a thing is the subjective distance between perceiver and perceived. This distance permits the glory of a thing to envelope its preciever; just as when an art critic steps back from a painting to get its “full effect.” Or, what is more to the point, von Balthasar points to the constant confusion, misunderstanding, and mis-interpretation on the part of the Apostles concerning the words and deeds of Jesus in his status exinanitionis which is only finally cleared up once Jesus regains his status exaltationis. The Apostles benefited from the unifying distance allowed by the operation of the Holy Spirit only after both the Ascension and Pentecost events.

This, of course, is fully supported by von Balthasar’s Triadology regarding the distance created within the Godhead as merely the other side of the processional coin
with the unity existing between Father and Son. For the Son to be Son he could not, above all, be the Father. This distance must exist; a distance that can only be characterized as “Godlike.”

An Attempt at Demonstrating My Thesis: The Beauty of the Cross and Viewing Edwyn Sandys’ *The Christa*

Given the above, one may ask how I justify linking beauty, understood as splendor which radiates from within the subject’s form, with obedience, understood as active receptivity based on the relationship between the Father and Son. In an encounter between persons, this type of Trinitarian relationality shifts the focus from the subject to the object. One is compelled to attend to the free gift of the “thou.” This attention is termed “active receptivity.” Von Balthasar calls it thus because the perceiving subject while attending to the “thou” in a non-controlling way also gives himself to the object while at the same time receiving the object’s gift of self-expression. Furthermore, the testimony of beauty in this exchange prevents conflict and tends toward mutuality. According to von Balthasar, active receptivity is a type of obedience because it requires a suspension of one’s own self-assertions. The beauty that appears in the perceived calls forth an obedient response wherein the perceiver simply allows the perceived to be what and who he is. This is the precise tension described in the Son’s response to the Father. The Son attends to the Father in obedience while the Father allows for the Son’s freedom to interpret how the Son’s mission will be best completed.

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4 Steck, 22.
I contend that this type of active receptivity, this docility and obedience to the splendor of the other, is most important when a person reflects on the cross. According to von Balthasar, The Cross is the preeminent event of Divine self-expression. Glory is manifested any time God expresses Himself. We perceive divine glory as beauty. As the preeminent event of divine self-expression the cross is, therefore, preeminently beautiful and preeminently encourages us to view it with a posture of obedience that corresponds to wonder. This wonder is the condition for active receptivity. For our viewing of the Cross to be reverent and, thus, properly theological, we must allow the Cross to be what it is.

The above, I argue, seems to be the greatest problem in terms of Edwina Sandys’ Christa. If we made a thought project out of viewing the Christa informed by von Balthasar’s theory of active receptivity one result of that viewing would render her very problematic. I do not think the Christa is an interpretation of the Cross-event that seeks to view that event in a non-controlling way. One reason maybe that it constitutes a break with the salvation history that forms the only backdrop to the Cross that renders what happened on the Cross understandable, meaningful, and universal.

Part of the Christ event that sets up such a scandal for us post-moderns is that it was so specific in nature. It happened to a single man who was born 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, was reared in Nazareth by a lower middle class family of builders who were members of a marginal, sectarian religion called Judaism. Seemingly, this is hardly the condition for any action of this one man to be truly universal in scope. But, in fact, it is the only condition, the only specificity, which can allow for this universality.
The political, liturgical, and faith history of the Jewish people is absolutely necessary to render the cross meaningful and universal. From Abraham to Mary, God patiently prepares the Jewish people for the Christ-event. God works glorious saving events that gather a community that experiences these events; and then God raises up prophets who reveal their meaning: Passover and the Exodus, the covenants and the kingdom, exile and the return of poor, the temple and the law. This is the time of God’s venture in history and God’s preparation of human beings for the full truth; this is the time of reciprocal searching and of the fidelity of the Holy One that is maintained despite the infidelities of God’s sinful people. Also this is the time when prophetic words include all nations and peoples in this covenant. Cultic sacrifices for sins are repeated again and again; nothing can do away with this repetition, which signals the grip of death, until the coming of the event that “once and for all” delivers human beings from death. These are the many preparations and prefigurements that will mark the coming of the mystery. All of this forms the condition for understanding the Cross because all this history forms our understanding of why this man, Jesus (including his maleness), is the only conceivable way that what happened in him did, in fact, happen as he claims.

If we were actively receptive to the cross’s Glory, this is what we must also understand, and this is precisely what the Christa may not allow. Taken in this context and with the lens of von Balthasar’s thought, the Christa seeks to make the cross in her own image and likeness. She does not allow for the suspension of her own self-assertions in the face of the glory and beauty of the Cross. One way of viewing the cross is to attend

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to, and be faithful to, the particular mode in which God is thus self-expressive in the same manner that the Son attends to the self-expression of the Father. The *Christa* seeks to form her own specificity around the cross which must, necessarily, limit the cross’s meaningfulness and universality. For the Cross to be truly universally salvific, we must embrace the stumbling block of its unabashedly historical nature.

To explain this, we have learned from von Balthasar that the only way Christianity, and, therefore, the Cross, becomes credible and understandable is for us to view the Christ event solely in terms of Divine love. We cannot reduce the cross to merely anthropological concerns with justice nor merely philosophical concerns with ontology. All human philosophy and human experience falls silent when confronted with the most fundamental belief of Christianity: the scandal of the Cross. That God would become human and, not only that, take an aspect of humanity that is most dissimilar to God, i.e. powerless and dead, is an event that cannot be explained by philosophy or anthropology but can only be understood as Love.\(^6\)

Balthasar proposes that when we are genuinely honest with ourselves we perceive that we do not possess this kind of love. We can, however, *recognize* it as love because, through the grace of God, human nature has been given a pre-apprehension of love. This kind of love, which he calls Agape, is *not* a human love. Any attempt to explain it as such will result in love’s failure. It will fail because to explain agape in human terms is to make God something other than Wholly Other. This, in turn, would lessen the inconceivable immensity of the kenotic sacrifice of Christ which would finally

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result in rendering Christianity unexplainable, incredible, and insane. Were God something less than totally and wholly Other it is conceivable that Christ’s sacrifice could have been done for reasons other than the unnecessary self-glorification of Divine Love.

Thus, for von Balthasar, we must understand Christian revelation in terms of the self-glorification of Divine love or we will simply fail to understand it at all. The love shown by God on the Cross is a divine love about which von Balthasar says this:

The plausibility of God’s love does not become apparent through any comparative reduction to what humanity (sic) has always already understood as love; rather, it is illuminated only by the self-interpreting revelation-form of love itself. And this form is so majestic that we are led to adore it from a reverent distance whenever we perceive it, even if it does not explicitly command us to do so.  

As a result, any attempt to change God’s “self-interpreting revelation-form” runs the danger of making the Sacrifice on the Cross merely a human sacrifice. To reduce the Christ-event to human concerns with justice, as I believe the Christa attempts to do, seeks to explain the Cross in a way that does not completely do justice to revelation or love, or, for that matter, justice.

In sum, in using von Balthasar’s notion of obedience as active receptivity as a way of viewing the Cross, I hope to have shown how the Christa could be a problematic source for theological reflection for two reasons: first, it violates the necessary historical specificity of the Christ event; and second, as it is an image that could be viewed as being solely concerned with justice, the Christa downplays the notion that the Cross is the unnecessary preeminent Event of the self interpreting, self-glorification of Divine Love.

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7 Ibid., 56.
In terms of Fundamental theology, there are a couple of strings here to tie up regarding the Beauty of the Cross and the *Christa*. For von Balthasar, significant speech about God intersects with culture inside of a notion of revelation that emphasizes obedience to God’s self-glorification. This means several things. First, as we have shown above by critiquing Edwina Sandys’ *Christa*, human experience does not suffice for a theological warrant; particularly when that experience equates political activism.

Von Balthasar’s hermeneutic of obedience, which emphasizes imitation of the way the Son attends to the Father, necessarily bursts all human categories of justice and oppression. As I mentioned above, his correction for limiting the usefulness of liberation theology is an emphasis, not on justice, but on love.

Secondly, I think von Balthasar’s theology, as I expressed it here, is fairly unpopular in our current climate. It should definitely be characterized as a reaction against Kant and his intellectual patrimony in that von Balthasar’s kind of theology has no problem “thinking God” on account of its insistence of the knowability of divine revelation. Furthermore, it places itself on the end of the spectrum that insists that culture should conform to these divinely revealed truths instead of the other way around. In other words, the community formed at the foot of the cross, instead of appropriating the cross, should be appropriated and formed by the cross by their docile obedience to the Cross’s revelation form. In this way, God’s self-revealed, self-interpreting, revelation-form will remain authentic, ever-new, and convincing.
Obedience is Theological Anthropology

Where Have We Gone and Where are We Going

In chapter one, we outlined von Balthasar’s Christology and showed that Christ’s mission consciousness and his “faith” are the modalities of divine obedience extrapolated in creation. In chapter Two we outlined the necessary condition of the Logos’ obedience to the Father, that condition being the very begetting of the Son. In chapter three we discussed love itself and there found that true Christian love and obedience are interchangeable terms whose proper exercise can only manifested in perfect freedom. Then in the immediately preceding section we discovered that obedience attends to the form of the beloved as the beloved is thus self-revelatory. By discussing obedience from these vectors we have come to a complete and comprehensive understanding of von Balthasar’s theology of obedience; namely it is a posture that we must render to God, not only because Jesus Christ exemplified it, but because it is a necessary criterion of his very procession from the Father in all eternity. Furthermore, to guard against the erroneous conclusion that the Father demanded slavish (i.e. unfree) obedience from the Son, we asserted that the form of obedience proper to Divinity (and those made in His image and likeness) is identical to love and freedom. This kind of love is made possible by the beauty and glory emanating from beloved which makes the beloved adorable in the true religious sense of the word.

Now, our task in this section of chapter four is to see how all of the above manifests itself in creation, or more specifically, how all the above talk about love and obedience in God extrapolates itself onto the human condition. We can call the following
von Balthasar’s theological anthropology.

Our question is: given that obedience is a posture adopted in a relationship between persons, what is my obediential response to God and my neighbor, since these are the two types of persons with which I have a relationship?

We will begin by returning to von Balthasar’s notion of personhood as mission-consciousness. To be a person, we must be obedient to the mission given to us by God. We will spell out how this mission is received in prayer and how it is fulfilled in community.

Following this comes a lengthy discussion of how human nature is defined by maintaining, not resolving, three tensions: (1) between body and soul, (2) between the individual and community, and (3) between man and woman. In all three of these tensions we will see the definition of obedience arising from our four obediential vectors takes concrete and practical form. Finally, at the end of the chapter we will take the most exemplary figure of Mary and show how she satisfies von Balthasar’s theological anthropology.

We know that the Son received his personhood by virtue of his procession/mission from the Father from all eternity. However, the conditions for the possibility of a conscious subject receiving personhood in the order of creation still needs to be discussed, i.e. how does a conscious subject receive and accept this mission? According to von Balthasar, a rational nature in the order of creation receives, accepts, and performs his mission by prayer in community; in so doing a conscious subject becomes a person. All three components of personhood indicated here (mission, prayer,
and community) carry their own obediential weight. In other words, all require some aspect of obedience to be exercised properly.

The first aspect, that of mission, we have already discussed at some length in chapter one, however, there remains a little more to be said; namely, a discussion of the awakening of human consciousness and its role in the development of mission-consciousness. The second aspect, that of prayer, we will discover that von Balthasar requires a certain kind of prayer effective for acquiring knowledge of mission, namely, contemplative prayer. The third aspect, that of community, will require a fairly length exploration of von Balthasar’s theological anthropology. Included in this exploration a discussion of the various dramatic tensions which define the human being in reference to the community. In doing this we will once again show how the singular category of obedience renders von Balthasar’s complex theology of personhood more systematic and understandable.

Self-Consciousness as a Form of Obedience: The “I/Thou” Relationship

The strong personalist tendency in von Balthasar’s theology must be supported by describing certain aspects of consciousness that make up his understanding of personhood. Though certainly not the only theologian to use “I/thou” psychology, von Balthasar finds the I/thou process of human consciousness crucial to the development of the human person. Notice how our very coming to self-consciousness takes the form of obedience as we receive that consciousness from someone else. Here we see aspects of our third and fourth chapters as self-consciousness comes from attending to how the other manifests itself in a loving relationship.
As discussed above in our first chapter on Christ’s relationship with Mary, Balthasar explains that a child’s consciousness begins by being addressed by a “Thou.” This address, normatively done on the part of a loving mother, plants the seed of a spiritual life in the child in three ways.

First, there is a subconscious awareness in the child that being a self means to owe that self to another. This basic posture is, at first, directed toward the mother but as the child grows and matures he discovers that even the mother owes her being to someone else. This line of thought eventually results in the recognition of Divinity as the source of freedom and being.

The second step on the path to self-consciousness involves a conscious subject becoming aware of the fact the he is defined in relation to others. Subconsciously, he becomes aware that being able to grasp his own being (i.e. coming to a knowledge of his own nature) is the same function as grasping freedom. The conscious subject now understands that, because of his freedom, his being is incommunicable to all others; even to those to whom he owes his being. But their presence is the condition for the possibility of his realizing his own consciousness. He exists in relation to them. He possesses his own incommunicable subjectivity only insofar as he leaves room in himself for other incommunicable subjects. In this way, he experiences the structure of being as such, which thus contains an image of the communal, i.e. Trinitarian, constitution of Absolute Being.

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9 Ibid., 458.
Now that he is aware of being addressed by a free, loving Absolute Subject (God) he becomes aware that he must respond in turn. “Having been awakened to free Subjectivity, he has also been entrusted with a ‘mission’; what he has been given is to be transformed and freely given back, and in this way he shall not loose it.”\textsuperscript{10} Therefore, within creation, this perpetual mutual awakening and indebtedness cannot be self-enclosed. It must point to an absolute being in whom these relationships are ultimately based, and to whom ultimate obedience is owed.\textsuperscript{11}

Even though much of the above takes place at an objective and pre-confessional level, it remains necessarily Christian; not only this, but it remains fundamentally Catholic. Only within the sphere of being raised and formed by the faith in prayerful obedience does one, ideally, become aware of his mission-consciousness. Once again, von Balthasar evinces a strong personalist facet to the path to personhood. As I said above, personhood is received and exercised in two ways: prayer and community for these two relationships manifest two different kinds of I/Thou relationships: the former indicates an I/Thou relationship with God, the later an I/thou relationship with another human.

The Role of Contemplative Prayer

By the term “prayer,” von Balthasar does not refer to every type of prayer, but contemplative prayer specifically. He holds that contemplative prayer consists in a communication with God that is also an encounter with God. In this communication, the

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
individual receives the definitive pronouncement of his life: what God desires and expects of him, what he is to endeavor to accomplish in the service of God and His Church.

If we want to live in his light, we must listen to his word, which always addresses us personally, which is always new since it is always free. It is impossible to deduce this word from some prior word that we have already understood and put into store: clear and fresh, it pours forth from the wellspring of absolute, sovereign freedom. The word of God can require something of me today that it did not require yesterday; this means that, if I am to hear this challenge, I must be fundamentally open and listening.¹²

Furthermore, an implied essential component of contemplative prayer is obedience. Fundamentally, this is a posture of putting oneself at God’s disposal.

Conformity to Christ only comes about by showing total obedience to Christ, not just in thought but also in action. Thus, it is constitutive of Christian prayer. When embarking on one’s journey toward fulfillment, one engages in contemplative prayer and discovers one’s own creatureliness. But in order to progress, prayer must take the form of obedience.¹³

Unless a man responds in obedience to the free and sovereign word of God in him, that man will fail to live up to the idea that God has for him.

Thus by prayer as a form obedience one comes to know his of identity, receives personhood, and is elected by God to follow a vocation. Here, election does not mean God’s objective eternal choice, but rather the subjective effect of God’s call on the sovereign freedom of the person called;¹⁴ that effect being that the one called must now


¹³ Ibid.

freely give his freedom the form of unfreedom. Typically, one becomes aware of his mission/vocation over time. He must grow into it as further prayer reveals further nuance in the mission. Nevertheless, election often coincides with an upheaval in the life of the one called. It often engenders a sense that one is being called against his will. Scripture is replete with such cases. However, his freedom resurfaces stronger than before in the realization that “by being a servant of his mission, he enjoys a freedom that is boundless.” Precisely this theological “moment” of resistance/acceptance, a moment that usually happens over a span of time, brings the called person into Christ’s “acting area.”

Jesus’ personal mission embraces the entire drama of the world’s salvation and all the dimensions between heaven and hell; thus when we are chosen, called and sent forth in him, it is always for service in a phase of salvation history. But even after acceptance the temptation to reject the mission lingers, due to original sin and from the pressures of the “world.” According to the Gospel, discipleship of this kind requires one to “forsake” and “hate” the world so that he may find the world again solely in doing the Father’s will. In this way one “discovers God by obeying him, his fellow men by serving them, and his own self, whom we only encounter in such service and obedience.”

Community and its Tensions: The Obediential Milieu

Given the last quote above, this mission-identity by its very nature is one that is

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 269.
17 Ibid., 271.
exercised in community. Von Balthasar contends that when a conscious subject becomes a person by accepting his vocation and mission, he simultaneously becomes socialized and must exercise this mission socially. Because Christ’s mission, in which the person participates, has a universal scope then the individual’s mission must also contain an analogous aspect of universality; though, since the individual Christian is decidedly finite, his mission’s analogous aspect of universality is simply that it must be exercised on behalf of the community.

The Tensions

A very basic tenet of the entire corpus of von Balthasar’s thought lies in the notion of drama. Dramatic tension exists between God and mankind, nature and supernature, a man and the rest of mankind, an individual person within himself. A dramatic tension even exists within Christ between His Divine and human natures. The dramatic tensions that exist between one person and another and those that exist within an individual form the core concern of this dissertation, as these are the tensions that express the communitarian dimension of the human person.

To place it within the context of the definition of obedience given in the first four chapters, please note the condition for the possibility of these personal tensions to exist is the very procession of the Son from the Father, as seen in our second chapter. In our first chapter, that tension manifested itself as the action of the Holy Spirit both on Jesus and in Jesus. In the third chapter the personal tensions manifest themselves in the tension between lover and beloved and also between the fundamental freedom of love and the fact that true love binds freedom. Furthermore, these tensions viewed within the context
of our fourth chapter on form and splendor show that there is an additional aspect of obedience inherent in all the tensions. Often, our tendency is to strive to resolve tension in favor of one or the other poles, or, at least, to find a compromise between them. However, for von Balthasar, tensions are not to be resolved, they must be preserved. They must remain “other” to each other so that (1) each pole can attend to the other as the other is self-manifesting, and (2) the distance implied by the existence of the tension is necessary to view the form of the other pole faithfully and in a non-controlling way. As stated above, both of these stipulations manifest a form of obedience.

In what follows, we will explore three of von Balthasar’s tensions: (1) the tension between Body and Soul, (2) the tension between an individual and community, and (3) the tension between man and woman. In defining these tensions we will discover that obedience plays and absolutely fundamental role in the communitarian dimension of human personhood because each and every tension requires that I be attentive to the other in the way that the other is self-manifesting. In each and every case, the way I behave toward the other, whether that behavior be motivated by love, hate, indifference, etc., is determined, at least in part, by the way the other is presented to me. This is obedience.

**Nature and supernature: The cause of the tensions**

For von Balthasar, each individual finds himself in a hiatus between nature and super-nature. A person sees himself as existing with other plants and animals, but detects that there is something more to his own existence.\(^\text{18}\) Mankind is not merely a refined

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version of natural “stuff”. Each person, while not denying his own biology, knows that biological data is woefully inadequate to explain his or her complexity. This knowledge of something else creates a conflict within each person. In the human person, as in no other creature, lower instincts struggle with a higher supernatural calling. Von Balthasar describes this conflict as a dramatic tension existing between two polarities. The human person contains three such tensions: (1) soul and body, (2) individual and community, and (3) man and woman.

Tension one: Body and Soul: how we view the world

The Dramatic conflict between soul and body plays itself out on a grand stage not limited by mere birth and death. Mankind, as stated above, knows itself as a unity of physical and spiritual matter. As spirit, each person knows that he is not limited to space and time as the body perceives it, but, as body, this struggle must take place on a sensate level. Balthasar says that, “Man can be the ultimate blossom of nature…while at the same time, despite his bodily being, he remains profoundly alien to the time/space world of nature and strives to regain the lost original world.” Furthermore, Balthasar says that it is the good of mankind to preserve this tension because extreme spiritualization is as de-naturing to a person as extreme sensualization.

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21 Nichols, 85.
Tension two: Individual and Community: how we obey the polis

The conflict that exists between the individual and community lies simply in that, for Balthasar, the nature of mankind demands that each individual person must perfectly embody the concept of humanity as a whole, but part of that concept of humanity is that everyone is his own incommunicable instance of humanity. A constant battle wages between the good of the individual and the good of the community; a dramatic tension that, again, must be maintained for the good of the human family.

The basic task of the community is to “surround and protect” the individual.

“The center of the empire or polis coincides with the center of the cosmos; the heaven/hell axis goes vertically through this center.” Here, von Balthasar indicates an essential aspect of the role that community plays in the performance of a man’s mission.

Our access to heaven and hell, our access to the spiritual milieu in which we will actualize our God-given mission must be done within the milieu of community, in a real relation with other humans.

Obedience enters this tension as a manifestation of two contrary movements.

First of all, the individual grows into the community; in primitive peoples he is adopted into it by special initiatory rites, stepping forth out of the “physical” unity of the family into the encompassing unity of the polis, the state, in order to participate in its law and freedom and so grow beyond the limitations of individuality. The good of moving from limitation to freedom is bought at the cost of obedience to the laws, indeed, by preferring the common good to the individual’s own good…By inserting himself into the world of the community, constituted by laws, the individual becomes a carrier of community values;…

22 Von Balthasar, Theodrama vol II, 383.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 385.
The two contrary movements are that the individual, in order to exercise the freedom of his mission, must do so in obedience to the laws of the polis. In this way, he becomes a person of that community. The contrary movement to this is that the community exists for the good of the individual, but the individual must be a man of community to truly manifest his individuality.

In this way, beings existing for themselves simultaneously exist for one another. Nor do they do so in a timeless realm; each free, human self-awareness enters the dance at a particular time.25

Earlier in this chapter we discussed the “I/thou” relationship and its role in a child coming to self-consciousness; the quote immediately preceding is simply another restatement of that notion. The individual can only be an individual by being obedient to the community which is other to him, but also includes him.

Tension three: Man and Woman: how we obey each other

The dramatic tension between man and woman is of fundamental importance for the purposes of this dissertation. It is interesting to note that in von Balthasar’s theology the notion of the complementary aspect of sexuality is largely not present; in that von Balthasar is less interested in the complementarity of the sexes as he is in their difference. Certainly, complementarity plays a decisive role in his theology of the sexes, but, complementarity carries with it the notion of resolution of tension, which, as you recall, for von Balthasar, we must avoid. This is not because he has a Manichean outlook on

25 Ibid., 388.
human relations, but rather because he insists on stressing the dramatic aspect of sexuality. Sexuality for von Balthasar is divine/human art. Furthermore, this dramatic tension should not be seen as something necessarily stress-inducing or painful or undesirable in any way (though it often is), for it describes the human situation even before the Fall, and, therefore, also describes it after the resurrection of the body at the end of time. It simply describes the movement of each person between two polar opposites that exist within themselves.\footnote{One may question why I say that maleness and femaleness are two polar opposites within each person: of all von Balthasar’s tensions, the difference of the sexes is the only one of all the internal struggles which was “instantized” or “exteriorized” by the drawing forth of woman from the side of man. Borrowing a phrase from John Paul II Theology of the Body, in our original solitude, the difference of the sexes was internal. Now it is not.} It can be said that the struggle that humanity now experiences in keeping the middle ground between these two poles will be non-present after the resurrection, as each person’s soul and body will be completely conformed to, and informed by, Grace.

From the very dawn of creation man and woman have stood beside and completed one another. After God created the heavens, the earth, and Adam, he proclaimed it all good except for one thing: “It is not good for the man to be alone.”\footnote{Genesis 2:18. New American Bible.} It was, therefore, that God drew from the side of Adam his counterpart Eve. Taking Eve from Adam’s side instead of his genitalia, which may have made more sense in the Ancient Near East,\footnote{One is reminded of the Egyptian creation myth, which is contemporary with the Israelite creation story, where the Egyptian “over-god,” Atum, masturbates, and as his ejaculate falls to the ground, humans are created.} expresses the fundamental equality that man and woman have in relation to each other.

\[\text{26} \] One may question why I say that maleness and femaleness are two polar opposites within each person: of all von Balthasar’s tensions, the difference of the sexes is the only one of all the internal struggles which was “instantized” or “exteriorized” by the drawing forth of woman from the side of man. Borrowing a phrase from John Paul II Theology of the Body, in our original solitude, the difference of the sexes was internal. Now it is not.

\[\text{27} \] Genesis 2:18. New American Bible.

\[\text{28} \] One is reminded of the Egyptian creation myth, which is contemporary with the Israelite creation story, where the Egyptian “over-god,” Atum, masturbates, and as his ejaculate falls to the ground, humans are created.
Also, Eve’s creation was an act of God and not a natural process. This afforded it the miraculous character that it must have if the relationship is to create life.29 Furthermore, if Eve were taken from the dust of the Earth just as Adam was, then there would have been no internal unity30 and Adam could never have made the epic sigh of relief, “At last! This one is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh.”31 Why was Adam so relieved to see Eve? His exclamation gives one a sense that she is more than just good company. It is Balthasar’s contention that it is Eve which finally completes Adam.

In what follows, we will explore in some detail the difference between the sexes and show how the four obediential vectors defined in the first four chapters have fundamental relevance for the proper relationship between man and woman, the original human community. This exploration will have three main parts: (1) Wort/Antwort – Litz/Antlitz. In a play on German wording, we will discover that man is word (wort) and woman is the answer (antwort) to his calling. Furthermore, we will discover that man looks (litz) out for a partner, an other, and finds it in the woman’s face (antlitz). (2) We will explore the von Balthasarian notion that, while man always has a singular ordering toward woman, woman is always split, as were, by an irreducible binary ordering toward both man and child. (3) The differences between the sexes notwithstanding, we all, man and women, stand in a feminine posture to God in that He plants the seed of Divine life in us, but it comes to fruition in us only if we give it room and our cooperation. Obedience


30 Ibid.

31 Gen: 2:23.
plays a role in all three sections as, essentially, all three define the very quintessence of human love, namely, that between a man and a woman. As we have written in the third chapter, love is where freedom and obedience are conjoined.

Wort/Antwort, Litz/Antlitz.32 Before Eve’s creation, Adam called all animals by name, but none were able to adequately answer him. It is only with his exclamation “at last!” that his word (wort) is given a suitable response in Eve’s answer (antwort). This relationship is far more than a mere conversation. As the second account of creation shows, the word that calls out only attains fulfillment when it is understood and accepted then given back as word.33

So, even though the answer is latent within the man (woman taken from his side) he is unable to produce it himself. He can only receive it from woman, as a freely given miracle of God, in their encounter face to face. In her answering she turns the man-who-sees, vis-à-vis all other animals of creation which he has named, into the man-who-is-seen vis-à-vis the woman.34 In this aspect man (litz) is dependent upon woman (antlitz) for his fulfillment.

Therefore the woman, who is both answer (antwort) and face (antlitz), is not only the man’s delight: she is the security and help of man, his home and the vessel of

32 Literally means: Word-Answer, One-Who-Sees – One-Who-Is-Seen. I thought it necessary to use the German in order to bring out the phonetical similarity as well as the clear indication of opposite that the “ant” indicates. This can only come through in the German.

33 Von Balthasar, Theodrama vol. III, 284.

fulfillment specially designed for him. But she is not merely the receptor of his fruitfulness. She has her own, equal answering fruitfulness. It is secondary to man’s fruitfulness, which in itself is helpless, because it is received within her and, united to her fruitfulness, brings it to its fullness.\textsuperscript{35} Because within her person man and woman’s fruitfulness is brought to its fullness, it is clear that she is the fruit-bearing principle in all creation.

Woman’s duality, Man’s Singularity. This manifests another fundamental difference between man and woman. Man can only offer his word (seed), uniting it to woman. But it is woman that produces and shows the true depth of word by uniting it to her answer and creating a third person equal in dignity to the man and woman. The woman does not give back to man what she received from him, but rather something totally new. In this way the woman gives him a twofold answer: a ‘personal’ answer (antwort) and one that goes beyond the I-thou relationship into a more generic social dimension. While man is only ordered toward woman, his answer and face, woman is ordered towards man and child, in other words she is both Bride and Mother.\textsuperscript{36} She has both a singular relationship vis-à-vis the man, and a societal/species relationship vis-à-vis the child.

As such the mission, or story, of man can be told in a “straight line” because he is always ordered towards and finds his completion in woman. However, woman is far


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 286.
more complex because her story and direction changes according to the needs of man
and/or child. Man simply has no experience of this irreducible binary focus.\(^{37}\)

It should be mentioned here that von Balthasar is not merely theologizing based
on a physicalist understanding of the sexual act. He bases this theology upon a
prelapsarian relationship where one cannot say what the manner of reproduction was,
particularly when one reflects that sexuality is intimately connected to death by virtue of
hereditary sin.\(^{38}\) He also asserts that he is speaking on a universal level where the man-
woman relationship is something ordained by God and obviously played out in the
created order.

Recall the third chapter wherein we discussed an interesting property of love: in
that it is necessarily limitless and, also, operates only under certain conditions, i.e. the
conditions placed upon it by the beloved. In the above explication of wort/antwort and
litz/antlitz we see this obediential vector play out. The man must love the woman only in
the way in which she will experience love. His limitless love for her must be placed
under the conditions that she places on it. Man is not free to address any other animal in
this way, only woman is his answer and face. But her creation is as miraculous; her
freedom is as inviolable as is his. When he gives his love to her, he does so not knowing
how, or even if, it will be returned. But none of this matters, he must be obedient to the

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 297.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 286. Quoting von Balthasar in full: “We deliberately leave this expression vague,
because initially it takes no account of the manner of reproduction. In the wake of the
Fall, reproduction is explicitly sexual, but we cannot say whether it was so, in the same
form, when man was in the original (paradisal) state, for sexuality is intimately bound up
with the death of individuals.”
terrible burden and life-giving liberty which are the consequences of self-sacrificial love. He must love her as she requires.

The woman, for her part, experiences the burden, the limiting nature of love, in that she must await the man’s first action toward her. She requires him to act first and she must receive what he gives. Love, in order to fulfill the irreducible binary ordering of feminine nature, demands that the woman wait for, and submit to, the love of the man. Doing this means that her very nature will be fulfilled; she will be the life-giving principle of nature. And in this, by this obedience, she will find her ultimate fruition and freedom.

Femininity vis-à-vis Divinity: how we obey God. A loose analogy between what has been said about the man-woman relationship obtains what could be said about creature/creator relationship. The entire created realm stands in a feminine posture toward God. However, there is no comparison between God and Adam for the simple reason that God does not need mankind’s antwort and antlitz for fulfillment. Nor does this relationship bear true within the intra-Trinitarian life. As Balthasar explains:

God the Father is under no necessity to separate himself from the product of his fruitfulness. He does not generate the Son in order to have a vessel into which to pour his richness, but out of the superabundant fullness of this selfless love…Similarly, the answer in the form of the Son does not come to the Father’s aid: he is a response of equal stature; and the Spirit, the fruit of their love, proceeds from their union, but does not become an independent and separate instance, founding new generations himself.39

39 Ibid., 287.
The act of creation is founded in Trinitarian freedom which selflessly grants contingent creatures a share in Divine life.

To continue with mankind’s femininity in relationship to God: if man and woman are made in the image and likeness of God, then they all contain their own fruit-bearing principle in the spiritual life. All humanity must be open to receive the seed of the Word of God and allow it to come to fruition within them.\(^{40}\)

In order to explicate the man/woman and mankind/God relationship just discussed in greater detail, we will now turn to the figure of Mary. She occupies a singular role in salvation history precisely because she relates to God both as a man (Jesus Christ) and as God (the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit). She typifies, along with her Son, exactly what the relationship between a man and woman should be, and she typifies exactly what the relationship between a human and God should be. Indicative of von Balthasar’s dramatic theology is the notion that every man and woman is made the way they are in order for us to make sense out of what happened between Mary and Jesus. Simply put, the difference of the sexes, for von Balthasar, exists from creation, to render what happened in Jesus Christ understandable. Maleness and femaleness exist for Jesus and Mary. In this we will see that the very foundation of the difference between the sexes is in order to manifest self-sacrificial love, which, as I have shown, is obedience. Also, in the following section, when I demonstrate that Mary is Church we will make the crucial assertion that we as members of the Church must obey the Church as we would God’s chosen instrument. In this are the requirements of obedience concretized. For von

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 288.
Balthasar, we are not permitted to maintain the illusion that we can obey God without obeying His Church.

**Mariology as Ecclesiology: A Woman With a Mission**

The ultimate flower and foundation of the tension between man and woman is, as we have indicated, the relationship between Jesus and Mary. Regarding this relationship we will see several points which need elaboration: (1) How Mary can be said to be Christ’s help, (2) In what way she helps Christ, and (3) How the irreducible binary nature of Mary’s femininity is manifested vis-à-vis Christ? When we elaborate on these items we will see how Mary, having satisfied all the prerequisites spelled about above, emerges as a true theological person.

How Mary can be Christ’s Help

Jesus Christ is said to be the Second Adam. If divine revelation and the created order are to be consistent with each other, than this Adam must have his counterpart, his Antwort/Antlitz, in a Second Eve. The relationship that Christ has with this particular woman is unique and potentially more complex by virtue of Christ’s humanity, divinity, and mission. Since Jesus Christ as a person has assumed human nature in its maleness, he must have a relationship with woman that too is individual. However, by virtue of the fact that he is the eternal Son of the Father, and that his singular mission is to reconcile the whole world to the Father, his helpmate must also have a social relationship to those who are redeemed.\(^{41}\)

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 288.
Furthermore, one cannot say that the Logos, even in his incarnated form, is incomplete without his female complement as he is still God. But one can say that “out of his fullness he creates a vessel, then pours his fullness into it, fulfilling both it and himself through the realization of its possibilities.”42 In other words, we cannot say that God needed Mary in an absolute sense, but, rather, that His mission required the agency of a woman. The Immaculate Conception creates a perfect vessel (Mary) from the fullness of his divinity into which he will place his fullness. As a result, the necessary action of Mary does not reduce the necessity of Christ’s work. But as Christ is divine, so he is human and, as is said above, the Second Adam will need a second Eve.

The primary way in which Mary acts as Christ’s helpmate is by virtue of her “fiat.” God would not violate the freedom of His creation by forcing on her such an awesome responsibility. We cannot conceive that God had a plan “B” should his chosen vessel say “no.” Therefore it is left to Mary’s faith and fidelity to usher in single-handedly the new age of Christ. Her “fiat” is the antwort to God’s Wort. Her bridal relation to the divine reality begins as a fundamentally Trinitarian mystery. She is overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, her fruitfulness is united to the fruitfulness of the Father, and, as the fruit bearing principle of creation, she gives birth to the First Principle of Creation in his human form.43

A second way in which Mary acts as a helpmate to Christ is that she awakens within the child Jesus his mission-consciousness. “Unless a child is awakened to I-

42 Ibid., 288.

43 McBride.
consciousness through the instrumentality of a Thou, it cannot become a human child at all.”

In Jesus’ case, as we have shown in chapter One, his I-consciousness is identical with his mission-consciousness. If it requires a Thou to awaken an I-consciousness then the Thou (Mary) would have to have a truly special relationship with Him. However, it is not appropriate to say that Jesus came to know his mission from any outside source because it, being identical with his being, would have had no conceivable beginning. All that would be necessary is an initial awakening of his human mission-consciousness.

This would have been conceivably caused by Mary imparting to the Child the religious traditions that looked toward the fulfillment of Israel’s hope. This awakening could only be done by Mary, for only she would be able to impart a pure and infallible understanding of the faith, being without sin and completely docile to the Spirit.

Without this spiritual handing-on, which takes place simultaneously with the bodily gift of mother’s milk and motherly care, God’s Word would not have really become flesh. For being-in-the-flesh always means receiving from others. Even if the One who receives the word of tradition is himself “the Word from the beginning,” from whom all genuine tradition takes its origin, he must accept this earth-grown “wisdom” as a form – in the terms of the world – of his Father’s will and providence. So we see that the Incarnation of the Word that brings the promised fulfillment, or the “new and eternal Covenant,” has an inherent need of an antecedent history that we call “Old Covenant”; in Mary, the (Abrahamic) faith that characterized this Covenant becomes a contributory element in the Incarnation.

Here Mary’s antwort takes on the role as teacher to the Wort. Von Balthasar, interestingly, asserts that the impartation of Mary’s faith onto the child Jesus is a

44 Von Balthasar, Theodrama vol III, 175.

45 Ibid., 176-177.

46 Ibid., 177.
decidedly *Jewish* faith. Other theologians\(^{47}\) will emphasize the role of Mary as the first Christian as she is the first to express faith in Jesus Christ, while von Balthasar emphasizes the importance of Mary as the preeminent Jew. Clearly, in this instance, von Balthasar thinks it important to express the necessity of continuity with the Jewish tradition.

The Duality of Feminine Nature in Mary

The duality of the nature of woman comes through in the person of Mary vis-à-vis her Son. As has been said above, woman is ordered toward man and child. Put in another way, woman must obey her nature to be both bride and mother. Von Balthasar claims that, by virtue of her Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth, Mary is both Bride and Mother to Christ. As a mother Mary must give, in the required purity, everything her Child needs, but as his Bride “she must be able to share his sufferings in a way appropriate to her, and what most fits her for this task is her utter purity, which means that she is profoundly vulnerable.”\(^{48}\) It is thus that Mary can empathize to the greatest degree with the sufferings of Christ’s brothers and sisters. Because of her sinlessness and utter purity her very being revolts at sin and she reaches out with purest love and compassion to those who suffer. She can be Christ’s Bride by virtue of her virginity and his Mother by virtue of her fruitfulness.

Additionally, only when Christ hangs upon the Cross and gives Mary into the charge of the Beloved Disciple does Mary become *antlitz* to Christ’s *Litz*. Christ looks

\(^{47}\) Notably Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 323.
out and his look is returned by the upturned face of his Mother/Bride. In the same moment the Church is born from His wounded side. Just as Eve was taken from the side of Adam, so the New Eve, Christ’s Bride, flows from the side of the New Adam. It is at this moment when Mary becomes Church and Mother of the Church.

Mary, as both Mother and Bride of Christ, is now both Church and Mother of the Church. She can be both because, as is shown above, at the foot of the Cross with the beloved Disciple she became the original image and cell of the community founded by Christ and at the same time received the apostle and in him all Christians as her children.\textsuperscript{49} The gesture of welcome which the Beloved Disciple gives Mary in taking her into his home takes him beyond the fact that he was never actually born of Mary and allows him to participate in the same position as Jesus.\textsuperscript{50}

Why We Must Obey the Marian Church

In order for the necessity of our obedience to the institutional/Marian Church is to be demonstrated it must be asked how it is that one lowly little woman can be the embodiment of the Universal Church in all of its universal aspects. Von Balthasar speaks of three more dramatic tensions which universalize the person of Mary: (1) She is between Paradise and the Fallen State, (2) She is between the Old and New Testaments, and (3) She is between time and eternity. The first two comprise the vertical and horizontal axis of salvation history respectively, while the third exists above and beyond and give Mary her truly unique, mystical, and universal role


She is between Paradise and the fallen state

Mary’s existence is supralapsarian and interlapsarian.\textsuperscript{51} This has already been discussed to some extent, but there remains a little more to say about it. The dramatic tension here which corresponds to the Church is that while Mary herself is utterly sinless, she lives in a sinful world and suffers the effects of Original Sin even more intensely than the rest of humanity by virtue her sinlessness. By the same token is the Church without sin or error, but suffers most egregious from the sins of its individual members.

She is between the Old and New Testaments

Mary as a faithful descendent of Abraham looking forward to Israel’s redemption stands in direct continuity with the line of Adam, but as Virgin Mother overshadowed by the Spirit she comprises a hiatus, a break from what went before, and new beginning.\textsuperscript{52} Her tension between the Testaments becomes most apparent when she marries Joseph. If Mary is the Bride and Mother of Christ, than who was married to Joseph? Joseph’s marriage to Mary was not one which bore fruit in the physical or sexual sense. Furthermore, it was not a sacramental union\textsuperscript{53}, such as Mary had with Christ. “God’s intervention does not dissolve this marriage (between Joseph and Mary) but

\textsuperscript{51} Von Balthasar, \textit{Theodrama vol III}, 318.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 328.

\textsuperscript{53} By “Sacramental union” I mean the basic definition of “sacrament”, namely, an efficacious sign instituted by Christ to give grace. The sacramental union between Christ and Mary is the primordial sacrament upon which all the other’s are grounded. I do not intend to indicate a sacramental marriage between Christ and Mary. Mary’s union with Christ is, in fact, something more profound.
simultaneously uses and transcends it."\(^{54}\) He uses it so that Jesus would be born in the line of David and transcends it by the Virgin Birth of Christ. Furthermore, Mary is the culmination of all the sufferings of Israel which were the birth pangs of the Savior. She is the epitome and embodiment of Israel who gave birth to the last age.\(^ {55}\) She is the fullness of Israel’s faith, the one who bore the Messiah in the flesh and shared in his sufferings right up to the Crucifixion and was raised, like him, to the throne of God.\(^ {56}\)

Mary’s position as the hiatus between the Old and New Covenants speaks of how she is the Church. She is the hope of all the patriarchs and prophets of the past. Furthermore, all the troubled and miraculous births of the matriarchs of the Old Covenant are prefigurements of the Virginal Conception in her.\(^ {57}\) Similarly, as a perfect receptacle of the Word of God, she herself embodies the Eucharistic Church.

**She is between time and eternity**

Most indicative of her role as Universal Church is that she is situated between time and eternity. This tension must emerge if Mary is the Mother of all the living by virtue of being Mother of the Redeemer.\(^ {58}\) Hans Urs von Balthasar takes as his starting point the Woman of the Apocalypse.\(^ {59}\) Here a great and epic battle is portrayed, a battle

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 329.


\(^{56}\) Ibid. 10.


\(^{58}\) Ibid., 334.

\(^{59}\) Revelation, chapter 12.
that begins in eternity but is played out in time. The woman clothed with the sun gives
birth to the Messiah, suspended between heaven and earth. Her Child is taken up to God
and she is chased into the wilderness of this world but is protected from the dragon.
However, the dragon, after being cast down from heaven, now wages war with the rest of
her offspring. It should be noted that, while the woman’s children fight, the woman
herself, though she is pursued, does not. The children can be overcome by the dragon,
but the woman (the Church) cannot. For the whole period of the history of the world she
is defended in the place prepared for her by God, where she does not have to struggle
for survival but is nourished by God. “This womanly, Marian Church cannot be affected
by the power of the dragon, ‘the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’”60 Thus Mary
is ordered to eternity in herself by virtue of her heavenly attributes (Immaculate
Conception), she is ordered to eternity in her Child by virtue of his Divinity, and in her
adversary who has fallen from heaven.61

In Mary the Church is immaculate and beyond the tension between reality and
ideal. It is on this very account that Mary stands above and beyond the purely mundane
encounter of husband and wife and opens it out into the infinity of the divine Eros,
insofar as the Father himself accepts her word of faith and fidelity, and as she is
overshadowed, not by the Word, but by the Holy Spirit. The fruit of this marriage is the
Incarnation of the Son who is Head and Body, Bridegroom and Bride. From this
standpoint Mary, as prototype of the Church, is properly called the bride of Christ. God

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gave Mary to mankind as a prototype so that the Church may never forget the Trinitarian aspect of her nuptial mystery. 62

On this account, Mary receives the Son as seed of the Father through the realizing act of the Holy Spirit of Father and Son. And it is for the same reason that, in the sphere of the Church, the actualizing of the sacraments is the work of the Holy Spirit, who places the Father’s Word in the womb of the soul for it to generate and give birth. This again does not prevent the Church being the Son’s bride, since this entire participation of the created world in the Trinitarian Divinity is the working and prolongation of the incarnate Word. 63

In sum, the theological constructions that von Balthasar makes on Revelation 12 are that the identity of the Woman Clothed with the Sun is fourfold: Israel, Church, Mary, and the New Eve. Furthermore, all four of these identities correspond to the multiplicity of roles implied in the mission of the single historical person, Mary of Nazareth.

By interpreting Revelation 12 within the structure of his theological dramatics, von Balthasar encourages a realized eschatology, at least in part. In a discussion of the roles of Mary, our theologian begins in the beginning with the Book of Genesis. Upon the relationship between Adam and Eve, he builds a complicated anthropology (c.f. the tensions indicative of human nature) which has soteriology as its ground in the sense that Adam and Eve’s relationship was a precursor to Jesus and Mary’s relationship. By conflating Adam and Eve with Jesus and Mary (which is not without its scriptural warrant) von Balthasar encourages a thinking that tends toward a notion of salvation history. It is a salvation history that proclaims Jesus’ “hour” as the fullness of time and


63 Ibid., 187.
the Church’s hour (now) as the last times. We are in the “already-but-not-yet” of the inbreak of God’s Kingdom. For von Balthasar, the final realities are not merely posterior to Christian experience but have already been realized in time. As a result, he will not discuss the classical topics of death, judgment, heaven and hell, but, rather, “the presence of the divine reality to which these terms refer in Christian existence now.”64 The Woman of the Apocalypse, by being identified as Eve, Israel, Mary and the Church, intends to show us that eschatology is realized at every stage of salvation history.

Further, and this is important to note regarding obedience, the only way that we can appropriate to ourselves the blessing and grace of Christ; the only way can be the spotless bride of the Lamb; the only way we can call our own the remarkable status of Mary of Nazareth is by obedience to the institutional, Petrine Church which, as we have demonstrated, is the sole inheritor of Marian perfection.

The Magnificat is Mary’s song of poverty, for she has been stripped of every possible counterdefense, striped, that is, of such “good things” as her own arguments or objections or “responsibilities”. The primordial act of the Church, therefore, is an act of allowing God to have disposition over oneself. This is an act that subsumes and magnifies the mature faith experience of Israel: that God is with the powerless and those deprived of rights and the God’s saving deed has chosen and redeemed precisely them most of all. Obedience is almost too limited, too specialized a concept for this attitude of letting God dispose of oneself. For this kind of obedience precedes specialized obedience in an analogous, transcendent way, just as the kenotic obediential will of the Son preceded his earthly obedience once he had taken on the form of a servant.65

64 Nichols. 219.

The above quote brings together several aspects of this entire dissertation. It draws the connection between Jesus Christ’s act of poverty, i.e. his kenosis, as the prime requisite of His obedience to the Father, and Mary’s poverty as the prime requisite of her obedience to God. Both of these “poverties,” both of these foundational acts of obedience are absolutely required for the Incarnation, Cross, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost events to take place which will give birth to the Institutional Church. Furthermore, this kind of specialized obedience, the quote above informs us, finds its ground in the very procession of the Son from the Father.

Only Mary and the Marian Church can be perfectly docile to the Will of God in this way, but the issue of institutional obedience becomes fraught with confusion, von Balthasar admits, when the perfect obedience of Mary is required of decidedly imperfect people like Peter or Paul (or any of the rest of us) who are members of the spotless Church. For Mary, no coaxing, no debate was required on the part of God to convince her to do His will. Mary is not a member of the Church, she is the Church. Peter and the rest of the Apostles are, however, members of the Church. Unlike Mary, these pillars of the Church (the Apostles) are not partners with Christ, are not mediators of Christ in the same way as Mary. As such, they offer resistance and debate and false pretense and Jesus must convince and rebut and rebuke. Peter, like the rest of us, is not a handmaid, not a partner, but an instrument:

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66 Ibid., 149

67 By use of the word “partner” regarding Mary, von Balthasar intends to elevate her status as co-redeemer, and honor which she and she alone can claim.
That is why the change from the place of alienation to the place of finding one’s own true identity (mission in Christ) is bound up for the individual Christian with an act that is both an act of obedient faith as well as an act of self-surrender in faith, although the change is not actually caused by this act but rather by Christ’s.\(^6^8\)

Obedience then requires us, in loving self-surrender, to give up what we thought was ours and embrace what is truly ours. This self-surrender is not without its pain. As such, ecclesiastical obedience makes no sense outside of the Passion of Jesus Christ.

Consider the following:

For it is only in the Passion that we are able to discern the last formal element in the gift of self in love – the element that not only is now, but always has been, the *most essential component of the love of Father and Son* and the must continue to be, in the future, the formal element of the Christian gift of self since the Lord has bequeathed to the Church his own love – namely, *obedience*. To establish at the heart of the New Covenant of love an absolute authority that makes possible an absolute obedience is, then, the highest grace the Redeemer can bestow on the Church he is to found; the grace of being allowed to bring, together with him, the proof of a love so perfect that it is ready to prefer the will of another to its own will even in the dark night of the soul when it no longer comprehends what it does.\(^6^9\)

This quote brings together certain fundamental elements of this dissertation: (1) obediential love is the way that Son and the Father relate, (2) given that fact, obedience is a gift to us; the highest gift, in fact, (3) obedience is liberating, (4) Even blind obedience is a gift when one does not comprehend what he is required to do.

Furthermore, like Jesus’ obedience to the Father, our obedience to the Church is neither a shirking of responsibility to follow rote orders, nor can it be seen as a flight into

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 150.

the comfort and complacency of smoothly running institutional order. 70 On the contrary, it is a willingness to be completely exposed ‘on the mountain of the Lord’, a willingness to embody Christ’s own mode of obedience for the sake of all and each one in particular.” 71

In conclusion, the whole of this chapter served to demonstrate how Christological obedience plays out in human nature; both in our relationship with each other and in our relationship with God. We have discovered that everything it means to be a man with a mission, to possess theological personhood, is wrapped up in what it means to be Jesus and Mary. All of our unique, individual missions are given to us to be acted out on Christ’s “acting stage.” In other words, we are all given a share in Christ’s one mission of salvation and redemption. Obedience to this mission will introduce us into the ever increasing glory of God’s own life, and, as a side benefit, obedience to our mission will also be the perfect expression of our freedom. To be what your Creator has fashioned you to be, to fulfill your nature given to you by God, is the perfect expression of freedom.

We have also learned that the proper milieu for the exercise of this mission is the Marian Church. The Marian Church is the community in which we will actualize our God-given mission. This actualization must be done within the milieu of the Church community, in a real relation with other humans in an institution created by God and characterized by Marian spotlessness and fecundity.

70 Ibid., 152.
71 Ibid., 152.
As we saw above in this chapter, von Balthasar’s theology of personhood depends on four interrelated factors: contemplative prayer, obedience, growth in holiness, and community. As it happens, the four factors just listed are, of course, the most fundamental notions of cenobitic monastic life. Two of the above four criteria are vows which the Benedictine monk takes: obedience and conversatio morum, which is typically translated as “conversion to the monastic way of life.” The obedience really needs no further explanation here; however conversatio morum implies a lifelong process in which the monk perpetually strives to grow in holiness. The remaining two criteria, contemplative prayer and community, imply the third monastic vow called “Stability.” Stability does not simply mean that a monk must be physically present at the monastery at all times, but also carries with it the notion that that particular monastery is where the monk will do all monastic things. Stability also implies a spirit of interior quiet, the kind of quiet necessary to pursue the heights of contemplation. Furthermore it also indicates community life, community liturgy, personal identity, and stability of spirit.

Whereas it cannot be said that the medieval monastic author I will be treating necessarily think that the monastic vocation confers theological personhood, I do think that von Balthasar’s theological anthropology, grounded in a notion of obedience, offers a new way of articulating the monastic way of life.
In the following I will conduct a close reading of Hugh of St. Victor’s *Soliloquy on the Earnest Money of the Soul.* During the course of my explication of this text I will use the above theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar as a hermeneutic tool. In so doing I intend to show that our theologian’s understanding of prayer, obedience, community, and vocation offer a deeper understanding of the monastic way of life.

It is not the goal of this essay to discuss the history of the *Soliloquy* in any length. It suffices to say that the document was written between the year Hugh was made director at the school of St. Victor, around 1125, and his death in 1141. It takes the form of a dialogue between a man and his soul where the man endeavors to convince the soul to love God by explaining how creation is the proof of God’s love for it. Creation is the dowry which the Bridegroom, Christ, has given for the love of his bride, the soul. By Hugh’s own admission, the work is intended to be read by monks for their own edification.

Near the beginning of the soliloquy the Soul says, “No one indeed can be happy without love, for in this alone is it agreed that unhappiness consists: not to esteem what one is.” The Soul argues this in response to what the Man previously said concerning the abandonment of all finite things. The Man insists that the Soul must hate the world in order to love eternal things. In this passage, the Soul expresses that it is impossible to love that which he cannot see and, furthermore, to love only eternal things means he must

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73 Ibid. Introduction by Kevin Hebert.

74 Hugh of St. Victor, 15.
hate what he himself is, i.e. a finite creature. The Man responds in true Augustinian fashion and asserts that it is not love of the world that necessarily puts one in danger, but rather a love of the world that is not in perspective with the love of God. In fact, the Man has much good to say about the world, it is the dowry given to us by our Bridegroom. However, one does not love the dowry more than the bridegroom.\textsuperscript{75}

Medieval monastic literature has been often been accused of strongly perpetuating the notion of hatred of the world found in Christianity. It is true that many times the verbiage is quite strong, but, using von Balthasar’s theology, we can nuance this intransigent language and come to a new understanding of the monastic ideal which expresses itself by the term: \textit{fuga mundi}. Simply put, \textit{fuga mundi} is not an expression of hatred toward “worldly things” but is, rather, an interior attitude expressed by the outward sign of cloistered living which provides the disposition within the monk to find his identity in the Absolute Subject. As I said above, the world can only provide a rational nature’s \textit{whatness}. \textit{Whatness} is transient and is dependent on transient things for its definition. \textit{Whoness} defines the subject’s true identity. The principle of \textit{fuga mundi} merely recognizes properly ordered love. When personhood is conferred upon a rational subject by Absolute Subject, that person can now love and embrace the world properly, i.e. \textit{in Christo}. Hugh expresses this idea beautifully by insisting that the Soul should, in fact, love the creation/dowry which the Bridegroom has given, not because of its own value, but because it is the gift of the Bridegroom. This is, essentially, a properly ordered love as a monk would see it.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 17.
It can be shown that Hugh is cognizant of the quest for identity. The Soul laments: “In this world not only the lost glory of distinction but also the commonness of participation causes me sorrow.” This is placed in the context of the Soul complaining that the wicked participate in the dowry to the same extent as the blessed. The Man consoles the Soul by saying that, just as the just have dominion over transient things, so do they have dominion over the wicked because they fail to recognize from where the gift of transient things come. In von Balthasar’s language, the wicked are still trapped in the generality of whatness while the just, having received their mission consciousness, are now particular persons whose love is properly ordered. The wicked do not participate in the mastery of creation because they have not been given identity apart from it.

Implied is that only through the life of asceticism can a monk’s love will be properly ordered. Through prayer, stability, community, and obedience one will leave the world in order to learn the love of God. Only then can the monk love the world not as an end in itself, but as a gift of God and as an indication of His love.

In speaking of the community of the just, the Man delivers a speech concerning the use of gifts in a community. This speech so closely resembles von Balthasar’s theology that it almost needs no explanation:

That love is given to each one, yet it is not private; it is singular, yet not bereft of companionship; it is shared, yet remains whole; common to all, yet known fully by each of the elect; in sum it is the individual love of all and the complete love of each. Neither diminished by participation nor exhausted by use nor aged with time, it is at once old and new, desirable in

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76 Ibid., 20.

77 Ibid., 20.
its affection, sweet to experience, lasting forever, full of joy, refreshing, satisfying, and never a cause of satiety.\textsuperscript{78}

Immediately after this the Man says:

For just as he (God) has granted common and special benefits, so has he also given personal ones. Common goods are those which all beings enjoy, such as the light of the sun or the breezes of the air. Again, special benefits are not given to all but to particular groups; examples of these are faith, wisdom, and education. Lastly, particular blessings are bestowed upon individual persons, examples of which are the primacy among the apostles to Peter, the apostolate of the gentiles to Paul, and the special privilege of love to John.\textsuperscript{79}

And further:

He knew for what sweet task you were destined and what raiment was needed; Therefore, He gave what was fitting. And so well did it become you that He Himself delighted in these very gifts.\textsuperscript{80}

The similarities here with von Balthasar’s notion of identity as mission consciousness are remarkable. The first block quote above manifests a fundamental understanding that, once a monk’s identity has been established by properly ordering his loves, his vocation must now be exercised in community. Even the particular blessings given only to individuals have a decidedly public aspect. It recalls what we said in chapter 3 regarding the fact that humans have no strict right to privacy because we are individuals always for the other. In the last quote there is a definite understanding of God conferring identity to the monk.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 24.
But there is further nuance to point out. Not only has God granted mission and identity to the monk, but He has done it in Christo:

You alone have been accepted before all these (others), and if you should seek the cause for this you would find no other reason than the free and gratuitous charity of your Savior...In His own name He called you that you might always remember it. He desired you to partake of that name, to share in the truth of that name. He anointed you with the unction of gladness, with which He Himself had been anointed. Thus he who by Christ is called a Christian has been anointed with this unction.  

Thus the correlations with von Balthasar’s theological anthropology are complete. A monk has fled the world to enter a monastery. This monastery is a community of prayer where the very essence of observance is one of obedience and growth in holiness. In this community a monk learns to properly order his love to prefer Christ above all else. In prayer he becomes aware of his vocation and identifies himself as a unique “beloved of Christ.” In fact, prayer, which is a movement of love, engenders a highly personal experience of the love of God  

communion with God is the result of love and requires contemplation which will reveal his majesty and greatness. This activity is fulfilled in the joyous and peaceful possession of God. Secondly, this communion is based on a direct and immediate intuition and not on ordinary or analogical knowledge. Lastly, this union of God and the soul is the culminating point of all psychic activity.  

Contemplation begins and terminates in love.  

However, he also knows that his particularity must be exercised in a community of other “beloved of Christs.” The monk has accepted and received his mission  

consciousness and is now an actor in the Theodrama. No longer will the monk labor in  

81 Ibid., 27.  

82 Ibid., 6.
the confused generality of human nature where one dimly detects that he is different from the rest of creation. He now exercises his specific theological personhood in the space provided by the Person of Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, we have built an understanding of the concept of personhood using the theological anthropology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. We have determined that personhood defined as mission consciousness in Christ relied on four criteria: prayer, obedience, continual growth in holiness, and community. As these four criteria contain an obviously monastic character we applied it to a classical monastic text to see what would happen. I believe that what we have discovered is that the monks of the Middle Ages were extraordinarily cognizant of psychology and individuality. Whereas it cannot necessarily be said that Hugh of St. Victor had the same concept of personhood as von Balthasar, it can clearly be said that Hugh had a concept that monastic life conferred special identity to the monk that is grounded in Christo. Additionally, I have shown that an intimate knowledge of von Balthasar’s theology of personhood as mission consciousness, grounded as it is in a notion of obedience, has rendered an esoteric medieval text more accessible.
CONCLUSION

TOWARD A HERMENEUTIC OF OBEDIENCE

In all of the above I hope to have shown that one concept of obedience cuts through the entirety of von Balthasar’s theology in two ways, one positive and one negative: (1) knowing von Balthasar’s theology of obedience renders his entire corpus more understandable, and (2) not knowing his theology of obedience is to miss von Balthasar’s point entirely.

In the first chapter, I showed that the relationship between the Father and the Son is characterized primarily as one of obedience:

Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name… Phil 2:5-9

This was the distinguishing characteristic of Jesus Christ’s life and mission: to be obedient to the Father. This is how the glory of Divine Sonship is manifested in the world. We, lowly men that we are, can conceive of a myriad different ways in which our redemption was wrought that might have made more sense, but the one that the Tri-personal God chose was obedience.

If obedience is the way that God has decided to be self-revelatory in creation, then, von Balthasar has contended, obedience must have an analogous expression in the
intra-Trinitarian processions themselves: “…his very existence itself is a result of his mission and thus of his obedience.”¹ This was the topic of our Second Chapter.

The third chapter discussed the kind of obedience we are talking about, i.e. an obedience grounded in self-sacrificial love wherein the lover freely gives to the beloved the lover’s own freedom. We defined love as an act whereby the lover gives his freedom the form of unfreedom for the sake of the beloved. Furthermore we drew the connection that this kind of love is perfectly synonymous with obedience because, when one loves in this way there simply is no difference between a command and a non-binding wish. As a segue into the fourth chapter we discussed von Balthasar’s contention that the non-necessary self-glorification of Divine love is the only vector to view Christianity which renders Christianity credible.

If Christianity is credible then it places demands upon those who call themselves by that name. These demands must be obeyed. Our forth chapter outlines then, the fundamental role obedience plays in a human relationship with others and in a human’s relationship with God. This is a very broad topic which accounts for the length of that chapter. We began by defining the terms “splendor” and “glory” and outlined their role in viewing other persons (divine or human) in a non-controlling way. We then moved on to point out the constitution of the human person specifically, and outlined the various tensions found in each human and between each human: (1) the tension between body and soul, (2) the tension between the individual and the community, and (3) the tension...

between man and woman. Like the constitution of the Trinity itself, we discovered that
the human person is fundamentally designed to act in a community. Acting in a
community, by virtue of what we said about form and splendor, necessitates obediential
relationships because it necessitates loving relationships. After a lengthy section on the
differences between man and woman being grounded on the relationship between Jesus
and Mary, we defined how obedience operates in that most excellent community called
the Church.

In all of this we discovered the fundamental role that obedience plays in the
theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. So fundamental, in fact, that it would be impossible
to understand his mighty corpus without a clear understanding of what he means when he
indicates obedience. This dissertation has sought to provide that heuristic assistance.

A Hermeneutic of Obedience

I hope the reader will indulge one more brief tangential rumination. In my research
for this dissertation, I have discovered that the concept of obedience could, in fact, be
heuristic for every text of the Christian tradition. Obedience, for good or ill, is
inseparable from Christian understanding if we are attentive to Christ as he is thus self-
revelatory. He become obedient, even to death on the Cross for this reason (and no
other) he was given the name beyond any other name. Because of obedience and
obedience alone can we have any claim to redemption.

If, therefore, we read the texts of the Christian tradition in the spirit of giving our
freedom the form of unfreedom for the sake of the beloved, we may find that we will
glean a new, faithful, and convincing interpretation of our faith. In what follows, I will briefly outline a defense of what I will call my hermeneutic of obedience.

I. Is it palatable to post-modernity, concerned as it is with liberty?
   a. Yes, if we began by showing how obedience is a form of love, which is the truest exercise of freedom.
   b. Obedience is not merely slavish “doing as you are told.” It is the free decision to defer your will to the beloved.

II. What of “free choice” and “critical intellect?”
   a. The decision to love includes and transcends free choice and critical intellect.
   b. It will require a certain naiveté, to be obedient in this way. A certain return to innocence.
      i. This, I think, will be attractive to many over-burdened as we are with guilt and shame.
   c. In any case, critical intellect and free choice were always intended to operate within the milieu of faithfulness to the will of God. In such a way there can be no real dichotomy between freedom and obedience.

III. What problem does the Hermeneutic of Obedience fix?
   a. It fixes, as some would say, our post-modern petulance and immaturity.
      Obedience will teach discipline
   b. It fixes our clear problem with vow keeping. Obedience will teach the value of love and permanence.
IV. Has not the notion of obedience been the justifying cause of the subjugation of many people?

a. Perhaps. But if it was it was not used properly. A Hermeneutic of obedience will not allow for subjugation as its necessary operation will require attending to the “other” as he is thus self-revelatory.

V. What is the hermeneutic of obedience?

a. The hermeneutic of obedience is a way in which we will read a text of the Christian tradition in such a way as to not control its content or message.

b. If it is a defining text of the faith, we must approach it with a sense of reverence and love, not control or suspicion.

c. The general justification for a hermeneutic of obedience is that since the Christian faith is founded on obediential love (i.e. Christ and Him crucified) it is only by the discipline of obedience and the reverence of love that we will determine the truth of the faith.
APPENDIX A

VON BALTHASAR’S METHOD OF SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION
Revelation 12: the Woman Clothed With the Sun

As noted in chapter four of this dissertation, von Balthasar employs a variety of sources and approaches to the biblical text of Revelation 12—and thereby identifies the Woman as both Mary (Queen of Heaven) and Israel (in the sense that she is representative). In his work *Mary for Today*, VB analyzes the significance of the Woman in Revelation 12 for the purpose of discovering Mary’s role in contemporary times. Insofar as VB interprets the biblical text, we in turn seek to explicate the exegetical moves (or approaches to the text) he makes in his interpretations and also derive from said moves how VB views the multi-valent nature of the text. VB makes three hermeneutical/exegetical moves in his approach to Revelation 12.

**Move One: The Text Requires a Midrashic Approach**

VB reacts to the symbolic nature of the text by providing an interpretation of representations that could qualify as a Midrashic approach. This particular term is used due to the characteristic style of commentary provided by VB. The style interprets images in a way dissimilar to allegory in that the text does not require some form of spiritual sensibility to interpret, rather just a knowledge of salvation history. Such a

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1 Much of the following research was done as an unpublished joint project between me and Mr. Jeremy Misselbrook in the Spring of 2006 for a class in Christian Eschatology. Since both of us worked very closely to produce this research it is impossible to point out precisely those sections which were the fruit of Mr. Misselbrook’s research alone. I point this out so that he may be given credit for some of this work.


3 Biblical scholars uses the term “midrash” to categorize a variety of interpretive approaches to biblical texts. Generally it means to quote a scripture passage, then
focus guides the exegetical style of this work—a verse or phrase is highlighted from the text of Rev 12 and the significance of the reference is fleshed out in Midrashic fashion by numerous traditions (using a variety of sources: biblical, ecclesiastical, etc.) and is finally applied within a present framework. Even artistry is shown to have a retro-impact on the theological interpretation of the text. In the case of the woman of Revelation 12, numerous depictions of Mary combine imagery referenced in the passage. Mary’s salvific/intercessory role is also a prominent feature in artistic expressions. Though this

analyze pieces of the passage to provide meaning(s) to the whole. Usually this does not involve placing the lemma text in canonical context, but offers a new explicative approach to the text being commented upon. For definitions of midrash and allegory see Irving Hexham, Concise Dictionary of Religion (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15-16, 148; and Everett Ferguson Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993) 103, 447.

4 See Kyra Belan, Madonnas: From Medieval to Modern (New York: Parkstone Press, 2001); Jacqueline Orsini, Mary: Images of the Holy Mother (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001); and Timothy Verdon, Mary in Western Art (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2005). In the late 14th century, Lippo de Dalmasio’s The Madonna of Humility (see Orsini figure 28) and Giovanni del Biondo’s Virgin of the Apocalypse (see Belan page 41) each contain common elements of Mary wearing a blue cape, holding the Christ child, with a 12-starred crown, while she rests her feet upon the moon while the sun radiates from behind and all around her. The sun, moon, and star elements indicate Mary’s status as “Queen of Heaven” as in Antonio de Pereda’s The Immaculate Conception (17th century) and Jean Hey’s late 15th century The Madonna of the Apocalypse (see Belan pages 119, 134-139). Hence the heavenly elements are retrofitted into every aspect of Mary’s role on earth as portrayed in Pierre-Auguste Pichon’s The Annunciation (ca. 1859) which combines the imagery of the annunciation (lilies) with imagery of Queen of Heaven (stars and blue mantle) (see Belan page 186).

5 In Lucas Cranach the Elder’s The Virgin Under the Apple Tree (ca. 1530) the mother Mary and Christ child are positioned under an apple tree (traditional symbol for the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden) to exemplify a restoration of paradise (see Belan page 81). Furthermore, the suffering mother with a virginal countenance holds (or “bears”) the Christ after his crucifixion in the Michelangelo’s famous sculpture Pieta (ca. 1498) thereby encompassing the life of Christ within her own life experiences (see Verdon page 158).
style governs his approach, his interpretation is informed by salvation-history (see next move).

Move Two: The Text Represents Some Form of Historical Events (Actual Salvation-History)

Von Balthasar exegetes the passage as though the text’s historical nature represents a chronological (or linear) sequence of events. It would appear that in the case of Revelation 12, von Balthasar’s key to pinpointing periods in history is the identification of the main characters involved (where the text does not explicitly name them). The most obvious event in the Revelation 12 text revolves around a woman who has a child. The identity of the child as the Messiah (Christ) most readily identifies the woman.\(^6\) According to von Balthasar, the woman is therefore placed within the context of salvation-history in general (Israel) and the life of Jesus Christ in particular (Mary)\(^7\); and further operates in the context of ecclesiastical-history by being both the Mother of the Church and the Marian Church itself.\(^8\)

In terms of salvation-history, the Woman of Revelation 12 finds identity in the dual roles of Israel and Mary. As Israel, the woman experiences the “birth pangs” of the Messiah\(^9\) and is spared from destruction in similar fashion.\(^10\) As Mary, the mother of

\(^6\) Mary for Today, 9-10.

\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Both the characteristics of commonality and distinctiveness are especially important characteristics of the Queen of Heaven.

\(^9\) Mary for Today, 9.

\(^10\) Ibid., 12.
Jesus, she fulfilled the faith of Israel and Abraham. Her earthly-mother context also shared in Jesus’ experiences of suffering and ascension insofar as her questionable pregnancy and association with doubters would have caused her suffering. Her continual faith was evidenced by her presence and actions at Jesus’ crucifixion.

In terms of ecclesiastical-history (salvation-history in the Church Age), the woman of Revelation 12 increases in valence of meaning to incorporate her present dual-situation. As “Mother of the Church”, the woman exists as an intersection of the human Mary and her divine future role as intercessor by being assigned a disciple (John) at the foot of the cross. The “Mother of the Church” role is further promoted as the siblings of Christ share a common mother with him. Mary’s earthly experience guides her heavenly-intercessory role now, thus her “children” are allowed to experience faith without understanding (as she did). Thusly the transition can be made to perceiving the woman as the “Mother Church” which--like the “Mother”--suffered similarly disgrace,

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11 Ibid., 10, 17.
12 Ibid., 10.
13 Ibid., 14-15.
14 Ibid., 16.
15 Ibid., 11.
16 Ibid., 14.
17 Ibid., 11.
18 Ibid., 17.
anxiety and fear without doubt.\textsuperscript{19} In this re-casting of Israel as the Church, the goal of salvation is redefined as the New Promised land, thereby both resuming and revising Israel’s goal in salvation-history in terms of reaching an attainable boundary.\textsuperscript{20} And salvation-history (and ecclesiastical-history) bears directly on the history of the present (the final move).

Move Three: The Text Reveals Present Day Reality

Von Balthasar operates as though the text’s pastoral nature reveals (or informs) our current situation. He assumes--without much discussion--that the book of Revelation is by its nature “eschatological” in that it references the “last days” which are equivalent with the “present age”.\textsuperscript{21} References are made to the contemporary times of von Balthasar’s work (such as communist Russia and John Paul II).\textsuperscript{22} The focus of von Balthasar’s approach is to uncover clues for present-day meaning, and in the case of Revelation 12 this means the discovery of the nature of Mary’s role since her own ascension.\textsuperscript{23} Therefore, such exegesis guides and defines the actions of the Church today. As “children” of the woman of Revelation 12, the Church’s role is to destroy fallacies as

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 14-16.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 11.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 17 and 20 respectively.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 10.
children “waging war” with Logos.\textsuperscript{24} As the Marian Church, the Church in Rome’s role is to bear witness (not wage war as the “children”).\textsuperscript{25}

**The Critique of VB’s Hermeneutical Moves**

Proponents of the Historical-Critical method would probably find two basic areas to be lacking in VB’s approaches. First of all, the lack of appeal to historical-cultural analysis limits perspective on the text. Other than a few general references to Israel’s traditional history, VB does not explore the numerous Hellenistic and ANE sources which parallel Revelation 12. The ancient traditions, however, provide much insight into the image of Revelation 12. The original audience of the apocalypse would have been inundated with these ancient traditions and would thusly find more valence of meaning. Secondly, without literary or genre categorization the broadness of the meaning of the image becomes more difficult to perceive. The character of apocalyptic-eschatology literature lends itself more easily to ambivalence that strictly rigid interpretation. The lack of this move leads to VB’s specification of the woman image in the second half of chapter 12 (differentiating Mother of the Church and Mother Church). A broader meaning of “the community of God’s people” better incorporates the image of the woman throughout the chapter.

The scholarly community, however, should incorporate (explicitly) one of VB’s hermeneutical characteristics into their own practices. VB contributes greatly to the world of hermeneutics by emphasizing the importance of contemporary application.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 19.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 20.
Regarding Revelation 12, the “sign” is not just a random portent. It is contained in a work with a clearly pastoral/ecclesiastical emphasis (Rev 2-3). Thus, it would be improper to interpret the book without these considerations in mind.

**Philippians 2: the Kenosis Hymn**

Von Balthasar’s use of the biblical terms “Sheol” and “kenosis” are worth exploring. Simply put, the kenosis of Christ is the condition for the possibility of his descent into Sheol. First let us deal with the notion of kenosis. Taking this notion from Paul’s letter to the Philippians 2:5-8, von Balthasar builds a vast theological system. Almost certainly, Paul did not intend this hymn to signify the nature of inter-Trinitarian relations, but this is precisely what von Balthasar has done with it. The kenosis of the son, what von Balthasar calls the *status exinanitionis*, is an expression of the Son’s distance from the Father. It is a distance that is implied in the Son’s very procession from the Father. It is this distance that allows for Christ’s feeling of forsakenness on the Cross. It is this distance that allows for Christ’s hopeless descent into Sheol.

The nature of Christ’s descent into Sheol has been often debated throughout the Christian centuries. Von Balthasar does not approve of the images of a victorious Christ harrowing hell. For von Balthasar, Hell can only be possible on the other side of the resurrection. As a result, it seems to me that he takes seriously the “mainstream” Jewish depiction of Sheol as the realm of all the dead. It is a dreary and joyless place for all the deceased, righteous or wicked. Christ enters this place of the dead in order to completely transform the experience of death from within. Instead of a victorious harrowing of hell, Christ’s redemptive work here takes the form of experiencing the whole kit and caboodle
of the nature of human death. However, it is Christ’s presence in Sheol that provides the passage for the just dead to be raised to heaven on the other side of the resurrection. Curiously, von Balthasar leaves open the possibility that Sheol could have been transformed into purgatory after all the just were raised to new life and the wicked raised to condemnation. He is unclear on this point but it certainly expresses his tendency toward the mythological expression of Christology.

In any case, von Balthasar is a classic example of taking biblical terminology and using them to make very broad and significant theological claims. I believe that this comes from his conviction that the Word of God is not necessarily to be equated with the Bible as a historical document. I am sure he is completely aware that he is imposing an understanding of these terms that may be foreign to the author’s original intent.
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VITA

Daniel Burns was born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts from St. Joseph Seminary College in Covington, Louisiana. After working in the private sector for several years he returned to school and graduated Magna Cum Laude from Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans with a Master of Arts in Systematic Theological Studies.

While pursuing a Ph.D. at Loyola University Chicago he was awarded a research fellowship for the 2005-2006 academic year and was also employed as a research assistant for Loyola University’s Cudahy Library on the Lake Shore Campus.

Currently, Daniel is a Junior Professor of Theology and a formation advisor at St. Joseph Seminary College in Covington, Louisiana.