

# HANS URS VON BALTHASAR AND IGNATIUS LOYOLA

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HENRI DE LUBAC ONCE SAID OF VON BALTHASAR that he was a 'fervent disciple' of St Ignatius.<sup>1</sup> His joining the Society of Jesus as a young man, his departure from it in 1950, and his attempt in his final years to rejoin it are all part of a life of constant loyalty to Ignatius. In 1974, when we were walking together, von Balthasar told me that he always used to let Ignatius lead him, and that he himself was like a blind man relying on his guide-dog. Von Balthasar let Ignatius' insights exert a significant influence on his thought—it is no coincidence that references to the Ignatian heritage appear throughout his work.<sup>2</sup>

What was distinctive in von Balthasar's reading of Ignatius? To answer this question, I will first try to bring out what von Balthasar and Ignatius had in common. Then I will offer a Balthasarian reading of the Ignatian Contemplation to Attain Love, as a way of illustrating and corroborating the relationship between them.

## ***Von Balthasar and Ignatius' Theological Mission***

The Ignatian Exercises have provoked a wide variety of interpretations, both in theory and in practice. We can separate out two basic approaches: the ascetical and the mystical. The ascetical tradition has recently been rearticulated by Gottfried Maron, the noted German Protestant historian, and then rejected—from a

<sup>1</sup> Henri de Lubac, 'A Witness of Christ in the Church: Hans Urs von Balthasar' (1967), now most easily available in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, edited by David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 271-288, here 273, where *fervent* is translated 'devoted'.

<sup>2</sup> For a helpful compendium of such texts see von Balthasar, *Texte zum ignatianischen Exerzitienbuch*, edited by Jacques Servais (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1993). See also Servais' study, *Théologie des Exercices spirituels: H. U. von Balthasar interprète saint Ignace* (Paris: Culture et vérité, 1996), and my earlier article, 'The Ignatian Exercises in the Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar', in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 103-122.

Protestant perspective and not entirely unfairly—as unbiblical, counter to the Gospel.<sup>3</sup> Maron reminds us of the near-definition we find towards the beginning of the text: ‘Spiritual Exercises to conquer oneself and regulate one’s life without determining oneself through any affection that is disordered’ (Exx 21). He then goes on to show how the ideas of self-conquest and ordering run through the whole book, arguing that both of these motifs arise from a Stoic ethics that has perverted the biblical gospel, transforming it into a subtle form of Pelagianism. Maron’s description is without doubt fair to a way of interpreting the Exercises that was for a long time dominant. Moreover, such approaches are still current, for all that the ascetical language is no longer used.

But this ascetical approach has been largely replaced by what is termed a ‘mystical’ one—‘mystical’ here meaning a Christianised form of the Platonist and Neoplatonist idea of a quasi-erotic striving for God. The best known representative of such an approach was Louis Lallemant; Henri Bremond documented historically the tradition which Lallemant founded.<sup>4</sup> Two modern heirs of this tradition are Karl Rahner as a theologian and Franz Jalics as a retreat-giver.<sup>5</sup>

From quite early in his career, von Balthasar was consciously presenting an alternative to these two kinds of interpretation. We could call it the ‘dramatic’ approach.<sup>6</sup> His multi-volume major work—the trilogy of *The Glory of the Lord*, *Theo-Drama* and *Theo-Logic*—presents above all a *dramatic* theology. The basic options implicit in this style of theology, options which are quite decisive for von Balthasar’s thought, have their chief source in the Ignatian ideas that von Balthasar picked up, principally from his thirty-day retreat in 1927

<sup>3</sup> Gottfried Maron, *Ignatius von Loyola: Mystik—Theologie—Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> See Louis Lallemant, *Doctrine spirituelle*, edited by François Courel (Paris: Desclée, 1959); Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu’à nos jours*, 12 volumes (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1921-1936).

<sup>5</sup> See Karl Rahner, ‘The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola’, in *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, translated by W. J. O’Hara (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), 84-170; Franz Jalics, ‘The Contemplative Phase of the Ignatian Exercises’, *The Way Supplement*, 103 (May 2002), 25-42, and Franz Jalics, *Contemplative Retreat: An Introduction to the Contemplative Way of Life and the Jesus Prayer*, translated by Lucia Wiedenhöfer (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> The term had already been used by Raymund Schwager in his doctoral thesis on the tension-laden relationships surrounding Ignatius’ understanding of the Church: Raymund Schwager, *Das dramatische Kirchenverständnis bei Ignatius von Loyola* (Zurich: Benziger, 1970).

near Basel. The title of David C. Schindler's recent book captures well von Balthasar's cast of mind: *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth*.<sup>7</sup> And a surprising confirmation of the idea that von Balthasar is a 'dramatic' theologian comes when we compare his work with that of Karl Barth. For all their differences, they inhabit neighbouring worlds of thought.

'To choose God's choice'—given the link with Barth we could almost say 'to elect God's Election'—sums up what lies at the heart of von Balthasar's dramatic interpretation of the Exercises:

The central point of the Exercises is the Election; the central encounter with God is an encounter with an electing God.

'Indifference'—the active readiness to make God's choice for me my own—is 'the archetypal creaturely act'. Reality is fundamentally determined by the electing God and by the human person who elects God's election. The doctrine of analogy enables us to say, truly and literally, that both God and creatures exist, albeit in infinite difference. But our existence as dependent creatures is a reality lived in freedom, and indeed in choice, both specifically within the Exercises and in everyday life subsequently. So von Balthasar extends the idea of the 'analogy of being', and writes of an 'analogy of freedom' and an 'analogy of election':

**For von  
Balthasar,  
truth is  
dramatic**

... the *analogia electionis* needs to become the form of the Christian life forming everything else.<sup>8</sup>

A dramatic theology understands the whole of reality as a great and serious drama that, thanks to God's action, culminates in the heavenly Jerusalem. And every human person is called to play his or her unique, inalienable part. The point of the Ignatian Exercises is to help people discover their role and make it their own. They do this by letting themselves be called, letting themselves be sent. Both Ignatius and Balthasar think dramatically; both start from the same intuition,

<sup>7</sup> (New York: Fordham UP, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> The source for this paragraph is a 1948 article, most of which is reproduced as 'People of the Church (V): Ignatius Loyola', in *The Von Balthasar Reader*, edited by Medard Kehl and Werner Löser, translated by Robert J. Daly and Fred Lawrence (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982 [1980]), 393-398.

even if the outward literary forms of their writing vary considerably. Von Balthasar's work is on a grand scale; it is written with linguistic virtuosity and moves on high planes of historical, literary, philosophical and theological erudition. The book of the Ignatian Exercises, by contrast, is rather skimpy, seemingly thrown together with no literary pretensions. All the same, it expresses, as von Balthasar emphasizes, a distinctive inner experience:

The comparison with works that allegedly influenced the Exercises shows all too clearly how fundamental, original, unique Ignatius' mental vision is—a vision which he tries to capture in sentences with great effort and not very successfully.

Ignatius' mental vision is—according to von Balthasar—the expression of a strong 'theological mission' that should touch and stimulate the theologians who live after him. So it was that von Balthasar let himself be led, and it is for that reason that his *oeuvre* has the shape that it does. The point is in no way undermined—quite the contrary—by the fact that von Balthasar was also richly and significantly stimulated by his encounters with countless other figures—poets, philosophers, theologians. But these figures do not shape his basic approach; their function is rather to fill out and confirm the basic idea, and to articulate a wider context. So it is that von Balthasar's *magnum opus* came into being.

### ***The Contemplation to Attain Love***

The suggestion that the Exercises be interpreted as a drama—as opposed to a mystical text or an ascetical programme—arises obviously from the different stages building up to the Election: the meditation on the call of the King, the instructions about what is proper material for an Election, the various conditions laid down, the description of the three 'times' of Election. A dramatic interpretation can easily accommodate all of these.

But how can we fit into this kind of interpretation a text that seems clearly mystical: the Contemplation to Attain Love? If all we had from Ignatius was this text, perhaps we could interpret it simply as a set of philosophical doctrines, and not invoke the gospel at all. We could see it as an initiation along Neoplatonist lines into a particular style of meditation on the world, on nature, and finally on God. It is

therefore all the more important that we try to understand this text on the basis of the Exercises as a whole—which means interpreting the love on which this contemplation turns in the context of the dramatic theology of analogy, freedom and election that we find in the Election processes. We need to interpret the Contemplation to Attain Love as a text about human beings in history, playing their part in the divine drama.

In 1971, von Balthasar produced a little book called *Living within God's Engagement*.<sup>9</sup> This formula sums up the dramatic understanding of the Exercises, and therefore also of the Contemplation to Attain Love that rounds them off. To choose what God chooses leads intrinsically to a life within God's engagement—a reality which the Contemplation to Attain Love helps us to appropriate in prayer.

'Living within God's engagement' essentially involves two points, which Ignatius only hints at in his text but which von Balthasar fills out. The first is a particular image of God as Trinitarian: only if God is Trinitarian can we begin to think about a divine engagement. The second point is about where the divine engagement is directed: it is directed towards the world and towards every human being within it. Thus a dramatic theology of the Exercises, and of the Contemplation to Attain Love, has to be about action, about the Trinity, and about the world.

**A God of  
engagement  
is a God of  
Trinity**

In his last years, von Balthasar set out in one extensive text how the Contemplation to Attain Love could be interpreted in the light of a dramatic understanding of the Exercises. We find it the final chapter of his book, *Christlich meditieren (Meditating in a Christian Way)*.<sup>10</sup> Here the author shows that the Ignatian Contemplation to Attain Love is directed towards Christian action, an action which points back to the Trinitarian God and out to the wider world. First, the Trinity:

In the end, the person who meditates in a Christian way is constantly being led into this Mystery; they will be adoring this

<sup>9</sup> Predictably, John Halliburton's English translation was given a more conventional title: *Engagement with God* (London: SPCK, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Translated as *Christian Meditation* by Mary Teresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989 [1984]). The chapter in question appears on pp.88-97, and this quotation comes from the final paragraph. This late writing develops ideas that were already present in the much earlier 1948 article mentioned above. The extracts given here have been retranslated.

Mystery without being able to see it, but in an awareness of living within it.

But it is also about action in the world:

The final meditation of the Exercises opens out what have been meditations on the life of Jesus to the cosmic dimensions of the divine plan for the world, and places the person in ever new ways at God's disposal for the carrying out of this plan .... Going beyond personal and ecclesiastical boundaries is essential to being a Christian and to being a Church. Thus the drawing of the world into the meditation is in no way a distraction; it is intrinsic to recollection, to the focus on what is essential: the intention behind God's self-revelation.<sup>11</sup>

For von Balthasar, God's engagement must involve the Trinity, and must take place within the world. In the Contemplation to Attain Love, exercitants hand themselves over to God so that God can take them into this engagement. For von Balthasar, the Contemplation to Attain Love is about a theology of the Christian life as vocation and mission.

#### *Theme and Variations*

What follows is a Balthasarian commentary on the Ignatian text, the English version of which will reflect von Balthasar's own translation.<sup>12</sup>

*First it is worth noting two things.*

*The first is that love must be placed more in deeds than in words.*

*The second: love consists in communication from both sides—this means that the lover gives and communicates to the beloved what they have, or out of what they have or can; and conversely the beloved to the lover, in such a way that when the one possesses knowledge or honour or riches, they give it to the one who does not have it. And so the one is always communicating to the other.*

*The preparatory prayer is the usual one.*

<sup>11</sup> *Christian Meditation*, 84-85.

<sup>12</sup> Ignatius von Loyola, *Die Exerzitien*, translated by Hans Urs von Balthasar (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1983 [1954]), 59-60.

*The first preparation is the composition. Here to see how I stand before God our Lord, before His angels, before the saints who are interceding for me.*

*The second: to pray for what I desire. Here to pray for inner knowledge of the benefits, such great ones, received, for this purpose: that in fully grateful acknowledgment I can in everything love His Divine Majesty and serve Him.*

These preparatory pointers in the Contemplation to Attain Love name, so to speak, the one theme on which the four subsequent points are variations: the love that God and humanity are imparting to each other. The Contemplation to Attain Love is organically part of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a whole, and its content needs to be filled out on that basis. Central to the Exercises is the human person meditating on God's love, letting that love happen in their lives, and then responding by handing themselves over to God. The whole process is about appropriating the Word of God, the call of Christ, as something directed towards this particular person. When the person responds, they are therefore choosing what God has chosen for them. This dramatic event is what is central to the Contemplation to Attain Love. What God chooses, how God chooses—this choosing just is the way in which God's love is imparted to this particular person.

**God loves  
individuals  
by choosing  
for them**

Moreover, the process is more a matter of action than of word: God's action in coming towards His world. Faith consists in letting oneself be taken up into this action, so as to participate in, so as actually to become part of, God's love in activity. This is what it means for an Ignatian exercitant to enter the service of His Divine Majesty. From now on, such a person is living within God's engagement on the world's behalf.

Ignatius is not concerned, then, to get across a 'world-view' and to offer the one meditating some pure theory or contemplation. Rather he is showing us the links between Christian contemplation and action. Contemplation gives direction and shape to action.

#### *The First Point*

*The first point is: to call into memory the benefits received of creation, redemption and special gifts, by considering with great commitment what a great thing God our Lord has done for me and how much He has*

given me of what He possesses, and consequently how much the same Lord desires to give Himself to me, limited only by how much He can in accordance with His divine condescension. And then to think back on myself, and consider with much good reason and justice what I from my side by virtue of debt must offer and give to His Divine Majesty, namely everything I have, and myself with it, just like one who offers, with great generosity: Take to yourself, Lord, and receive all my freedom, my memory, my understanding and my entire will, all that I have and possess. You have given it to me; to you, Lord, I return it. It's all yours. Dispose entirely according to your will; give me your love and grace, that's enough for me. (Exx 234)

In the first variation on the theme, Ignatius is working on the assumption that the true dimensions of the Christian life are revealed to us only if we make a quite deliberate attempt to reflect. We are to recall that creation is more than the natural world; it is a realm which has been, and always will be, endowed with God's benefits. We are also to dwell particularly on the fact that God our Lord has given His very self to each individual human being, and thus reappropriate that truth.

This Ignatian use of memory is certainly something more than a natural consideration of the world; rather, we are looking at the world with the 'eyes of faith'. What the Bible and the Christian tradition say about the world flows into the consideration. Thus we see it as a *creation*, and therefore a work of God's hands; it is also a work of *redemption* through God's grace. 'Meditating in a Christian way' begins with a turning in faith to God and to God's deeds. For von Balthasar, our action must indeed be prepared by contemplating the mystery of 'God's fullness in His intra-divine self-giving, manifested in Jesus Christ, in his Eucharist and in his Church'.<sup>13</sup> But we move beyond straightforward prayer to a second phase, one in which we are taken with God into the world: 'Christian action is ... a being taken up into God's action through grace', it says in *Love Alone is Credible*, even if it remains true that 'whoever does not come to know the face of God in contemplation will not recognise it in action'.<sup>14</sup>

The point applies not only to the world in general, but also to the individual within it: whoever I am, Ignatius says, it applies to me. I

<sup>13</sup> *Christian Meditation*, 86.

<sup>14</sup> Translated by D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004 [1963]), 116, 109.





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*'To think back on myself'*

should also therefore 'think back' on myself. I should ponder God's deeds for me. God's benefits for me personally are also His invitation and calling to a task in and with His world.

This being sent into the world is something that is always unique. It is addressed to the individual human person, calling them by name. When we appropriate what we can be, ought to be, in God's plan, we become a person before God. First-person expressions are frequent throughout this Contemplation: *I* should consider how much God our Lord has done for *me*, and how much He wants to give *me* out of what He possesses, and consequently how much the same Lord desires to give Himself to *me*, and then think back on *myself* ....

The interchange here does not take the same form for everyone. It is always specific, individual, personal. The loving God always has 'me' in view when He is communicating Himself in creation and covenant. And, whoever I am, I can properly feel myself to be personally touched and gifted. I have my own personal answer to give; I must give myself to God. God is disposing my life in a way that is always new, always to my measure; and God does this by giving me a mission, or, better, my mission. To meditate in a Christian way is to hear this call and to accept the mission it contains to this God-given world. Hence it leads into the prayer of dedication.

Here we hand ourselves over to God in indifference, and then receive our identity back again, in renewed form, as people whom God has ‘disposed’ and is continuing to dispose in ever new ways. We are now living on mission, living within a task. The result is Christian action in the full sense, action in which God is found.

*The Second Point*

*The second point: to consider how God is dwelling in creatures: bestowing in the elements existence, in plants growing life, in animals sensory feeling, in human beings conscious awareness. And so too in me: how He is giving me existence, animating me through and through, awakening senses for me, and giving conscious awareness—how He, so to speak, is making a temple of me, since I am created to an image and likeness of His Divine Majesty. And once more to think of myself, in the way said in the first point, or in another way if I feel this to be the better. And let it happen in the same way with each of the following points. (Exx 235)*

In this second variation on his theme, Ignatius expresses the embeddedness of the self in the cosmos, and the inclusion of the cosmos in the self. God’s self-gift is not directed just towards the individual, but towards the whole of reality, of which nevertheless the individual is a part. Moreover, it touches not just the person’s deepest interiority, but their whole self at every level. Conversely, the person’s handing themselves over to God is not a purely interior, unworldly affair; it involves the whole range of the personality. Nothing is to be held back. The very cosmos needs to be brought into the movement of self-giving. The person of prayer returns everything to God, their Lord: their freedom, their memory, all that they have and possess.

Ignatius begins by looking at the different levels of being in the cosmos: the elements to which God is giving existence; the plants to which He is giving life: the animals which He is endowing with powers of sensory awareness; human beings whom He is enabling to be consciously aware. But then—and this is the central point—Ignatius has us meditate once again on our own selves—‘to me as well’—under God’s grace. Humanity is indeed the focus of all these gifts, integrated into an artistic, organic unity. But this much is not yet the whole truth. I am completely myself only in so far as God ‘is making a temple of me’, since I am made to be the image and likeness of His Divine Majesty.



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*'God is dwelling in creatures: bestowing in the elements existence,  
in the plants growing life'*

As Ignatius here describes how my self is woven into the cosmos, he in no way forgets what he has already said in the first variation: human personality does not come 'from below'; it is not merely the product of the lower levels of the cosmos coming together in some new form of integration. Rather it comes 'from above', from God's free and creative action, creating human beings with particular names as images and likenesses of His divine communicativeness.

We are more than mere instances of a general kind, despite what some great theologians have said. Ultimately, we are the individuals we are because we have been created as individuals in God's image. And one can take the point a step further. The image that God has of each individual is already stamped with a mission, with a role that the individual has to play within the whole of reality, a role that he or she must strive to perceive and appropriate.

### *The Third Point*

*The third: to consider how God exerts Himself and takes pains for my sake in all created things in the world, that is, He behaves as one who undertakes strenuous work. So in the skies, elements, plants, fruits,*

*herds, etc., by giving and conserving their existence, giving them growth and sensory life, etc. Then to think back upon myself. (Exx 236)*

The third variation stresses a further characteristically Ignatian motif: the integration of prayer and activity, of contemplation and action. In the history of Western ideas, activity—especially when it takes the form of work—has often been viewed as something negative. The Latin word is *negotium*—‘not leisure’; work is the antithesis of recollection, of play, of leisure. Against this background, our return to God is imagined as an entry into God’s rest, into God’s eternal Sabbath—a standard against which human activity can only appear deficient.

Ignatius, however, introduces a new emphasis. He is aware that the God of the Bible is something more than a mere sea of rest: this God is essentially a God who is working, who is making efforts. God’s self-gift in creation and covenant, especially in the incarnation of the Son and in his death on the cross for us, entails a God who is engaged with a reality outside Himself. God’s love takes the form of toil and effort on our behalf. Von Balthasar expressed the point thus:

The dialogue between God and His world, between infinite and finite freedom, is a drama in countless acts with God Himself engaged. The final proof of this is the Cross. ‘To consider how God exerts Himself and takes pains for my sake in all created things in the world, that is, He behaves as one who undertakes strenuous work.’ Because of the sheer pressure of world history’s slaughter, many no longer see God’s engagement, or else suppose that He is raised up on a throne above everything as an indifferent observer. And then their meditation is often an attempt to find a safe place for themselves out of the slaughter, and to move into a place that is divine and secure. They forget how visible God’s strenuous engagement is already in the Old Testament, where God shows himself as angry, as one who is thinking better of having created, as one who is wanting to punish, and yet also as one who is continually having mercy. ‘My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal ....’ (Hosea 11:8-9) Ultimately God takes the entire burden on Himself by letting His well beloved Son humble himself to death on the shameful gibbet, letting the Son himself become a curse, the embodiment of sin (Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Anyone who wants to meditate themselves into an other-worldly God, happily unconcerned with all this, would be letting themselves be

lulled into an illusion, leaving the deepest depth of reality to one side. The vocation of Christian meditation can only be 'to make one's whole self available for this effort' (Exx 96).<sup>15</sup>

It is in this sense that Ignatius speaks of a God working in all things. Ignatius is leading the exercitant to a sense of how God's love implies God's effort, God's working engagement. This note is struck already at the beginning of the meditation (Exx 230), with the talk of love being shown in deeds rather in than words. And humanity responds by placing itself at God's disposal in vocation and mission. Our mission involves an *effort* shared with the working God.

Engagement with work and toil is no longer, therefore, a regrettable interruption of restful contemplation. It has an intrinsic value; it is the service given by the human being united to God's effort. So it is we find an answer to the prayer which Ignatius has us make at



*'God exerts Himself and takes pains for my sake'*

<sup>15</sup> *Christian Meditation*, 91-92.

the outset of the meditation, the prayer for an awareness of God's benefits so that in all things I can not only love but also serve His Divine Majesty.

People have often noted, rightly, that Ignatian spirituality implies a 'mysticism of activity'. Work, the effort to serve humanity, is highly valued within it. Commitment to God and commitment to the world are very closely connected. Action and contemplation are indissolubly united. But we must also be aware that such a positive vision of work can lead us to idolize work and success. We avoid this danger, however, if we remember that 'God's engagement' for human beings reaches its climax not with some brilliant result of labour, but in the mute suffering of the crucified one. We must therefore reckon with the possibility that God will always be using those who give themselves to Him as *co-sufferers* with Jesus, and precisely in that way making them fruitful in ways invisible to worldly eyes. Ignatius was well aware of the point, and it is constantly coming through, for example, in his encouragement to the exercitant to be praying for identification with the poor, suffering, despised Jesus (Exx 167).

#### *The Fourth Point*

*The fourth: to look at how everything good and all gifts come down from above—so as also my limited power from the highest and infinite above; and so too our justice, goodness, piety, mercy and so on, as the rays come down from the sun, from the source the water, and so on. Then finally to look back into myself in the way said. To finish with a colloquy and an Our Father. (Exx 237)*

Ignatius offers one final variation on his theme. Here *de arriba*, 'from above', is the central idea—which, for von Balthasar, corresponds to the other Ignatian word central to his thought: 'indifference'. The recognition that everything comes from above, from God, and the readiness (like that of Mary) to let oneself be taken into service, point to von Balthasar's consistent advocacy of an alternative to the Platonist idea of desire striving towards God—the model of growth that has always been so dominant in Christian theology. For von Balthasar a Christian can accept such ideas only if they are informed—in a way that he finds in Augustine—by the Ignatian doctrine of indifference and by the idea of 'from above'.

Ignatius writes of dependence as well as of union. He stresses that the human person owes everything they have to God, just as rays depend on the sun and water on its source. The human person is a creature, and remains so both in poverty and in dependence. It is only from that position they can become both rich and free. In what they do, they have no need to work themselves up to the position that alone God can occupy. For Ignatius it is humility and calmness that characterize a person living within the task laid on them by God. And they perform their service not for their own honour and glory, but 'for the greater glory of God'.

Von Balthasar expressed the point in his interpretation of the fourth point of the Contemplation to Attain Love as follows:

When does this striving towards God ... really attain the measure of God? When, as Augustine puts it, it consists in pure *longing for* God, an attitude that has at the deepest level understood that God alone in His freely and graciously descending love can still this yearning. The creature's longing can never be a will to power, a will to appropriate what God alone possesses—rather it is a will to give oneself over, to let oneself be appropriated by Him. And as such it is itself shaped by the form of the love that is God: a readiness to receive God's descending love, and a will to conform one's own



*'All things come down from above ...  
as the rays come down from the sun'*

love—both love for God and love for people—to this descending movement.<sup>16</sup>

A person ‘corresponds’ to God to the extent that they are fulfilling their mission, their task. Then they are developing a power that corresponds to the power in God and that is flowing out from God. What they are doing is being shaped by ‘justice, goodness, piety, mercy and so on’—qualities corresponding to realities in God. In carrying out the task laid on them, the person is acting like God, as the image and likeness that ‘His Divine Majesty’ has created and called them to be.

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In short, then: the Contemplation to Attain Love provides a sketch of the whole of Ignatian spirituality. Its central theme is that of humanity before God’s love as it is revealed in Jesus. Humanity perceives the truth of this love and receives it in many ways—prayer, meditation, the Eucharist and so on. Then we respond to it in dedication, a dedication which includes our readiness for God to take charge of us. From then on, we are living ‘within God’s engagement’. We are doing the particular thing laid down by God for us and for no one else. We are carrying out the mission entrusted to us by God. The Contemplation to Attain Love presents this as a theme with four variations. That such a text, which can easily sound simply mystical or philosophical, can sustain von Balthasar’s dramatic interpretation confirms the claim with which we started: von Balthasar was indeed ‘a fervent disciple of St Ignatius’.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Christian Meditation*, 93.

<sup>17</sup> The original version of this essay, which was written as a paper for a von Balthasar centenary conference in Mainz, will shortly appear in Germany. The translation is slightly abridged, and the references have been adapted for English-speaking readers.