

Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

Ignatian Dramatics

First Glance at the Spirituality of Hans Urs von Balthasar

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Introduction

VON BALTHASAR (1905–88) IS A GIANT of twentieth-century Catholic theology. He authored books which reflect not only his command of the historical wealth of Christian thought, but also a profound knowledge of (and sympathy for) music, art, literature and philosophy from every age. He made it his task to trace all these in their relationship to the living form of Jesus Christ, who (in von Balthasar's view) is the true subject of history, and who *in-forms* all created being.

Von Balthasar is therefore a theologian both of astonishing comprehensiveness and a passionate, devoted attention to the particular. To manage to be both is a rare thing in our age (von Balthasar's Protestant friend and fellow Swiss, Karl Barth, being one of the few others who accomplishes it), which is perhaps why Fr Aidan Nichols OP turns to make comparisons with figures from earlier epochs: von Balthasar, he says, combines 'the mind of St Thomas with the heart of St Augustine, all within the spirit of St Ignatius'.¹ This article wants to home in on the third of those identifications: the identification of von Balthasar with 'the spirit of Ignatius'.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer multiplicity of the sources of von Balthasar's thought, but there are some thinkers who are more than mere sources for him: they exert a genuinely shaping influence. Ignatius was one of these. Indeed in some respects his influence seems to have been startlingly immediate, for even after von Balthasar's painful departure from the Society of Jesus, his life's work in company with the mystic Adrienne von Selys² was guided, as they tell us, by the intensely experienced presence and intervention of the saint. Ignatius' vision of a kind of dynamic Christian *Bildung* (personal growth or schooling in the context of a 'culture' of the spirit which is both contemplative and active) affec-

ted not only the way that von Balthasar prayed, but it also influenced the way he evaluated other thinkers, especially those in the German philosophical tradition. Finally it also drove his fascination with *drama* as a consummate way of expressing the intersubjective, ongoing character of the divine encounter with humanity (that being the true subject matter of theology). And that is one of the most significant gifts von Balthasar has made to theology in our time. Von Balthasar was never a man for whom theology and 'spirituality' (here understood as the Christian life of prayerful contemplation and activity in the community of the Church) could be separated. One can only do theology properly 'on one's knees', he argued. To trace the indebtedness of von Balthasar's theology to the cadences and themes of Ignatian spirituality is to show that this interpenetration of spirituality and thought can be real and fruitful.

The importance of action: why knowing the truth involves doing the good

In his *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius succeeded in creating a work which is a genre of its own: it is not a scholastic text, nor is it straightforwardly a spiritual treatise: it is, as Philip Caraman puts it, 'a manual with the practical purpose of helping a man to save his soul and find his place in the divine plan. Even in its final revision in 1541 it is . . . not a book to be read but a guide to be translated into practice.'³

Ignatius' concentration on 'practice' was immensely important for von Balthasar, whose scholastic training left him frustrated and angry, and who had almost nothing but fierce criticism for the Promethean self-assertion of modern philosophical thought. It was to fuel his conviction that the discovery of truth is consequent upon participation in the world: a world whose being we do not command or compel, but which 'gives itself' to us and only thus initiates our response. In other words, he dismissed modernity's obsession with epistemological issues ('our' activity of *gaining* knowledge). Rather, he insisted that beauty and drama (as things which have a kind of priority to our knowing endeavours) are the conditions of reason. Hence the structure of his great theological trilogy, which begins with an aesthetics (*The glory of the Lord*), moves to a dramatics (*Theo-drama*) and only then treats *Theo-logic*. There cannot be reflection on the truth of the Christian revelation until one is a player in its midst – living it out and *partaking* of it in committed

action, and this is something that happens only when revelation elicits the necessary *desire* to partake.

Human beings, then, because they find themselves in the *middle* of creation and history, must work out (together with others) their place in God's plan. How could this be anything other than dramatic? How could one be so presumptuous as to suppose a cool, analytical distance from this drama which is so constitutive of creaturely existence? Such a viewing platform is not available. As von Balthasar himself puts it:

The life common to Christ and the Church is . . . actual life poised between perdition and redemption, sinfulness and sanctity. The existence of sin within the field of force of grace, the impact, here and now, between despairing obduracy and crucified love, these, and not a colourless and static world of philosophy, are the matter of theology. This is why it cannot be expressed *solely* in the sleek and passionless form of the treatise, but demands movement, sharp debate . . . , the virile language of deep and powerful emotion . . .⁴

Theology is done not outside or above the drama of Christian living, it is part of the drama and von Balthasar's writings try to express this. He is 'concerned with expounding the word of God, which is as much a word of life as a word of truth'.⁵ His heroes are the great teachers of the Church who were not the victims of a false separation between knowledge and life: rather they were:

complete personalities: what they taught they lived with such directness, so naively, we might say, that the subsequent separation of theology and spirituality was quite unknown to them. It would not only be idle but contrary to the very conceptions of the Fathers to attempt to divide their works into those dealing with doctrine and those concerned with the Christian life (spirituality).

Ignatius is for von Balthasar just such a 'complete personality' – in continuity with the Fathers of the early Church. It is that same quality of 'naivety' which entrances von Balthasar, and from which he seeks to learn in reaction to the manipulative arrogance of the Enlightenment and its sciences of knowing. Ignatius exquisitely represents the readiness to receive: that active receptivity, or availability, to God which is in von Balthasar's view the defining feature of sanctity. Ignatius preserves the perpetual openness which is the only proper response to a God who is 'ever greater'. Ignatius under-

stands the polarity which (via Erich Przywara) permanently animates von Balthasar's theology also: the tension between love and fear, intimacy and distance, likeness and unlikeness. And yet, along with this very developed emphasis on the individual and his or her experience (the 'lyric' strain of Ignatius, which von Balthasar acknowledges in *Theo-drama*),⁶ Ignatius is a believer in the authoritative operation of the Spirit in the structures and institutions of the Church. Here, too, in key ways, he is von Balthasar's tutor.

The drama of encountering the Ever-greater God

Von Balthasar was, like Barth, a theological *realist*. He maintained that the reality of God precedes (and is independent of) all human knowing – hence his assaults on those brands of mysticism which suggest the identity of divine and human in the depths of the human subject, and their issue in Idealism and Romanticism of various kinds. It could be said that the whole of *The glory of the Lord* – and in particular the opening volume, and the volumes on the history of metaphysics (IV and V) – are an exercise in critical realism.

The spirit of Ignatius is strong here, as we know from Ribadeneira's recollections:

In the presence of myself and many others [Ignatius] once said that, as far as he could judge, he could no longer live at all . . . unless there was something which did not come from himself and which *could* not come from himself, but which could only come from God.⁷

Von Balthasar's theology strives to evoke the awesome and sovereign reality of a God who far exceeds our every conception of him. This is a God of ever-greater dissimilarity (*maior dissimilitudo*):

Everything that [the human being] and the world is bears traces of God, but, in the end, it never manifests him. There is a certain similarity, but it dissolves in an ever-greater dissimilarity. Everything points to God, but he is the Wholly Other, the Unknown. . . . There is a *via affirmativa*, but it issues in the *via negativa*, in which we know and reverence God more profoundly, because we set aside all statements about him that do not describe him as he is. There cannot really be a third course, at all events not as a kind of synthesis of the two, in which knowledge by analogy – similarity in even greater dissimilarity – may be surpassed. It will be either the expression of the creature's continued aspirations, ever unsatisfied,

or else of the fact that God has revealed himself in a degree far beyond the possibilities of nature.⁸

To understand von Balthasar's attitude to the Christian life, it is absolutely essential to appreciate this twofold emphasis – this polarity. If it becomes an *intellectual* commitment, that is because it already has its roots in the *heart* and in the *spirit* of the former Jesuit. The 'definition' of the *maior dissimilitudo* (classically in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215) appeal so much to von Balthasar, and has such prominence in his theology, because it expresses what he knows to be true of life before God: that love is caught up in ever-increasing awe (or fear); that human aspiration (the *via affirmativa*) has to be 'overtaken' (usually unexpectedly) by a divine grace from above which is quite 'beyond the possibilities of nature'; yet that on the other hand (and this is the other pole) the finite and the concrete are not annulled or destroyed by this grace (this 'dissimilarity'), but preserved in it – contrary to some of the suggestions of the German mystics and the religions of the East.

Von Balthasar and Ignatius are united in their articulation of this polarity. Indeed, as Hugo Rahner puts it, Ignatius is virtually 'the sacred icon of what the Fourth Lateran Council defined'. Ignatius was a man seized and possessed by God, Rahner goes on, and because his whole being was possessed in this way, 'he learned to respect and preserve his reverent sense of distance from all that is of God'.⁹ Were we, with Erich Przywara, to use the terminology of another time, we would call both the experience of Ignatius *and* the way he articulated it 'dialectical': the dialectic is that of the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being, in which God simultaneously bestows and withdraws from our creaturely being, calling us ever onwards into his mystery in all our activities of believing, hoping and loving, and whenever we contemplate the existing things of the world.

The drama of reading the world in relation to the Ever-greater God

This latter point is vital in a theology like von Balthasar's which begins with an aesthetics: with an examination of how it is that we perceive God's 'supra-form' (*über-Gestalt*) in a way that respects worldly forms and allows them their own relative integrity. Perception does not abstract from the concrete. We are material beings, and God's revelation is incarnate, so it can never be our task

to get 'behind' the things of sense, even though we may recognize their fragmentariness and the need to re-order the fragments around their true centre, the form of Christ. For this reason von Balthasar's theology holds the *maior dissimilitudo* alongside a close and passionate attention to actual things: the lives of saints; paintings; symphonies; literary plays and the mechanics of staging them. This, too, is an Ignatian sensitivity. Ribadeneira recalls:

We often saw how even the smallest things could make his spirit soar upwards to God, who even in the smallest things is Greatest. At the sight of a little plant, a leaf, a flower or a fruit, an insignificant worm or a tiny animal Ignatius could soar free above the heavens . . .¹⁰

Ignatius was fascinated by the smallest and most insignificant of things – finding God in them even when they seemed practically peripheral to the created world. Ignatius saw their place in the whole differently, because he saw them *de arriba* ('from above'). Now most of the particulars that von Balthasar attended to reflect rather a developed taste for high culture – worms were not quite his style – but there is no questioning his desire to cast them in a new light: the *glorious* light 'from above'. If the prayer of the Society of Jesus is as Jerome de Nadal described it, then it is von Balthasar's prayer too:

It is possible, in virtue of a special gift of grace and higher illumination, to attain to a consideration and contemplation of God in all things which are less than he or, in this selfsame light, to move upwards to ever higher and clearer truths, sensing with interior sweetness that the divine power is yet greater still . . . It is a still higher gift when God bestows a grace and a most sublime illumination in which the supreme truths are all united together in one single embracing vision – and those who have experienced this feel that in this illumination they see and contemplate all else in the Lord'.¹¹

The drama of making oneself available for a mission in the world

In this final section, we will see what issues from this contemplative encounter with the awesome God who is simultaneously *aliud* and *non aliud*. The issue, as we will see, is a kind of Ignatian dramatics, for which von Balthasar is the most powerful modern advocate, and which provides resources for a distinctive understanding of what

'spirituality' is – one not overly preoccupied with the cultivation of some notional 'inner space' (which would be a 'lyrical' rather than a 'dramatic' alternative).

The dialectic we have already looked at (the dialectic of the analogy of being) generates a dynamism at the heart of creation (a dynamism played out in history) which von Balthasar argues is only adequately construed as a divine-human *drama*. He borrows categories from Hegel to illustrate what drama is: it is not merely the perspective of immediate feeling and individual association (that is the lyric world, which in art results in 'a romanticism remote from reality' and in the Church produces a pious but emptily 'affective' theology). Nor is it an unruffled perspective on the objectively given (that is the epic world, which in art results in a "modern" realism devoid of awe and reverence', and in the Church produces 'scientific' theology which is increasingly divorced from prayer and so loses 'the accent and tone with which one should speak of what is holy').¹² Drama breaks out when the *subject matter* of theology (the epic component) reaches out and claims the self-involved (lyric) person. All of a sudden, revelation is demonstrated not to be a mere set of historical events, but a present ferment. All of a sudden it becomes apparent that one can have no real idea of the 'truth' of this revelation until one is caught up in it, relinquishing one's claim to neutrality. 'The saints', as von Balthasar observes, 'have always been on guard against such an attitude, and immersed themselves in the actual events of revelation.'¹³

There could hardly be a better description of the *Spiritual Exercises* than this: an 'immersion' in revelation. This is the first big indication that von Balthasar's dramatics are in a vital way *Ignatian* dramatics.

The parallels continue. Ignatian spirituality is mission-orientated, and von Balthasar's theo-dramatics turns on this centrality of mission – which is to say, in his own words, 'the mystery of the homecoming of one's own freedom to the freedom of God'.¹⁴ Missions animate and fructify the Church. It is missions that accomplish that 'participation' in God where personhood is not swallowed up but enhanced and honoured. This makes perfect sense to a man schooled in the Exercises, which are preparatory to mission (and therefore also to drama), and which are geared wholly to bringing the individual face to face with his or her eternal destiny and calling. The Exercises are, if nothing else, designed to generate dramatic Christian life by negotiating and surpassing epic (the 'normativity'

of the gospel narratives) and lyric (my interpretative freedom) components alike. In George Schnier's words, 'Making the narrative present through the integration of it by the work of creative imagination into "my" time and space perpetuates the story's life'.¹⁵ The individual who has really become a theological person by the reception of a mission will enter the drama. He or she will not want 'to stop listening, not for a single moment, to what is being revealed, as though the content of revelation were an event long since concluded, over and done with, something there to be examined and probed like any other object of science'. Rather he or she will sit 'with Mary . . . at the feet of Jesus'.¹⁶

Of course, one needs to be trained in order to make the sort of dramatic choices that properly arise from 'the fullness of the contemplation of the life of the Lord'. For von Balthasar, the Exercises show the one thing needful in this respect – they show it so well, in fact, that he regards the Exercises as 'the practical school of holiness for all the orders', and not just the Jesuits. What they offer a schooling in is '*indiferencia*': indifference, which is to say that disposability which is humbly ready to serve the Lord as his 'handmaid'. This is the highest example of an attitude which modulates through every period of history, from the *apatheia* of the Hellenistic world and the early church Fathers, to Benedictine and Franciscan humility, to the purgation and abandonment of the Rhineland mystics, and then in the modern guises of the Schillerian 'middle state' of the artist, and the indifference of Hegel's 'first class' (who exemplify the way that individual freedoms in the context of the state can become the medium of a far greater collective possibility in the drama of the Spirit: uniting subjective wills and objective structures in a life lived freely and corporately). Every age has had its insights about how the human creature is to find its true value. But the place where these insights receive their clear and archetypal expression is in the attitude of Mary – for von Balthasar, the holder of the most significant mission of all in the theo-drama. And Ignatius is the person who identifies most accurately what that attitude was.

Conclusion

If we were to offer an assessment of von Balthasar's dramatic spirituality, what would we say?

We might be concerned to register one strain (once again it is Ignatius' before it is von Balthasar's) which threatens his desire to make human individuals into active, responsible, joyful players in

the drama of God and in the arena of the Church. It is a tendency to slip back towards an epic perspective, and it is particularly related to an emphasis on the objective structures and institutions of the Church, which take on a certain uncriticized positivity. Ignatius was committed to the view that there could be no absolute conflict between the nearness of the God of his conscience and experience (the grace from within) and the institutional direction of the official Church (the grace from outside). Von Balthasar passionately holds the same view, despite its being out of fashion. Here, again, he manifests a notable closeness to Hegel, who insisted that the freedom of the Spirit had a thoroughly objective and institutional aspect to it, and that there could be no real opposition between the individual and the collective. To be fair to him, and to Ignatius, there is never an attempt to make institutions a substitute for the fullness of the life of grace in all its diversity: the letter is there to be filled by the Spirit. But there is at times too great a preoccupation in von Balthasar's thought with the crystallizations of the flowing currents of the Holy Spirit – a preoccupation which forgets the ongoing, historical, often contingent aspects of all the patterns which emerge in Christian life. He sometimes freezes the drama.

Nevertheless, it is to his credit that with a powerful conviction he recalls Christian life from the lyricism which too often passes itself off as 'spirituality', to a corporate, and whole-hearted common task: the live performance in solidarity with others of Christ's all-encompassing mission to the world. In this respect, he exceeds even Ignatius, who is often accused of a kind of mystical individualism. As he puts it, a 'too-individualistic idea of contemplation', wherever it is found, will not be fruitful for the Church. Perfection, to be Christian, must 'radiate out' into the active apostolate.¹⁷ It is here that von Balthasar's legacy is at its richest, and here that his *own* theology comes closest to achieving the 'practical purpose' exemplified in the Exercises, 'the practical purpose of helping a person to find his place in the divine plan'.

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John Riches, and contributed to the forthcoming book *Balthasar at the end of modernity* (Edinburgh, 1998).

NOTES

- 1 Speaking at the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain, September 1997.
- 2 Adrienne von Speyr was a medical doctor whom von Balthasar met shortly after beginning his chaplaincy work in Basel in the 1940s. Under his direction she was admitted into the Roman Catholic Church, having been brought up as a Protestant, and was until her death the recipient of many visions and other exceptional graces. Von Balthasar and she maintained a very close relationship, and together founded the *Johannes-gemeinschaft* – an order of ‘secular institutes’. He was convinced that their respective missions were inseparable, and her visions had a deep influence on his theology. He made it his concern to have her experiences recognized in the wider Church, and published a great quantity of her writings, as well as transcriptions of their conversations. The best introduction to Adrienne is his book *First glance at Adrienne von Speyr* (San Francisco, 1981).
- 3 Philip Caraman, *Ignatius Loyola* (London, 1990), p 41.
- 4 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in theology I: the Word made flesh* (San Francisco, 1989, pp 204–205).
- 5 *Ibid.*, p 183.
- 6 *Theo-drama II: dramatis personae: man in God* (San Francisco, 1990), p 55.
- 7 *Fontes narrativi de sancto Ignatio* vol II (Rome, 1951), p 338.
- 8 Von Balthasar, *Explorations I*, p 174.
- 9 Hugo Rahner SJ, *Ignatius the theologian* (London, 1968), p 2.
- 10 *Vita Ignatii Loyolae* vol VI/1 (Cologne, 1502), p 538.
- 11 *Monumenta Natalis* (Madrid and Rome, 1898–1905, 1962), quoted in Rahner, pp 9–10.
- 12 Von Balthasar, *Explorations I*, p 208.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p 205.
- 14 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Pneuma und Institution* (Einsiedeln, 1974), p 427; quoted in Medard Kehl and Werner Löser (eds), *The von Balthasar reader* (Edinburgh, 1982), p 321.
- 15 George P. Schnier SJ (ed), *Ignatian spirituality in a secular age* (Ontario, 1984), p 12.
- 16 Von Balthasar, *Explorations I*, p 205.
- 17 Von Balthasar, *Explorations I*, p 238.