

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR— THEOLOGIAN OF BEAUTY

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‘THE FAITH NEEDED TO BE SHOWN under a new light and dealt with from another angle; he had no motive except the desire to make it popular for the salvation of people.’¹ So G. K. Chesterton sums up the theology of St Thomas Aquinas. Hans Urs von Balthasar too proclaims Catholic Christianity in a new way, in terms of love expressed as beauty, goodness and truth. His faith-vision advocates the whole instead of the part, the synthetic rather than the analytic.

Formative Years

Hans Urs von Balthasar was born into a distinguished family in Luzern, Switzerland. As a young man, he had considered a career in music or literature, and he was an accomplished pianist.² Von Balthasar studied with the Benedictines at Engelberg and then with the Jesuits at Feldkirch in Austria. Towards the end of his studies, he discovered Mozart, who represented to him musical perfection. He committed to memory all the composer’s works; because he could hear any given piece within himself, he later gave away all his Mozart recordings. At the age of 22, von Balthasar did the full Spiritual Exercises, which proved to be a life-changing experience. Years later he recalled:

[I was] struck by lightning It was simply this: you have nothing to choose, you have been called. You will not serve, you will be taken into service. You have no plans to make, you are just a little stone in a mosaic which has long been ready. All I needed to do

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *St Thomas Aquinas* (Baltimore: Newman Book Shop, 1933), 93.

² What follows is indebted at many points to two articles by the Jesuit bishop Peter Henrici, a nephew of von Balthasar: ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life’, in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, edited by David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 7-43, here 9 (first published in *Communio* [USA], 16/3 [Fall 1989], 306-350); and ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Cultural and Theological Education’, in *The Beauty of Christ*, edited by Bede McGregor and Thomas Norris (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1994).

was ‘leave everything and follow’, without making plans, without wishes or insights. All I needed to do was to stand there and wait and see what I would be needed for.³

In 1928, the young scholar earned a doctorate in German literature and philosophy from the University of Zurich,⁴ and the next year he entered the Jesuit novitiate at Feldkirch. After the novitiate, von Balthasar studied philosophy at Pullach, near Munich, between 1931 and 1933—an experience which he described as a ‘languishing in the desert of neo-scholasticism’.⁵ He then went on to study theology at Fourvière, near Lyon.

Henri de Lubac and the School of Fourvière

At Fourvière, von Balthasar complained about ‘a grim struggle’ with the ‘dreariness of theology’ and ‘what people had made out of the glory of revelation’. He recalled, ‘I could not endure this presentation of the Word of God. I could have lashed out with the fury of Samson’. Only his teacher and mentor, the philosopher Erich Przywara, ‘understood everything; I did not have to say anything. Otherwise, there was no one who could have understood me.’⁶

Fortunately, von Balthasar came to be inspired by the older, French Jesuit Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), who lived in the same house of studies and also influenced Jean Daniélou, Henri Bouillard and others. De Lubac’s dedication to patristic renewal laid the groundwork for a theological renewal, the *nouvelle théologie*. De Lubac’s small circle founded the two series *Théologie* and *Sources Chrétiennes*—that great collection of patristic sources encompassing ‘sacred scripture, modern philosophy and theology, the investigation of the human sciences, but above all, the whole tradition of the Church’. Until this time, schools

³ Henrici, ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life’, 11.

⁴ His dissertation, entitled ‘History of the Eschatological Problem in Modern German Literature’, was published in the late 1930s under a title which translates as *Apocalypse of the German Soul*. For a handy list of the original German titles of von Balthasar’s books correlated with translations, see *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, 299-305.

⁵ Since the mid-eighteenth century, the Swiss government had banned the Jesuits from any institutional presence, whether in schools or churches, owing to a civil war between the Catholic and Protestant cantons. Jesuits were tolerated as chaplains, however, and in 1947 a Swiss vice-province was established. Since 1973, certain restrictions have been lifted: a referendum has allowed them to vote.

⁶ Henrici, ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life’, 13.

of theology had given little attention to the treasury of patristic literature. Under de Lubac's aegis, von Balthasar embraced 'the symbolic-holistic understanding' of the Church Fathers 'and not the critical-analytic reflection of the moderns'.⁷

Nouvelle théologie formed the basis of von Balthasar's trilogy on the so-called transcendentals—beauty, goodness and truth—and on the unity between them.⁸ This new theology overcame "the two-storey thinking" of the neo-scholastic doctrine of grace' with its dualism 'between nature and grace', between history and revelation



Hans Urs von Balthasar as a student

on the one hand, and experience and faith on the other.⁹ It met with opposition from influential theologians such as Michel Labourdette and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrance, who linked it to modernism, which for them was dangerous.¹⁰ In 1950, Pius XII's encyclical *Humani generis* obliquely made critical mention of it.

Jesuit Priest and Departure from the Society of Jesus

After his priestly ordination in 1936, von Balthasar served as associate editor of *Stimmen der Zeit*, the German Jesuits' cultural review, from 1937

⁷ Medard Kehl, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Portrait', in *The Von Balthasar Reader*, edited by Medard Kehl and Werner Löser, translated by Robert J. Daly and Fred Lawrence (New York: Crossroad, 1982 [1980]), 5.

⁸ The transcendental attributes of Being are so called because they surpass all the limits of essences and are coextensive with Being. They 'climb over or leap over all divisions, categories, and distinctions between and within beings, pervading them all': W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, In: U. of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 43.

⁹ Kehl, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Portrait', 5-6.

¹⁰ See Michel Labourdette, 'La théologie et ses sources', *Revue thomiste*, 46 (1946), 353-371, and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrance, 'La nouvelle théologie où va-t-elle?', *Angelicum*, 23 (1946), 126-145, at 143.



Adrienne von Speyr

to 1939. He and three other Jesuits had been slated to open an ecumenical institute at Rome's Gregorian University, but he was given the option of going to Basel as a university chaplain, and he took it. In 1950, after a long discernment, von Balthasar left the Society of Jesus to devote himself entirely to the Ignatian secular institute, the Community of St John. He had founded the Community in 1945 with Adrienne von Speyr, a medical doctor who had been received into the Catholic Church under his direction. Her spiritual gifts convinced him that God was calling them within a double and complementary

mission to special service within the Church, but conflict ensued with his superiors. It was understood that Jesuits would not assume the regular spiritual direction of women, and his request to be released for this task was denied. 'So for me', he reflected, 'the step taken means an application of Christian obedience to God, who, at any time, has the right to call a man ... from his chosen home in a religious order, so that He can use him for His purpose within the Church'.¹¹

Shortly after his departure from the Society in February 1950, von Balthasar renewed his religious vows at Maria Laach Monastery. In 1956, he was incardinated into the diocese of Chur, Switzerland, a step 'which officially dispelled the canonical cloud under which he had been working for so long'.¹²

A Renaissance Man

After 1950, von Balthasar immersed himself in university chaplaincy, in writing, in lecturing, in giving the Spiritual Exercises, and in serving

¹¹ Henrici, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life', 21.

¹² Henrici, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life', 23; Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 4.

as the director of the Community of St John. Such ministry put his theology to the test of reality. In Einsiedeln, he established the Johannes Verlag, a publishing company.

Von Balthasar wrote major theological works and studies in theological and philosophical history, philosophy and hagiography. With fluency in Hebrew, Greek, Latin and several modern languages, he also translated and edited works of Church Fathers, notably the great Greek figures, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor. He translated too the work of distinguished French Catholic literary figures: Paul Claudel, Charles Péguy and Georges Bernanos.

In 1951, von Balthasar published a major study on Karl Barth entitled *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*.¹³ His friendship with Barth had begun with their mutual admiration for Mozart, and Barth considered von Balthasar ‘one of his earliest and most accurate interpreters of his work’; equally von Balthasar’s theology reveals the influence of the Reformed pastor.¹⁴ According to one of von Balthasar’s correspondents, whenever Barth was asked about the significance of his biblical theology, he replied, ‘Read Urs’.¹⁵

Final Years

After Vatican II, von Balthasar’s theology attracted international attention, and the honours accumulated. In 1971, he received the Romano Guardini Prize of the Catholic Academy of Bavaria. From 1969 until his death, von Balthasar was a member of the Pope’s International Theological Commission, and, in 1971, he drafted a document on priestly spirituality at the second Synod of Bishops. With other major figures he founded *Communio: International Theological Review*, a leading Catholic theological journal, in 1972. In 1984, he received the International Paul VI Prize and, as if a life that began with the arts had come full circle, he received in 1987, as his final honour, the Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Prize. A member of the Community of St John published a bibliography of von Balthasar’s writings in 1990;

¹³ Translated into English as *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, by Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Communio, 1992). Barth was a theologian and pastor of the Swiss Reformed Church. He died in 1968.

¹⁴ Thomas Guarino, ‘Reading von Balthasar: Fundamental Themes’, *New Theology Review*, 4/3 (August 1991), 52-53.

¹⁵ Kenneth M. Batinovich, ‘On the Death of Father Balthasar’, *Communio*, 16/1 (Spring 1989), 152.



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Hans Urs von Balthasar in later life

he wrote more books than the normal person reads in a lifetime—almost seven hundred in all.¹⁶

In his last years, von Balthasar applied for readmission to the Society of Jesus. His request was denied,¹⁷ but in 1988 Pope John Paul II named him a Cardinal. ‘Though tired and ill again’, writes Henrici, ‘he this time accepted, out of obedience to the Pope, what to him was an embarrassing honour’.¹⁸ He died on 26 June 1988, two days before the official ceremony was to take place. De Lubac considered von Balthasar a ‘modern Father of the Church’, praising him as ‘perhaps the most cultivated man of his time’, and he adds: ‘if there is such a thing as a Christian culture, here it is’.¹⁹

Theology and the Aesthetic Act

The theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar begins and ends with God’s glory communicated as love to humanity, man and woman; it invites their response.²⁰ In his massive trilogy, von Balthasar proclaims God’s love as beauty, goodness and truth. Known in philosophy as the

¹⁶ Cornelia Capol, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, Bibliographie: 1925-1990* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1990); Henrici, ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life’, 7.

¹⁷ Henrici, ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life’, 22.

¹⁸ Henrici, ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life’, 41.

¹⁹ Henri de Lubac, ‘A Witness of Christ in the Church: Hans Urs von Balthasar’, in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, 271-288, here 272; see also Gerard O’Hanlon, ‘The Jesuits and Modern Theology: Rahner, von Balthasar and Liberation Theology’, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 58 (1992), 25-45, at 45.

²⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982-1989), I:204, IV:11, V:302, VII:23 (hereafter *GL* cited in text). The word glory (Greek *doxa*) unifies God’s beauty, holiness, and love. Glory forms not only the content but also the underlying theme of Scripture. It is expressed by some 25 different Hebrew words, of which *kābôd* is the chief.

transcendentals, nevertheless these ‘three sisters’ are understood by von Balthasar to be anchored in revealed theology, and to be inseparable from it (*GL I*: 18; *IV*: 19). *The Glory of the Lord*, the first of the trilogy, presents Christian revelation and faith through what is called the ‘analogy of beauty’. For von Balthasar, the love of created beauty can help us understand what it is to be enraptured by Christ. As Incarnate Love, he is not merely one object of beauty among others, but rather the perfection and measure of all worldly beauty (*GL I*: 177, 431-432).²¹

As von Balthasar sees the matter, the Church since the Enlightenment has either abandoned the topic of beauty or belittled it as a mere trifle. She has forgotten the close links between truth, beauty and love. The advertising industry and the mass media trivialise all three of them, and Christianity has allowed these highly profitable businesses to define beauty and love for us. But God has given us beauty, and given it to us for a purpose. Our enfleshed spirits need pleasure, enjoyment and delight, just as the intellect seeks truth, and the will is attracted to goodness. Beauty is part of being human, and without it happiness cannot be fully realised. Beauty lightens daily burdens and helps society live in harmony. A thing of beauty uplifts us and expands our openness to reality (*GL I*: 118). It reminds us human beings of our dignity, made as we are in God’s image, and called as we are to the divine likeness. The Judaeo-Christian Scriptures greatly esteem beauty as something which calls us to faith. Deprived of beauty for any length of time, we seek forms of pleasure, often vulgar, which offend against our exalted vocation. As von Balthasar puts it:

... whoever sneers at (beauty’s) name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past—whether he admits it or not—can no longer pray, and soon will no longer be able to love (*GL I*: 18).

Von Balthasar was initially educated in the arts, and did not consider himself a professional theologian. The chief influences on his thought were the Church Fathers and Ignatius Loyola, the author of the *Spiritual Exercises*—these authors nourished a sacramental view of

²¹ *The Glory of the Lord* focuses on the theology of perceiving beauty. *Theo-Drama* and *Theo-Logic*, though interrelated with *The Glory of the Lord*, are primarily concerned with ‘God’s dealings with humanity and the manner of expressing God’s activity’, the good and the true (*GL I*: Foreword).

the world, and an understanding of the act of faith as rooted not in reason but in love.

The Aesthetic Act

In an age that prizes the subjective, it goes without saying that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’. But despite the prevailing temptation simply to equate human beauty with physical appeal, we know instinctively that beauty is more than a pretty face or an attractive body. We perceive beauty and respond to it in persons, places and things; we sense beauty in what we see, hear, taste, touch and smell. What, then, is beauty?

Beauty is what delights us—its quality and design please our senses, but also our other faculties: memory and imagination, intellect and will.²² We can perceive beauty directly and intuitively, even if we do so by our experience and preconditioning. The beautiful strikes us as good and true, but understanding it may require some guidance.²³

For von Balthasar, beauty is a dynamic event: what is objectively beautiful ‘apprehends’ and transforms the beholder, drawing him or her into a kind of union with itself. ‘Beauty’ therefore refers both to something given and to a personal response, and embraces both the objective and the subjective.²⁴ When confronted with beauty’s revelation, people are drawn to it beyond themselves. Something good and true has taken place in this experience. Let us look at the objective and subjective aspects in turn.

The Objective Given

The beauty of a rose is something given. In the classical view, this beauty, this great radiance, comes ‘from within’ (*GL* I:20). Indeed, a thing of beauty reveals God’s beauty, because it is God’s creation and participates in God’s own perfection of beauty (*GL* I:19-20). In the end, things can only be known in and through God (*GL* I:164). The world does indeed blaze forth with God’s glory (*GL* IV:19-20; VII:242-

²² According to St Thomas Aquinas, ‘... we call those things beautiful which please us when they are seen’, or *id quae visum placet*. Translation of *Summa theologiae*, I, 5, 4 taken from Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1988), 35.

²³ W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 299.

²⁴ *GL* I: Foreword. Von Balthasar notes that these moments complement one another.

243); it is ‘charged with the grandeur of God’.²⁵ Nothing that exists can be totally devoid of this radiance. Von Balthasar notes that all great art is religious because it is an act of homage before the God of glory (GL IV:13).

The Objective Christ

For Christians, Jesus, ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Colossians 1:15), surpasses any other worldly beauty.²⁶ Yet there are some parallels between our experience of beauty and our response in faith to Jesus Christ. He is God’s radiant splendour in human form, and the light which shines forth through him is poured out on the senses. In the incarnation, Christ descended into our human flesh in order to show us the way to beauty, goodness and truth.

In the incarnation, however, the divinity of Jesus remains hidden. Nevertheless, his infinite depth reveals itself as the glory of God in human form, God’s *kâbôd*. He is the pre-eminent beauty in the world; he transforms those who behold him and draws them out to himself. Jesus makes faith a fully human act, and therefore an act which engages the senses, a sensory act. In him life and culture assume a new meaning. The Christian is called to perceive Jesus as God’s radiance, bathing the whole world with the sheer revelation of his glory.

**The act of
faith engages
the senses**

Jesus is also a sign of God’s *eros*, God’s jealous, ravenous love beckoning to us.²⁷ Though he may no longer be visible in the body, the beauty of his moral teaching continues to shine out from the New Testament. In him, the saints have always found their ultimate pleasure and delight.

Subjective Transformation

The German word translated in theological contexts as experience is *Erfahrung*. It is connected to the German word for ‘to go’ or ‘to travel’,

²⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘God’s Grandeur’.

²⁶ Von Balthasar notes that theological aesthetics has nothing to do with the aesthetics of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Idealism or other ‘profane sciences’. See *Love Alone is Credible*, translated by D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004 [1963]), 11. This line of thought attempts to apply the theory of beauty, subjective and self-conscious, to revelation and faith; this is an aesthetic theology (GL I:38, 79). In contrast, theological aesthetics uses the methods of theology to study beauty. It argues for a genuine relationship between theological beauty and the beauty of the world (GL I:39, 80).

²⁷ This idea is scriptural: see Exodus 13:22; Isaiah 33:14; Song of Songs 1:18; Hebrews 13:29.

and it thus conveys the notion of going out of oneself, of travelling to a different place—geographical, intellectual or spiritual (GL I:222 and n.38). The enjoyment we derive from the experience of beauty depends on our moving away from the self. Moreover, to perceive beauty is more than a sensory experience; one is also recognising the object's truth and rightness, its integrity and quality of design. Union with the beautiful brings with it a kind of transformation.

Christ, too, working through the Holy Spirit, 'transforms the believer as a whole' into his image. God's action in a person of faith may be likened to a person playing a violin. The artist must first tune the instrument, and then press with his or her finger on the strings to produce a note, perhaps, too, moving too and fro to generate an intense vibrato so that the violin sings beautifully. So too with the human person and Christian faith:

Faith attunes humanity to *this* sound; it confers on humanity the ability to react to precisely *this* divine experiment, preparing humanity to be a violin that receives just *this* touch of the bow, to serve as material for just *this* house to be built, to provide the rhyme for just *this* verse being composed.²⁸

Thus the whole self is taken into 'a Christian "attunement" to or "consonance" with God' (GL I:242). In this process we are responding to God's initiative, and being transformed into God's work of art. Von Balthasar plays on the German word *stimmen*, which is both a musical term meaning 'to tune', and also a more general word denoting correspondence. He speaks of,

... an attunement (*Gestimmtsein*) which is a concordance (*Übereinstimmung*) with the rhythm of God's own self, and therefore an assent (*Zustimmung*), not only to God's reality, but to His free act of willing which is always being breathed by God upon humanity. (GL I:251)

Within the terms of this analogy, the music is at once God's outward self-revelation and humanity's response in grace and faith. We are called to participate in a circular movement that goes out from God and returns to God. What is at stake here is not some general scheme

²⁸ GL I:220—emphasis added.

of ‘emanation and return’, but something utterly unique, grounded in the incarnation (GL I:477).

God of the Senses

The biblical experience of God takes place in the senses. In Christ, God appears to us right in the midst of the world’s reality. Jesus uses simple things—bread and wine, fish, oil and water—to convey his message and accomplish his mission. The encounter with the Incarnate Christ necessarily takes place through the senses, through which alone humanity becomes aware of reality (GL I:365).

Without the sensory aspect of faith, there is a danger of falling into errors that denigrate the human, and impair the meaning of the incarnation. Von Balthasar writes that ‘everything depends on the effects of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and especially touching the Word of Life, all of which culminates with the placing of the fingers in the wound on the side’ (GL I:313). Christianity not only begins with the bodily; unlike other religions, it also culminates with the bodily: ‘we abide in the seeing, hearing, touching, the savouring and eating of this flesh and blood’ (GL I:314). Our theology must include a theological aesthetics because God’s own reality, through the divine gracious initiative, can and must be seen, heard and touched (GL I:311).

The Convergence of Beauty and Love

Beauty needs, however, to be seen in a wider context; it is not an end in itself. God is Love; beauty is an attribute of love. Moreover, God’s love goes beyond mere *eros*; God’s love is *agape*, self-sacrificing gift. We must understand God’s entry into our horizon in terms of the great dogmas of the Trinity and the incarnation.²⁹ The self-giving of Jesus demonstrates that love’s beauty consists in its being given unconditionally and without limit.³⁰

²⁹ See how von Balthasar explains the articulation of his major trilogy in ‘A Resumé of My Thought’, in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, 1-4, especially the final pages.

³⁰ Love and beauty in creatures are distinct, though interrelated. Whereas aesthetic maturity requires education of the senses, though perhaps not formally, unselfish love matures through the training, more or less explicitly, of the intellect and the will. Nevertheless, we must love as human beings, and not as pure spirits; harmony between matter and spirit is for us a lifelong pursuit. For us, *eros* is a way to God, but *agapic* love is the goal. In God, beauty and love are one.

Our experience tells us that what we love appears not merely beautiful to us but also *herrlich* ('overpoweringly glorious').³¹ So it was for Paul on his way to Damascus. He had seen the highest beauty, and so was snatched up into the beauty of Christ (*GL* I:33). He loved what he saw, and never ceased proclaiming the beauty of the Lord now risen who had once been 'crowned with thorns and crucified'. Such mysticism conveys 'the notion of having been touched from the outside and from above' (*GL* 1:246). Paul is an outstanding example of a person who has been impressed with Christ's form.

Other articles in this collection address more fully the relationship between von Balthasar and the Ignatian Exercises. Here, however, it is worth bringing out one particular theme, that of the role of the senses in prayer, particularly in the so-called Application of the Senses.³²

The Spiritual Exercises amount to an experience of salvation history realised in prayer. Throughout the Exercises, the individual meditates on the senses, with the senses, and through the senses as a way of becoming attuned to the mystery under consideration (*GL* I: 374). The senses put on the mystery; they live in the mystery. It is not that we leave the senses behind; rather we widen and deepen their range. We move beyond 'the concreteness of the simple happenings in the gospel', and reach a stage where, in our experience, 'the Godhead itself becomes concrete':

... since what must be made real is, objectively, God's worldly and corporeal form, it cannot be made real—precisely in its full perfection—other than in a totally human way: in the encounter of the corporeal sinner who has been granted grace with the God who has corporeally become human. (*GL* I:375-376)

We live in our bodies; our spirituality is corporeal. Our redemption lies in the real world of space and time, the only world in which we can live. It is here and nowhere else that God's great work is accomplished.

³¹ Von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 54—'radiant with glory'. The German title of *The Glory of the Lord* is simply *Herrlichkeit*: the standard German word for 'glory', linked etymologically to *Herr*, the word for 'Lord'.

³² Von Balthasar's discussion of this Ignatian Exercise comes in *GL* I: 373-380.

Guidance

Sometimes beauty, particularly in the natural world, evokes a direct, spontaneous response; often, however, we need to learn how to appreciate a work of art. Philosophers raise questions about beauty. If beauty is an objective reality, why is it that not everyone sees it? How is it possible for things that are truly beautiful not to appear beautiful. Francis Kovach names some factors that can prevent us from seeing beauty: closed-mindedness, prejudice, ignorance, family and religious attitudes.³³

Von Balthasar identifies himself with the majority view of the ancients, for whom beauty is not arbitrary, relative or accidental. Things are not beautiful because they delight us; rather, we enjoy and love things because they are beautiful.³⁴ Beauty resides in things, objectively, whether or not we can see it. What we may need is a guide to help us see it.

When the beauty in question is that of Christ, it is, for Balthasar, the Catholic Church that at once continues and mediates the form of Christ, and provides the guidance we need if we are to perceive his mystery. From its beginnings, the Church has proclaimed the inner truth and vitality of Christianity and its divine origins. Christians have lived out their belief in Jesus, and have died for him and his mission. Their witness has taught subsequent generations; and for each of us, our ability to see with the eyes of faith has been learnt with the help of particular persons, places and events. The process has also involved, of course, our own reflection and perhaps some inner struggle, before we have come to see with adult faith. The search may last a lifetime.

³³ Francis J. Kovach, 'Aesthetic Subjectivism and Pre-Modern Philosophy', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 40 (1966), 209-221, here 211, 215.

³⁴ Kovach, *Aesthetic Subjectivism*, 215.



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Von Balthasar in 1936, with his family, after he had presided at the Eucharist for the first time. His mother had died in 1929; his sister Renée eventually became General of a Franciscan congregation; his brother Dieter became a Swiss Guard.

A Culture of Love and Beauty

The Song of Songs, one of the most beautiful books in the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures, affirms the dynamic convergence of body and spirit, of love and beauty:

O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.

You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you. (Song of Songs 2:14; 4:7)

Augustine writes movingly of the restlessness that haunted his life until he could exclaim, in regret certainly, but more profoundly in gratitude: ‘Late have I loved thee, O Beauty, ever ancient, ever new; late have I loved thee’.³⁵

Augustine’s restlessness is ours as well; the search for love and beauty is a quest intrinsic to the human condition. To build a culture of love, to change the world from the inside, this is our mandate. We are called to live as co-creators with the Divine Artist. In one sense the task is simple: live lovingly, and wonder at the unity of beauty, truth and goodness. Decry ugliness in all its forms. Help our human family to discern the beautiful in their own lives, and imitate it when it

³⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10:38—translation taken from *The Liturgy of the Hours*, volume 4 (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1975), 1357.

radiates from others. The ugly will not vanish, because sin will not vanish; but we can overcome the ugly by cultivating instincts of beauty and love. *The Glory of the Lord* sharpens our awareness of beauty's role in salvation history.

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