

THE WORLD AS GIFT

• Nicholas J. Healy III •

“The gift that we bring is the reception of the divine self-communication in history by receiving the reality of the world as an expression of trinitarian love—that is, by receiving the world as a gift from God and *for* God.”



At the end of the final volume of the *Theo-Drama*, Hans Urs von Balthasar tentatively proposes that we consider the question of eternal damnation not so much from the anthropological perspective—“What does man lose if he loses God?”—as from the standpoint of God: “What does God lose if he loses man?”¹ The obvious difficulty with this question is that it seems to presuppose both that something can be lacking to God and that God can receive something from the world. How can God, who is the fullness of being without any admixture of potency, receive something from finite creatures? Following St. Thomas Aquinas, Balthasar conceives God’s perfection in terms of pure actuality (*actus purus*).² Balthasar also concurs with Aquinas in affirming the absolute gratuity of God in

¹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* [=TD], vol. 5: *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 506.

²Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* [=Glory], vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 636.

creating the world. “God alone,” Thomas writes, “is the most perfectly liberal giver, because he does not act for his own profit, but only for his own goodness.”³ How, then, can Balthasar claim that God receives from the world

an additional gift, given to the Son by the Father, but equally a gift made by the Son to the Father, and by the Spirit to both. It is a gift because, through the distinct operations of each of the three Persons, the world acquires an inward share in the divine exchange of life; as a result the world is able to take the divine things it has received from God, together with the gift of being created, and return them to God as a divine gift.⁴

To begin to answer this question I will outline two distinct areas of Balthasar’s thought. The first is a philosophical reflection on the meaning of being as gift; the second concerns the life of the Trinity as revealed in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Guided by Balthasar’s adage *ohne Philosophie keine Theologie* (there is no theology without philosophy), Part One will secure on philosophical grounds the claim that receptivity is somehow intrinsic to the perfection of act in its fullness. Only then will it be possible to explore, in Part Two, how the Incarnation of the Son unveils the mystery of a divine giving and receiving within the Trinity. Both reflections converge on the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is the ultimate gift of the Trinity and the manner in which the whole of created being is invited into the trinitarian exchange of life.

1. *Being as gift*

According to St. Thomas, being (*esse*) “signifies the highest perfection of all.” “The proof,” he tells us,

is that act is always more perfect than potentiality. Now no signate form is understood to be in act unless it be supposed to have *esse*. . . . Wherefore it is clear that *esse* as we understand it

³*ST* I, q. 44, a. 4 ad 1.

⁴*TD* 5, 521.

here is the actuality of all acts, and therefore the perfection of all perfections.⁵

The question we need to consider is whether this perfection can include a free dependency or receptivity in relation to another. At the conclusion of the metaphysics volume in *The Glory of the Lord*, in a section called “The Miracle of Being and the Fourfold Difference,” Balthasar offers an interpretation of the act of being by proposing four levels of difference that must be held open to remain faithful to the basic question of metaphysics: Why is there something rather than nothing?

(i) The first level of difference that opens up is between the child’s “I” and the “other,” who is at first the child’s mother, but implicitly is everything else that will be “other” to the child:

Its “I” awakens in the experience of a “Thou”: in its mother’s smile through which it learns that it is contained, affirmed and loved in a relationship which is incomprehensively encompassing, already actual, sheltering and nourishing. . . . Existence is both glorious and a matter of course. Everything, without exception, which is to follow later and will inevitably be added to this experience must remain an unfolding of it.⁶

In a word, the original experience is one of being granted entrance into a sheltering and encompassing world of love.

To draw out the significance of this starting point, we need to consider how it sheds light on the primordial meaning of difference. The “I” of the child awakens to an affirmation of the goodness of its being other than its mother, whose love welcomes the child as a gift. Within the comprehending love of the mother, the child’s self is a “more” that is affirmed as positive, rather than a product of loss or a fall. The original experience, then, is one of being given to oneself—and given *for* another—as a gift.

The experience of being granted entry into being provides the abiding context for posing the fundamental question of metaphysics—*why* is there something rather than nothing? The reception of a gift provokes a natural desire to know the source of the gift. To whom do I owe my gratitude?

⁵*De potentia Dei*, q. 7, a. 2 ad 9.

⁶*Glory* 5, 616–617.

(ii) The second level of distinction opens when I realize that my wonder and gratitude over “being permitted to be” cannot come to rest on my mother or any particular existent, because these individuals have also been granted entry into being:

Insofar as I am one existent among others, . . . I now understand that all other existents stand in the same relation to being as I do myself. It evidently follows from this that, although all existents partake in being, yet—to whatever extent we were to multiply them—they never exhaust it, nor even, as it were, “broach” it.⁷

We can relate this second stage to Thomas’ account of the *actus essendi* as possessing a simple and unlimited fullness. There is a plenitude and generosity in being, a “more” which overflows both every particular being, and the totality of beings together. “The sum of possible beings,” writes Balthasar, “transcends the range of realized beings; but merely possible beings are by definition not real, so that the readiness of being to make possible entities real is greater than their sum.”⁸ Being itself, as distinct from any particular being, appears as limitless source and ground, and thus my wonder is directed to being.

(iii) The third level of distinction is opened when one realizes that although each existent depends on being for its entrance into reality, there is a reciprocal dependence of being upon the existent to attain subsistence. Thus, if the second distinction corresponds to the Thomistic understanding of *esse* as the “actuality of all acts,” the third distinction highlights the non-subsistence of being of which Thomas speaks in the first question of *De Potentia*: “*esse significat aliquid completum et simplex, sed non subsistens.*”⁹ “The fact that an existent,” Balthasar writes, “can only become actual through participation in the act of being points to the complementary antithesis that the fullness of being attains actuality only in the existent. Just as existents stand in need of being, being stands in need of the existent.”¹⁰ Being is simultaneously rich and poor; rich in its fullness which continually overflows the limits of every existent, and

⁷*Glory* 5, 618.

⁸Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilog* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1987), 38.

⁹*De potentia Dei*, q. 1, a. 1.

¹⁰*Glory* 5, 619.

poor in that it stands in need of the limited existent to attain reality. “Each ‘pole,’” writes Balthasar, “has to seek and to find its ‘salvation’ in the other pole: Being arrives at itself as subsistence only within the entity and the entity arrives at its actuality . . . only within its participation in being.”¹¹ Balthasar will say that there is a mysterious “more” at the heart of being that allows all things to come from its fullness and grace. And yet, coincident with this fullness is a poverty that receives from the existent the gift of subsistence. I will return to this theme below.

The original question “*why* is there something rather than nothing?” cannot be answered at the level of a distinction between being and the existent. As non-subsistent, being cannot be the ultimate source of the existent. The mutual dependence of the existent upon being and being upon the existent points to a fourth and final distinction between God and the world. This final distinction is opened only to remain faithful to the original promise of love.

(iv) To whom do I owe my gratitude? On the one hand, the source of my being cannot be one existent alongside other existents, but must be the plenitude of being and thus “all in all.” On the other hand, being, as non-subsistent, cannot freely “decide” to create the multiplicity of created existents. Hence in order to preserve in wonder the goodness of creation, we must affirm the existence of subsistent Being who is sovereignly and freely responsible for both being and the existent. The fourth distinction, however, “does not set God over-against man as one particular being to another: rather, this relationship is mediated by the analogical ‘allness’ of being.” At the same time, “it must be said that the relationship between God and creature is *more* than a relationship between a being and (created) Being, but transcends this as free personality.”¹² Only when creation is grounded in the unconditioned freedom of God does the true meaning of the interpersonal communion between mother and child, as well as the reciprocal dependence of being and the existent, come to light. The mysterious “more” that lies at the heart of being reaches all the way to God, who is present in creation as a gift that has been truly given away. “[I]t is precisely when its essential

¹¹Ibid., 625.

¹²D. C. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 48.

finitude shows it to be something quite different from God,” suggests Balthasar, “that the creature knows that, as a real being, it has had bestowed upon it the most extravagant gift—participation in the real being of God.”¹³

Let me review the levels of distinction before considering the understanding of actuality implicit in the “fourfold difference.” Within the first distinction, the comprehending act of the mother’s love allowed for the distinct “I” of the child to awaken to consciousness. The second distinction brought to light the inexhaustible fullness of the act of being, but was immediately complemented by the third distinction, which showed that this fullness is not *in itself* subsistent, but finds its subsistence only in the relative otherness of the various existents. In order to safeguard the positive character of both being and the existent in their reciprocal dependence, it was necessary to affirm the existence of subsistent Being who is sovereignly and freely responsible for both being and the existent.

Perhaps the most original aspect of Balthasar’s interpretation of the Thomistic real distinction concerns the positive character of being’s non-subsistence, which he explains in terms of a mysterious unity of wealth and poverty. Thomas secures the unity of being by reducing all perfections to a principle that he calls *esse*, which concentrates all of the perfections of actuality found scattered through the created universe. *Esse*, he tells us, is “simple and complete.” But Thomas does not, as it were, reductively situate all of the perfections of reality in *esse* alone. *Esse*, after all, is not just simple and complete, but also non-subsistent; it is traversed by difference. This difference is, in the first instance, its difference from the divine *ipsum esse subsistens*. God is not one thing among many, and creaturely being differs from him by lacking the subsistence that God has by virtue of the identity of his essence with his *esse*.

The difference that traverses *esse* as non-subsistent act, then, does not divide it into two things or even into two parts. It thus does not compromise *esse*’s ability to function as a principle of the unity of being. Nevertheless, this difference does mean that *esse* can fulfill such a principal function only within a second difference, namely, that between *esse* and essence. The simple, indivisible fullness of *esse* not only is compatible with, but contains a relation to, an irreducible

¹³Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 4: *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, trans. Brian McNeil, et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 404.

“other” that, while remaining within the fullness of being, is nonetheless a condition for the exercise of that fullness. The complexity of the essence in its non-identity with *esse* is not simply a limit that is foreign to *esse* itself, but is rather a difference that is generously allowed by *esse* itself—essence truly “affects” *esse* without for all that depriving it of its simple fullness and perfection. Balthasar characterizes this mysterious interplay between being and essence as a reciprocal, asymmetrical generosity.

The receptivity we encounter at the level of created being is bound up with neediness and imperfection. The same is true of created generosity and activity. The perfections of created being are always marked by finitude and thus are infinitely different from their actualization in God. The question is whether receptivity does not also indicate something positive about the mystery of the act of being. Within the greater unlikeness separating God and the creature, we can say that God’s self-giving can include a receiving from the creature whose nature is displayed—within the greater unlikeness—in the generous dependency of *esse* on essence and, therefore, on their mutual, asymmetrical interplay within the unity of being:

God-given being is both fullness and poverty at the same time: fullness as being without limit, poverty modeled ultimately on God himself, because he knows no holding on to himself, poverty in the act of being which is given out, which as gift delivers itself without defense (because here too it does not hold on to itself) to the finite entities. . . . Here, through the greater dissimilarity of the finite and the infinite existent, the positive aspect of the *analogia entis* appears, which makes of the finite the shadow, trace, likeness and image of the Infinite.¹⁴

At the most profound level, the poverty and wealth of being point forward to the radiance of God’s love on the Cross—the hidden radiance of a God who gives everything away:

May it not be the case (as Ferdinand Ulrich seeks to show) that the final mystery of the kenosis of God in Christ has an analogous structure in the metaphysical mystery of being, which shines

¹⁴*Glory* 5, 626–627.

forth as it nihilates, which mediates the radiance of the divine only by pointing forward to the utter humility of the Cross.¹⁵

2. *The Hypostatic Union*

In his movement from birth to death and Resurrection, Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of created and uncreated being in their difference and unity. The preceding philosophical reflections on the poverty and wealth of being as gift are fulfilled and concretized in the event of the Son's Incarnation. In order to see how the Incarnation sheds light on the meaning of being, we can begin with a consideration of the idea of "kenosis." In a preface to the second edition of *Theologie der drei Tage*, Balthasar points to a potential weakness in the traditional interpretation of the kenosis of the Son as described in Paul's *Letter to the Philippians*. He writes:

[B]y placing the emphasis, in the doctrine of the kenosis, so exclusively on the human nature assumed by the Son, or on his act of assuming that nature—the divine nature remaining inaccessible to all becoming or change, and even to any real relationship with the world—one was running the risk of underestimating the weight of the assertions made in Scripture.¹⁶

Later in the same book, Balthasar specifies two related aspects of the New Testament that he thinks are underestimated in the traditional account of the Son's self-emptying. First, there is the Johannine affirmation that "in the uttermost form of the slave, on the Cross, the Son's glory breaks through, inasmuch as it is then that he goes to the (divine) extreme in his loving, and in the revelation of that love."¹⁷ The second point is that in the event of the Incarnation the triune God does not merely help the world, but also discloses to the world the innermost secret of his being.

The framework for interpreting these passages is provided by the Council of Chalcedon: "We confess that one and the same Christ, Lord, and only-begotten Son, is to be acknowledged in two

¹⁵*Glory* 4, 38.

¹⁶Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), vii–viii.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 29.

natures without confusion, change, division, or separation.” As fully human Jesus Christ reveals the true meaning of creation, and as fully divine he reveals the true meaning of God. The crucial point is that this twofold revelation occurs in and through the *union* of his person, even as that union requires an abiding *difference* between his human nature and his divine nature. Because of the abiding distinction between the nature of man and the nature of God, the human events of Christ’s incarnate life cannot be univocally predicated of God, who remains transcendent and immutable. At the same time, by virtue of the hypostatic union the entire existence of Christ, including his suffering and death, expresses or reveals the mode of being of the Son who is the subject of these actions and therein the reciprocal love between Father and Son. In other words, Christ reveals the final meaning of Chalcedon’s “truly God” to be a trinitarian exchange among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the same time, Christ assumes responsibility for representing and including within his person not only a single human nature, but the whole of humanity, and ultimately the whole of creation. Thus the full stature of “truly man” is revealed in a eucharistic self-giving which accomplishes a gathering of the whole of creation into the body of Christ. This twofold revelation of the Trinity and creation does not fracture into a (Nestorian) dualism because both as man and as God, the Son receives his being in gratitude from the Father who is the “ever-greater” (Jn 14:28) source of his existence:

The trinitarian analogy enables the Son, without abolishing the *analogia entis*, simultaneously to do two things: he represents God to the world—but in the mode of the Son who regards the Father as “greater” and to whom he eternally owes all that he is—and he represents the world to God, by being, as man (or rather as the God-man), “humble, lowly, modest, docile [*tapeinos*] of heart” (Mt 11:29). It is on the basis of these two aspects, united in an abiding analogy, that the Son can take up his one, unitary mission.¹⁸

We can enter more deeply into this point by reflecting on Christ’s revelation of the Father. To the question—*How* does Jesus

¹⁸Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 230.

make known the Father?—it is not enough to point to his teaching. His very existence is an interpretation of the Father. This is why whoever sees Jesus sees the Father (Jn 12:45; 14:10–11). Of particular pertinence here is the Johannine idea that the mission of the Son comes to a climax in the “hour” of the Cross and Resurrection. This is the “hour” of glorification when Christ tells us “plainly of the Father” (Jn 16:25). If the entire mission of the Son is characterized by a love which goes “to the end” (Jn 13:1), it is his death on the cross and the ensuing gift of Spirit and Eucharist that provides a perfect earthly image of the Father’s eternal act of giving everything to (begetting) the Son. As interpreted by the life and death of Christ, the Father’s eternal act of begetting the Son should be understood as an act of total self-surrender. The ultimate mystery of the Father as *fons et origo totius divinitatis* consists in the fact that he holds nothing back, but gives everything away to the Son. Christ’s human life thus becomes a perfect earthly image of the invisible Father at the moment when his witness takes the form of giving up his life out of love for the world and the Father.

At this point we need to reintroduce the twofold representation required by Chalcedon. Not only does Christ reveal the mystery of the Father, but he reveals the true meaning and integrity of human nature in its distinction from the divine nature (*gratia non destruit, elevat, perficit naturam*). The crux of the matter, however, is that the Son does not actualize the integrity of his human nature outside of, or apart from, the act of receiving his entire being and existence from the Father. To the contrary, the integrity of his human nature is perfected to the extent that it is assumed and taken into his Person.¹⁹ To sketch this point in the terms introduced above, Christ’s human nature does not cease to be truly finite when it is received as an additional gift from the Father—a gift which mediates and expresses the Father’s eternal love for the Son. Of course, the mission of the Son extends beyond the reception of his own human nature. *All things* were created in and for the Son, and

¹⁹Cf. Marc Ouellet, “Jesus Christ the One Savior of the World, Yesterday, Today, and Forever,” *Communio* 23 (1997): 211–233, at 228: “The full and concrete reality of a human existence is taken in and assumed within the relationship of the Son to the Father in the Trinity. His act of created dependency (receptivity) from God as a man is thus assumed within his act of filial dependency (receptivity) from the Father.”

his mission is to return to the Father with every human being, and ultimately the whole of creation.

Now, if it is the Incarnate Son we are speaking of, then he must return to the Father as a human being, that is, within the limits of a bodily and temporal existence. His return to the Father cannot be something that is accomplished “after” his historical death and Resurrection. For Balthasar, the key to the concrete universality of the Son’s saving mission is the relation between the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist. The total self-giving of Christ, which expresses and mediates the reciprocal love of Father and Son, is fruitful of Spirit and Eucharist. As the divine “fruit” of the reciprocal love between Father and Son, and as the fruit of the Incarnate Son’s divine and human self-surrender, the Holy Spirit universalizes the particular temporal and bodily existence of Christ by including others within his Eucharist.

It is the Eucharist, communicated in the Holy Spirit, that seals the New Covenant as a reciprocal exchange of life and love. What is given to us in the Eucharist is precisely the whole of Christ’s human existence together with the trinitarian life that is the origin and end of that existence. Developing an insight of Odo Casel, Balthasar insists that Christ communicates

not merely the material side of his bodily substance, but the saving events wrought by it . . . the person of Jesus is really present; but along with the person comes his entire temporal history and, in particular, its climax in cross and Resurrection.²⁰

Most fundamentally, in the Eucharist Christ communicates the Holy Spirit, who is Person-Gift, the reciprocal love of Father and Son poured forth upon the Church and the world.

With this last observation, we can return to the original question, *Was hat Gott von der Welt?* Christ gives himself as Eucharist by receiving the world, despite its sinful condition, as a gift that expresses and mediates the divine love of the Father and the Holy Spirit. It is the Eucharist that enables Christ to fulfill his mission of ensheltering the world within his body and thus within the divine life. Not only does Christ receive the world as a gift, but he communicates a share in his own receiving and giving. Thus, on our

²⁰Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4: *The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 391–392.

side, we receive this gift adequately to the extent that we are conformed to the life and mission of the Incarnate Son. In the Eucharist we are taken into Christ's missionary gift to the world; missionary because we are expropriated and called no longer to live for ourselves, but for others; gift because the source of the life that we "bring" to the other is not ourselves but the gift of divine life. In other words, the gift that we bring is the reception of the divine self-communication in history by receiving the reality of the world as an expression of trinitarian love—that is, by receiving the world as a gift from God and *for* God.

One final question: Will it really be all who are saved? As distinct from Origen and Augustine, Balthasar insisted that it is not possible for a *theologia viatorum* to answer the question of universal salvation; we stand under God's judgment. However, in Christ's return to the Father we see the ultimate lengths to which God goes in remaining faithful to his original gift and to his original plan for the redemption of creation. As absolute love God has involved himself in the drama of our salvation precisely to the point of being abandoned and dying the death of a sinner "in our place." In the mystery of the Eucharist, we see in Christ an infinite humility and a patience that is willing to wait for the very last of creatures to freely accept God's offer of love. And it is this that is the basis of our hope that all may be saved. □

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