

# THE DIVIDED SELF, THE ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST, AND THE JOURNEY OF COMMITMENT

## Ignatius, Von Balthasar, and the Human Condition

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**W**HAT DOES IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY IMPLY about the fundamental nature of the human person? How do we find this vision in von Balthasar's theology? Such are the questions that I want to explore here, obviously only in part. But if something of the totality comes through, then this essay will at least bear out the title of one of von Balthasar's books: 'the whole in the fragment'.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Ignatius and Conversion***

Is there one central point from which we can see who, for Ignatius and perhaps also for von Balthasar, the human person is? I think the answer to that question is yes. We can begin with Ignatius' initial generative experience: with his conversion. After all, the beginning of a spiritual process often reveals what will be decisive in its further development, even if this is still latent.

As everyone knows, Ignatius' spiritual journey begins at his sickbed in Loyola. Ignatius is badly wounded and has only just escaped death. He is given over to the 'vanities of the world'. But through reading two books he is suddenly confronted with the life of Jesus and the examples of the saints. This confrontation sets off in him a deep movement, first within himself, and later more publicly. The desire grows in him to

<sup>1</sup> *Das Ganze im Fragment: Aspekte der Geschichtstheologie* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1963)—translated into English by William Glen-Doepel as *Man in History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968).

place his life at the service of Jesus, as the saints did, and to follow Jesus as a disciple. Over time, this 'holy desire' comes to fulfil him, to console him, more than the worldly wishes that nevertheless also remain alive in him. In other words, the holy desire corresponds more to what he is actually yearning for in his depths, to what he is really wanting. Ignatius looks at Jesus, and at the process of discrimination between his different inner movements and desires which looking at Jesus has made possible. On that basis, he seeks out, through a long process, his own distinctive way of discipleship of Jesus, his way of service with Jesus for others.

In this seminal experience we can already see important aspects of Ignatian spirituality and of Ignatius' understanding of the human person. The story starts with *the dividedness of the human condition*. Ignatius is a strong-willed person, but he nevertheless experiences life's fragility and threatenedness. His leg is broken, metaphorically as well as literally. He has big plans and goals, but they are too much for him and beyond his reach, a fact which he represses. Very significantly, it says in the *Autobiography* that in his wishing and imagining,

... he was so carried away by all this that he had no consideration of how impossible it was to be able to attain it. (n.6)

Then there is also *the encounter with Jesus Christ*. Christ comes to him and confronts him inwardly, through other human beings and through the Church—in the communion of saints, as it were. This coming of Jesus is illustrated for Ignatius during his conversion period in sensory form, in a nocturnal vision that he significantly calls a 'visitation':

... being awake one night, he saw clearly an image of Our Lady with the holy child Jesus, at the sight of which, for an appreciable time, he received a very extraordinary consolation.<sup>2</sup>

The encounter with Jesus then prompts Ignatius to undertake a *personal journey*. The encounter sets a man who was previously immobile in motion; it encourages him and helps him along a

<sup>2</sup> *Autobiography*, n.10. Here already it is clear how important it is for Ignatius that the spiritual can inform the senses. The whole human person, with all its sensory faculties, is drawn into encounter with the God who has become human for our salvation.



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*The Loyola family crest*

particular way (both inwardly and outwardly). From this point onwards, ‘way’ is a central word in Ignatian spirituality. Ignatius describes himself as a pilgrim, in a manner that is certainly indicative of his spiritual self-understanding. ‘Holy desire’, spiritual discrimination or discernment, and election, the decision for a particular form of discipleship of Jesus, are essential elements in his process. Before and during the journey, Ignatius needs to be open and ready for Jesus Christ the Creator and Lord—to exhibit what the Ignatian tradition calls ‘indifference’.

Before I elaborate a little on these three aspects, I would like to draw attention to a further text, from the *Spiritual Exercises*, where they can also be found—a text which influenced von Balthasar’s thought greatly. I am referring to the colloquy with the crucified Christ at the end of the first meditation of the First Week (Exx 53). Through the earlier points of the meditation, the exercitant has become aware of being inwardly divided, loaded down by sin, in a way that leaves them completely at a loss. In this state, they are meant to enter the presence of Christ on the cross. They are to look at him, eye to eye, and hold a conversation or ‘colloquy’:

Imagining Christ our Lord present and placed on the Cross, to make a Colloquy; how from Creator he has come to make himself a

human being, and from life eternal has come to temporal death, and thus to die for my sins.

By looking in this way at how Jesus Christ has come from God, and by thinking about his self-giving unto death ‘for me a sinner’, the exercitant is able, as the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* explicitly states, to look within themselves. An authentic, true understanding of the human person emerges from the encounter with the Creator, who, as a human being, has entered right into the abysses of human existence, into death and sin, so as to be present for me precisely *there*. True self-understanding arises from encounter with the ‘Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20).<sup>3</sup> However lost I may be, God is searching for me, loving me; God in person is making efforts for me, so that I can enter into a trustful relationship with Him, a conversation and colloquy with Him that is at once friendly and reverent (Exx 54). The relationship of the human person with God—before the crucified one, this point becomes quite clear—is a relationship of reverent acknowledgment and dedicated service. God is affirming the human person, even the lost human person; God is dealing with humanity as one who serves.

It follows that the human answer can only be to affirm God in return, to acknowledge who God is, and to do this in and through a readiness for service. The Principle and Foundation tells us that humanity ‘is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord’ (Exx 23). The foundation for this claim is established in the encounter with Jesus Christ crucified, in whom my Creator and Lord is lovingly present for me.

Consequently, it is when they are face to face with the crucified one that the person making the Exercises should think about how they are to answer God’s engagement on their behalf. They ponder their actions, past, present and future. The question ‘what ought I to do for Christ?’, posed here in colloquy with the Son of God who has died ‘for me’, will remain a live one during the further movements of the *Spiritual Exercises* in the Second Week, until a concrete decision comes with the Election.

<sup>3</sup> In a footnote to an essay first published in 1969, von Balthasar explicitly links this Pauline text with Exx 53: ‘Christologie und kirchlicher Gehorsam’, in *Pneuma und Institution: Skizzen zur Theologie IV* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1974), 133-161, at 160-161, n. 17.

The threefold structure here (divided self, encounter with Jesus, specific option) is also characteristic of von Balthasar's way of thinking, and of his understanding of the human person. When von Balthasar speaks of the human person, he often, perhaps even predominantly, begins by pointing to the paradoxes of humanity: its brokenness, its ambiguity, its tensions and contradictions, its being torn apart. No human agency can resolve this tragic situation; its redemption cannot in any sense be seen as a natural potential of the human condition. The resolution does not come 'from below', from any kind of intellectual or moral effort on humanity's part. Rather, it comes as a gift, in the mystery of Christ that has its centre in the event of the cross.

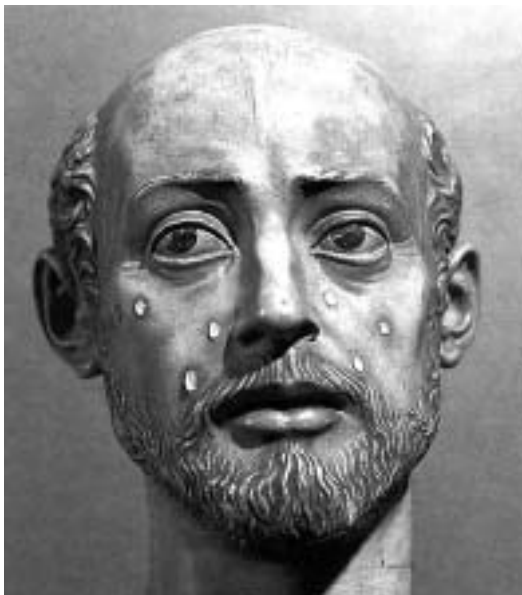
**Von Balthasar  
begins with  
human  
brokenness**

In his or her relationship with the mystery of Christ, the human person is confronted 'eye to eye' with the mystery of God's own self. Because humanity, riven as it is with tragedy, is nevertheless beheld mercifully and lovingly by God's own self as one with the crucified Christ, as incorporated into the crucified Christ, it can find reconciliation within its contradictions. Humanity is 'released from the impossible task (short of denying some part of its own reality) of projecting itself, from its position of brokenness, as nevertheless whole'.<sup>4</sup> Humanity is released from this task because it has been from the beginning affirmed and chosen by God, because what ultimately specifies who a human person is, the fact of their being chosen, is something *given* to them by God.

However, this prior affirmation and election by God does not preclude human activity; rather it calls that activity into being, and enables it to be free. We have to choose God's choice, God's act of choosing. 'But what God chooses for us is in every case a mission in the discipleship of Christ within his Church.'<sup>5</sup> The convergence with the Ignatian threefold structure is clear: the divided self, the reconciling encounter with the crucified Christ, the opening up of a way or process through a mission in the discipleship of Christ.

<sup>4</sup> *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory: Volume II: Dramatis Personae: Humanity in God*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990 [1976]), 335-346, especially the last few pages. With 'eye to eye', von Balthasar is probably alluding to Exx 53.

<sup>5</sup> 'Drei Formen der Gelassenheit', in *Homo creatus est: Skizzen zur Theologie V* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1986), 31-51, at 33.



In what follows, I want to discuss further these three aspects as they occur in the *Spiritual Exercises*, and thus to bring out rather more clearly the Ignatian vision of the human person.

### ***The Divided Self***

What would the human condition be, had God not come to save and redeem it? In the meditation on the Incarnation, Ignatius has the exercitant cast a

wide glance over the 'surface of the earth'. He notes firstly 'such variety, in dress as in actions'—in other words the diversity and range of behaviour, of customs, of cultures, of biological and social reality:

... some white and others black; some in peace and others at war; some weeping and others laughing; some well, others ill; some being born and others dying, etc. (Exx 106)

The whole range of human life, rich as it is in its tensions, comes into view, in a way reminiscent of von Balthasar's wide-ranging discussions. All that is human deserves notice and meditation.

But we should not stay on the surface, however glittering it may be. If we look more deeply, we see that cynicism dominates us, and that people are swearing and blaspheming (Exx 107), a manifestation of despair. Rivalry and enmity are rampant. People are injuring and killing each other; they are on the way to total ruin; they are going to Hell (Exx 108). Why? Because they are not following the pattern given to human beings, the pattern engraved within them by God as Creator. It is in this discrepancy between the design or plan of God and how human beings actually behave that the real division of the human self is situated, the deepest rivenness of humanity.

The design towards which humanity is inwardly orientated is presented by Ignatius in the Principle and Foundation:

The human person is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save their soul. (Exx 23)

The praise, reverence and service of God amount, in the Ignatian understanding, firstly to a grateful acceptance of God's love, the love in which God gives Himself to humanity and commits Himself to their cause, and secondly to a response to that love that lets it be active both in oneself and in the world (Exx 230-237). In this consists human salvation. Everything else has to be directed towards this goal.

Hence the need for 'indifference', for freedom with regard to all created things, so that God's will, God's loving will, can be the determining factor in everything. But in place of this directedness towards God and this inner freedom, people experience themselves as constricted and enslaved at many levels—by powers and forces surrounding them, by human history, and by their own sinful attitudes. Ignatius here considers the cosmic, historical, social dimension of sin. Humanity has sinned and acted 'against the infinite goodness' (Exx 52), and has opted for worldly things (honour, reputation, wealth) rather than for God's service. The consequence is that humanity has lost its freedom; it is as though it is chained, imprisoned, exiled (Exx 47). Human beings are plunging themselves and others into ruin (Exx 58).

But is this ruin absolute? When we look at the human condition, can we find no chink of light? Is everything rotten to the core, as perhaps a Lutheran or a Calvinist might believe? Ignatius has the exercitant meditate on sin, both their own and that of the world, and hopes that the person will become deeply ashamed and confused on its account. But he also has the person recognise, in astonishment, that they are still alive. Despite all the sin, all the confusion and dividedness, they have not sunk into a state of hopeless perdition; they are still alive. This is a matter of enormous wonder:

... an exclamation wonderingly with increased feeling, going through all creatures, how they have left me in life and preserved me in it; the Angels, how they are the sword of the Divine Justice, how yet they have endured me, and guarded me, and prayed for me; the Saints, how they have been engaged in interceding and praying for me; and the heavens, sun, moon, stars and elements, fruits, birds, fishes and animals—and the earth, how it has not opened to swallow me up, creating new Hells for me to suffer in them forever! (Exx 60)

In the workings of creatures who are letting me live and providing for my continued survival, it is God's own self whose mercy 'has given me life up to now' (Exx 61).

This passage gives clues that are particularly revealing of how Ignatius understands the human condition. As long as people are alive, they are not completely lost, and therefore should not be regarded and despised as lost. For life is God's gift. In this preservation of life, God's creative love is active in humanity. This is the basis for an 'increased desire', for a new yearning for God, for hope. As long as people *are alive*, they have not been abandoned by God's love; on the contrary, they are being sustained by God's love.

But one can go beyond Ignatius. Does it not follow that human beings are also alive in the Hell that they have prepared for themselves by their own sinfulness? And that the creative, labouring, forgiving love of God and the hope it entails are still present among those who have closed themselves within Hell? Von Balthasar was to speculate along these lines, while Ignatius stopped short. But if God the Creator is 'infinite goodness', surely von Balthasar's question is legitimate.

### ***God's Approach as One Who Labours***

Humanity may be constricted by its sins, and live in contradictions. But it is not abandoned by God. God has decided definitively and irrevocably for the salvation of lost humanity. God has also decided to make this will manifest and effective in the incarnation of the Son, and in the Son's labours leading to his death on the cross. This theological reality is the basis for the whole process of the Spiritual Exercises.

Here I should like merely to indicate one point in the *Spiritual Exercises* that is theologically significant. According to the theological tradition long dominant in the West, God makes a choice of only some human beings for salvation out of the lost mass of humanity that deserves damnation. Perhaps indeed, most people are not chosen, and therefore do not attain eternal salvation; perhaps they are ultimately condemned to eternal damnation. Such an understanding, radicalised at the time of the Reformation, especially by Calvin, casts a dark and gloomy shadow on to God, the one who is described in the Bible as love, as graciousness and as goodness. What sort of love is it supposed to be that does not choose human beings from the beginning for



salvation, and that has indeed positively excluded them from salvation? This kind of ambivalent understanding of God has an intrinsic tendency to cause a deep anxiety and insecurity in us, which we then try to resolve with a strident certainty about salvation.

In this context it is striking that nowhere in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, so far as I know, do we find any trace of this kind of covert restriction



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of the divine will for salvation. On the contrary, the reaction of the Triune God to the lostness of humanity in the Incarnation meditation is 'to save the human race' (Exx 102). God's will is not to call only a limited number of human beings out of the *massa damnata*; God's will for redemption is directed towards the whole human race, towards all human beings, without restriction. The Triune God looks 'on *all* the surface and circuit of the earth, and *all* the people in such blindness, and how they are dying and going down to Hell' (Exx 106). Full of mercy, God resolves: 'Let Us work the redemption of the human *race*' (Exx 107).

God's desire is to save the human race, composed as it is of such a diversity of living beings, in such conflict (Exx 106). Similarly, the call of Christ in the Kingdom meditation is directed towards 'all the entire world ... and each one in particular' (Exx 95). Jesus Christ, 'Lord of the whole world', sends his disciples 'through all the world', and enjoins them to desire to help everyone (Exx 145-146). For it is his will 'to conquer all the world and all enemies'—enemies, that is, of salvation (Exx 95).

In Jesus Christ, God's decision to save the whole world is operative, and this decision provides the context within which the exercitant is to make his or her own decision. And because God has

decided unrestrictedly for the salvation of all people, then human beings, for their part, can open themselves to God in unrestricted confidence, as to a friend. There is no need for covert anxiety about a hidden God, whose desire for the salvation of the lost is perhaps not without restriction, who might perhaps want to demonstrate towards some people or many people His righteous anger. The Exercises, as I see the matter, never refer to God's anger. Sinners are not invited to cower in terror before the wrath of God, but rather to feel shame on account of their inner evil and the ugliness of their sin, and because of the malice with which they have acted against God's wisdom, God's all-powerfulness, God's justice and above all God's own 'infinite goodness' (Exx 52, 59).

This is not to deny that the talk of divine anger which is rooted in the Bible has a good sense; but it must be understood in such a way that the mercy and 'infinite goodness' of

God, ready in advance for forgiveness, is in no way thereby restricted. In the index to Peter Knauer's very extensive selection of Ignatius' letters in German, there is only one reference to the anger of God. Juan de Vega, Viceroy of Sicily, had in a letter to Ignatius interpreted his wife's death as a sign that the anger of God had been turned towards him on account of his sins. Ignatius does not simply reject the idea of God's anger, but he places it within the wider context of God's goodness and mercy:

May our wisest Father be blessed, who is so kind when He punishes and shows such mercy when He is angry.<sup>6</sup>

### ***God's Outworking in Humanity and Humanity's Openness to God***

How does the salvific will of God, as made manifest in Jesus Christ, become effective in the divided, lost human self? How does God's fundamental will to save engage with human lostness? In other words, how does the justification of sinful humanity happen?

What Ignatius suggests is that God's salvific action is operating in two ways simultaneously: in history through Jesus Christ and the ministry of the Church, and in human beings at large through the

<sup>6</sup> Ignatius to Juan de Vega, 31 May 1550: MHSJ EI 3, 63-64; ET in *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola*, selected and translated by William J. Young (Chicago: Loyola UP, 1959), 217-218.

Spirit (Exx 365). God is leading humanity along a path; and humanity is letting itself be led. God's gracious action in the human person and humanity's free autonomous action are not, for Ignatius, two separate realities; rather, God works precisely in the action of humanity as the One who is enabling it. God acts through human beings allowing themselves their own activity, their own progress and movement. God's grace, God's justifying grace, is a power and adynamic that unleashes human action. The activity of God's love, which precedes and enables all things, operates through the activity of created beings.

God's activity does not occur in some special place, without mediation, such that we can just put our finger on it. God, rather, is acting through creatures: 'giving them being, preserving them, giving them vegetation and sensation, etc.' (Exx 236). God is lovingly close to humanity, imparting Himself by drawing human beings to Himself, empowering them to a love that is divine. It is when human beings are directed towards God in faith, hope and love that God's loving, gracious, salvific activity exists. God acts in and through human action.

God comes to human beings, God gives Himself to human beings by means of—which is not to say 'because of'—a human openness to God, a human striving towards God. When human beings are longing for God, God is already close to them, present to them, present within them. This yearning is already 'the echo of God's descending love wrought in the soul by the Holy Spirit'. This longing of the human heart 'already bears the hallmark of the divine self-emptying'.<sup>7</sup>

One should not therefore despise this yearning. Perhaps, in the end, all that is left to us is the longing cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', and the simple prayer, 'Give me your love and grace—that is enough for me' (Exx 234). At any rate, that is how the Exercises end. In a person who can call and pray in this way, God is lovingly present; in that person the Spirit of God's own self is calling and praying (Romans 8:26).

If God is at work in human movements and actions, then the question arises as to whether this principle really applies to all human activity without exception. For obviously not every human activity, by

<sup>7</sup> 'Homo creatus est' (1986), in *Homo creatus est*, 11-30, here 28, 30.



a long way, is a manifestation of God's saving action. Ignatius is well aware of the ambivalence of human activity. There are movements in human beings, individually and collectively, that come from the 'bad spirit', that are dominated by the power of sin. Moreover, evil appears only too often under the appearance of good. Thus, given that Ignatius is convinced that God is operative in the world through human activity, he has to be concerned to make a discrimination between the different movements in the human person. What are the movements that correspond to the divine will for salvation?

And, conversely, what are the

movements that may derive their existence and power from God's creative action, but yet fall short of the good possibilities grounded in that action, and amount to a misuse of the power given by God—so much so that they actually work against God's salvific action?

All we can do here is to point to one important criterion for discernment. God's activity occurs within a human activity only when the latter, however active it is, is shaped by an inner receptivity. The active person must let their activity come to them as a gift, let it be 'put in their soul' (Exx 180). They must be ready to choose and decide on their own account in favour of what is more for God's glory and human salvation. Such readiness for God's will is not to be forced, but to be prayed for. If a human decision is sustained by such readiness and emerges out of it, then we are not simply dealing with a self-willed, autonomous human decision; rather God's will is being acted out in the human decision. Freely, as his or her own decision, the human person chooses what God chooses.

And it is only because what one chooses is God's choice that one can reasonably intend to take an ultimate decision, given human fickleness. The Spiritual Exercises seek to lead a person to a serious

vocational decision, involving a commitment of their remaining lifetime without reservation. It is far from self-evident that such a life-decision is possible, given the failure of so many commitments and the consequent increase in people's anxiety about making them. The Exercises nevertheless presuppose that such decisions, binding for the future, are possible. But the condition for them consists, for Ignatius, in the fact that God's own self, and therefore the God whose loyalty is constant, is moving the human will. It all depends—to repeat—on God's own self placing in my soul what I should do (Exx 180). The detailed indications in Ignatius' text about how to make an election are intended to help individuals be moved by God's love in their decision processes:

... that love which moves me and makes me choose this kind of thing should descend from above, from the love of God .... (Exx 184)

Only in so far I let myself be moved by God's irrevocable love can I give my love a specific, binding form. It is only God who can be the ground and the guarantee of such a life-decision; I cannot do this for myself.

Moreover, a rightly made election is still always a decision on the way, a decision-in-process. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, the expression of this principle is the teaching that an election requires subsequent confirmation by God:

... once such election, or deliberation, has been made, the person who has made it ought to go with much diligence to prayer before God our Lord and offer Him such election, that His Divine Majesty may be pleased to receive and confirm it, if it is to His greater service and praise. (Exx 183)

Why is this 'confirmation' necessary if the election has been properly made? What does the confirmation consist in? When does it come to an end? Ignatius' text does not elaborate on these questions. But obviously Ignatius believes that even after I have taken good decisions, still I must always, or—better—can always, be handing them over to the ever greater God, over whom my good decision gives me no power. As the story of my life develops, with the God who is beyond control constantly there empowering it, my own decision will be

deepened, made more specific, perhaps even modified. Every human decision carries with it 'an unavoidable unfinishedness', to use Michael Schneider's appropriate phrase:

Life with one's own election is a process of maturation and learning, a process of constantly seeking to preserve and carry through the truth and decisiveness of the beginning. The yearning of the heart that led one to make the decision in the first place will also be enabling the person to undertake future corrections and deepenings of the decision, and to be moving forward on their way decisively.<sup>8</sup>

A person who stands by their decisions thus remains still a pilgrim, and never ceases to seek out what corresponds better to the 'praise and service' of God. Decisiveness about one's way of following Jesus does not remove the openness and indefiniteness intrinsic to the human condition, for all that it does free us from the associated dangers either of uncommitted flitting from one thing to another, or else, in reaction, rigidity and narrow-mindedness. A relationship to the mystery of Christ confirms the 'indefiniteness' of humanity:

... human beings see themselves through this relationship placed eye to eye before the mystery of God, and thus it becomes quite clear that they, as 'image and likeness' of the essentially unknown and unobjectifiable one *must* bear in themselves something of this theologically mysterious character.

Allegiance to Jesus Christ, the standing 'eye to eye' with the crucified one, frees the human person from the 'helplessness that arises from not being able to take a decision' and directs him or her 'to God's being ever-greater which can never be positively grasped'.<sup>9</sup>

This brings us back to what is central in both von Balthasar and Ignatius: the encounter with the crucified one. By looking at him, the Son of God, 'who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20), the human person, trapped in its divisions, confusions and guilt, can

<sup>8</sup> Michael Schneider, 'Unterscheidung der Geister': *Die ignatianischen Exerzitien in der Deutung von E. Przywara, K. Rahner und G. Fessard* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1983), 213.

<sup>9</sup> *Theo-Drama: Volume II*, 343-346.

recognise who he or she actually is: a recipient of the self-imparting love of God, a love that is both calling for and enabling its answer.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Translated by Philip Endean SJ from Fr Kunz's collected essays, published on the internet in 2001 as *Gott finden in allen Dingen* ([www.st-georgen.uni-frankfurt.de/leseraum/kunz.pdf](http://www.st-georgen.uni-frankfurt.de/leseraum/kunz.pdf)). The essay was originally published in *Gott für die Welt: Henri de Lubac, Gustav Siewerth und Hans Urs von Balthasar in ihren Grundanliegen*, edited by Peter Reifenberg and Anton van Hoof (Mainz: Grünewald, 2001), 293-303. Our thanks to Fr Kunz for giving his gracious permission.