

The Soteriologies of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar

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Every Christian knows that we are saved by Christ, but our understanding of this salvation may differ. This paper will compare the ways that Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar understood soteriology. In this comparison we will see that the soteriology of Rahner is less traditional than that of Balthasar. Because it is less traditional, it may appear less representative of the *sensus fidelium*, our convention theme – depending, that is, on how we understand the sense of the faithful. My goal will be to see what we Rahnerians may learn from Balthasar.

The mutual criticism of Rahner and Balthasar (Jesuit colleagues from the time that the slightly younger Balthasar entered the order in 1929 until when he left in 1950) is common knowledge. In 1966, Balthasar attacked Rahner's concept of anonymous Christianity for devaluing the cross.¹ Rahner, for his part, scorned Balthasar's theological aesthetic. He reportedly said that, "in the third millennium, the Christian message probably would not be sold under the category of Beauty."² We might conclude that there was no love lost between these two, except for the fact that each knew the other's work and cited it extensively. If we look at the indices in Balthasar's fifteen volume trilogy, comprising *The Glory of the Lord*,³ *Theo-Drama*,⁴ and *Theo-Logic*,⁵ we find 91 references to Rahner. Similarly, the digital edition of Rahner's *Theological Investigations*⁶ lists 73 references to Balthasar. Despite their differences, we can say, Rahner and Balthasar recognized each other's intellectual achievement.

I confess to having only a second-hand knowledge of Balthasar. In the summer of 2013, one of my colleagues, Vincentian Father Gregory Semeniuk, invited me to read his dissertation. It was titled, "Salvation through the Father's Representative: Sacrifice in the Biblical Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar." Prior to this time I had not read a great

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. by R. Beckley (Glen Rock, NJ: Newman Press, 1968), p. 65.

² Interview with Adolf Darlap, in Andreas R. Batlogg and Melvin E. Michalski, editors and translators, *Encounters with Karl Rahner: Remembrances by Those Who Knew Him*, translation edited by Barbara G. Turner (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009), p. 103.

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (1961-69), seven volumes, trans. by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis and others, edited by John Riches and others (New York: Crossroad; and San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982-1989). The indices show 19 references to Rahner.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (1973-1983), five volumes, trans. by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-98). The indices show 52 references to Rahner.

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory* (1985-87), three volumes, trans. by Adrian J. Walker (vols. 1-2) and by Graham Harrison (vol. 3) (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000-2005). The indices show 20 references to Rahner.

⁶ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (1954-1984), 23 vols. in English, various translators, Electronic Centenary Edition presented by the Centre for Culture, Technology and Values (Limerick: Mary Immaculate College; distributed by THE WAY, Campion Hall, Oxford, 2004).

deal of Balthasar's theology. Gregory Semeniuk and I discussed his work at length throughout the summer and the fall, and at Boston College in 2014, he successfully defended the dissertation.⁷

Part I: Differing Soteriologies

In what follows, I will be following Semeniuk's analysis, which first prompted me to compare Balthasar to Rahner. We will begin with a sketch of the two soteriologies, focusing on redemption in Rahner, and the cross in Balthasar. We will follow Rahner's critique of the traditional soteriological language and see how the traditional language is affirmed in Balthasar. That is the first part. The second part will examine the two views of the Trinity implicit in the two soteriologies. Rahner, we will see, insisted on the identity of the economic and the immanent Trinity. The life and death of Jesus reveals the mystery of God. Balthasar showed why the distinction between economic and immanent arose in the first place. Without a concept of the immanent Trinity, he implied, the prayer of Jesus to his Father (an expression of the economic Trinity) appears incomprehensible. The differences between the way that Rahner and Balthasar understood the Trinity, we shall see, reflect their distinct starting points in Christologies from below and from above.

A. Redemption in Rahner

Let us begin with Rahner. Thanks to his articles on redemption and soteriology in *Sacramentum mundi*,⁸ it is relatively easy to summarize how he understood salvation in Christ. The human condition, he wrote, is one of incompleteness, ambiguity, and suffering. These are the conditions from which human beings need deliverance. To this situation Christ brought redemption, understood as God's divinizing and forgiving love. Rahner affirmed the traditional teaching that the crucifixion is the "cause" of salvation.

He took pains, however, to distinguish this cause from theories that depict the death of Jesus as "rendering satisfaction" or "making reparation" or "meriting forgiveness." Such theories can be misunderstood, Rahner said, as reducing the concept of redemption to a *quid pro quo*. According to this legalistic misunderstanding, Christ's death offered compensation to the Father for the injury done by sin to God's dignity. The legal concept of rendering satisfaction has distorted the doctrine of redemption, argued Rahner, from the time of the African Fathers to St. Anselm and into the present.

The correct way to understand redemption, Rahner said, is not the restoration of a legal equilibrium between God and humanity. The word redemption expresses rather the saving will of God, active in all times and all places. This saving will took concrete

⁷ Gregory J. Semeniuk, C.M., *Salvation through the Father's Representative: Sacrifice in the Biblical Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology and Ministry of Boston College in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Sacred Theology (S.T.D.) in Systematic Theology (May 2014).

⁸ Karl Rahner, "Salvation, Part IV: Theology, Section A: Redemption," and "Salvation, Part IV: Theology, Section C: Soteriology," in Karl Rahner, Editor-in-Chief with 13 others, including Adolf Darlap, who served as General Editor; *Sacramentum mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, six volumes (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), vol. V, pp. 425-33 and pp. 435-438.

historical form in the crucifixion. That historical form should not be understood, according to Rahner, as the punishment of Jesus in our place. It is rather the manifestation of God's will throughout history to save human beings. "God forgives and loves sinners," said Rahner, "because he loves them in union with the man Jesus Christ."⁹ The starting point, we see, is a Christology from below. The man Jesus is the New Adam. He is the first human being to have fully received God's self-communication and, as our representative, to have fully responded to it.

In Rahner's view, the traditional doctrines about Christ's rendering satisfaction, making reparation, suffering vicariously, and meriting forgiveness are all ways of expressing a basic and more profound dynamic. It is the dynamic of God's transcendent will to save, a will that reached its climactic expression in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rahner acknowledged that the death of Jesus is the "cause" of redemption, just as the church teaches, but that cause is also the "effect" of God's saving will. The crucifixion does not save us by making reparation and thereby changing the mind of an angry God. It saves by manifesting the love of God who has been faithful and constant throughout history. To the man, Jesus, God communicated the divine self. The crucifixion saves by manifesting the free acceptance of this love and the obedience unto death by one who was united with God from his very conception.

B. The Cross in Balthasar

Rahner's soteriology differs considerably from what we find in Vol. VII of Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord*, especially in the section entitled "The Momentum of the Cross." In Balthasar the elements of rendering satisfaction, making reparation, suffering vicariously, and meriting forgiveness receive a high profile. It is just as Gregory Semeniuk noted in his dissertation on Balthasar. Early Christianity grasped the death of Jesus as an offering to the Father, for the chosen people worshiped God through cultic sacrifice. Where Rahner warned us about too sharply separating the person and the death of Christ,¹⁰ Balthasar emphasized the death, insisting that the cross is more than a historical expression of God's eternal will. It is in fact the very goal of the incarnation.¹¹

In Balthasar, the traditional themes of soteriology retain their importance. Christ died vicariously for all, Balthasar said, suffering in our place, thus manifesting the love of God the Father and God the Son. The Father, wrote Balthasar, allowed the Son "to go into the absolute obedience of poverty and self-abandonment where he can be nothing else than the total object that receives the divine wrath."¹² Balthasar's starting point, in short, is a Christology from above. The divine Son freely chooses "to go into the absolute obedience of poverty and self-abandonment." He suffers vicariously and renders satisfaction. It is not, for Balthasar, that the death of the Son is the price of

⁹ Ibid., Vol. V, pp. 429-30.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 427.

¹¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, Vol. VII: *Theology of the New Covenant*, translated by Brian McNeil C.R.V., edited by John Riches (New York: Crossroad; and San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989). "From the outset, every path that we took directed us to this goal: the hiatus of the Cross, and to the plumbing of the depths of this hiatus when Hell gapes open" (p. 202).

¹² Ibid., p. 207.

forgiveness, a price demanded by God. Satisfaction means rather that God, by accepting the death of the Son, renders absolute judgment against human sinfulness.

The death of the Son, Balthasar said, expresses God's wrath on account of sin. Balthasar took literally the following passage from St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: "For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (5:21). God made the sinless Christ "to be sin." In this passage, wrote Balthasar, lies the "unfathomable" mystery of the cross.¹³ God sentenced, as it were, the Son to death. The Father prescribed for the Son what goes against a father's nature. Balthasar put it this way: "The true subject who acts on the Cross is therefore God, and the instrument he employs in acting is sin."¹⁴ So when we contemplate the crucifixion, in Balthasar's view, we see much more than the death of a man. We are witnessing instead the punishment due to sin. The man on the cross is not Jesus but an instrument, namely Christ-made-sin. The "true subject" in the crucifixion is not a man, said Balthasar, but rather God. God destroys sin in the one who has become sin-incarnate.

In short, Balthasar regarded the cross as the heart of soteriology. It renders satisfaction by expressing God's judgment against sin. It makes reparation by destroying sin incarnate. It atones vicariously by manifesting God's love for us through the divine Son who identifies with us. And ultimately it merits forgiveness in the sense that the obedience of the crucified Jesus is rewarded. The Father changed the death of the Son to life by raising him from the dead. On the cross, the Son identified himself with sin and was condemned to hell. But there, in the anguish of the alienation between Father and Son, a change occurs. Balthasar wrote:

The extreme distance between Father and Son, which is endured as a result of the Son's taking on of sin, changes into the most profound intimacy; but it always *was* such because the distance was a work of Trinitarian, loving obedience.¹⁵

The resurrection for Balthasar overcomes the separation between Father and Son – that is, between God and human sinfulness. The Son, who experienced the bondage of hell, is set free. "Now," wrote Balthasar, "in freedom, he sends the Spirit forth, who is *his* Spirit, the Spirit of both freedom and obedience to the Spirit."¹⁶ Crucified as sin, the divine Son becomes the source of God's Spirit. In the Spirit we receive divine and eternal life.

Part II: The Trinity in Salvation

This brings us to the second part of the presentation. For Balthasar, the Father raises the Son who in turn sends the Spirit. The healing event of the resurrection

¹³ Ibid., p 208.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 209.

¹⁵ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, Vol. IV, *The Action*, originally published in 1980, trans. by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), pp. 361-362.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 364.

overcomes the alienation between Father and Son. It liberates the Spirit as the love between the two. Salvation, in short, is an event of the Trinity.

The same can be said about Rahner's soteriology. It too is Trinitarian, but with a difference. Rahner's starting-point, as we saw, is a Christology from below. The man Jesus, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, has received from his Father the communication of divine life. As the representative of all humanity, Jesus responded to God in full obedience. He reveals what it means for a human being to accept God's word and obey it. For Balthasar, however, the starting-point is a Christology from above. Salvation comes from on high, when the Father sends the Son. Jesus Christ expresses God's eternal will in the economy of history. The starting-points of Rahner and Balthasar express different ways of understanding the Trinity.

A. Rahner and the Economic Trinity

Let us first consider the view of Rahner. His book on *The Trinity* expounded the thesis that "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."¹⁷ This means that the God whom we know in history is the one and true God. Rahner complained that theories about the immanent life of the triune God, apart from Scripture and tradition, inevitably involve theological speculation. He even referred somewhat disparagingly to Augustine's work on the Trinity as a "psychological theory." Theological speculation, he suggested, is not as trustworthy as the revealed Word. Rahner put it this way: "The Logos is really as he appears in revelation . . . on account of the personal being which belongs exclusively to him, the Father's Logos."¹⁸ Jesus Christ truly reveals God – not just an aspect of God or one Person of the Trinity, but God in the divine fullness.

In the man Jesus, said Rahner, God took human nature to be God's own. The manifestation of the Trinity in the economy of history *is* the immanent Trinity. The chapter on "Jesus Christ" in *Foundations of Christian Faith* established this thesis in a variety of ways. There Rahner claimed to have faithfully reinterpreted the doctrines of the incarnation and hypostatic union.¹⁹ Incarnation means that God has really offered human beings a share in the divine life. Hypostatic union means that in Jesus a man lived out the acceptance of a grace that gave him immediacy to God. Hence Rahner can say this about salvation: "We are saved because this man who is one of us has been saved by God, and God has thereby made his salvific will present in the world historically, really and irrevocably."²⁰ We are saved because God has saved Jesus – saving him as our pioneer in the faith, saving him as the one who is perfecting faith in us (Heb. 12:2).

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, translated by Joseph Donceel, originally published as Chapter Five, "Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte," in Vol. 2 of *Mysterium Salutis: Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, edited in 1967 by Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhrer (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), p. 22. In the proposed English edition of *Mysterium Salutis*, of which *The Trinity* was part, a third editor – Thomas F. O'Meara – was listed along with Feiner and Löhrer.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. by William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), p. 299.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

B. Balthasar and the Immanent Trinity

Balthasar does not view the identity of the two aspects of the Trinity in quite the same way. In Balthasar's theology, there is a distance between the immanent and economic Trinity, and the immanent has priority. To be sure, Balthasar acknowledges what he calls the Trinitarian "law." The third volume of *Theo-Drama* conceded that "The order of the economic Trinity must correspond to that of the immanent Trinity."²¹ In brief, the mission upon which the eternal Son has been sent by his heavenly Father (the immanent Trinity) has been received in obedience by Jesus (in the economic Trinity). To that extent, Balthasar would seem to affirm the Rahnerian thesis that the immanent and the economic Trinities are identical.

But problems arise as Balthasar considers the prayer of Jesus at Gethsemane and the cry from the cross. If the divine Son accepted his "hour" and the "cup of suffering," why did Jesus pray that the Father might take them from him? Such a prayer suggests a tension between the Father in heaven and the Son on earth. The human Son petitioned for a release from suffering. Did Jesus seek to escape a fate that was the very mission upon which his heavenly Father had sent him?

Similar questions arise when we consider Jesus' words from the cross. When he cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" his words suggests something akin to despair. To be sure, this is a quotation from Psalm 22, and commentators always note that Jesus is praying at his moment of existential crisis. Furthermore, we know we are reading, not a transcript taken from the foot of the cross, but a theological interpretation. The death of Christ (that prior to the gospel might have appeared as the utter defeat of Jesus) was not a defeat at all. The basis for our understanding is the gospels' theological interpretation of the event. Such a theological interpretation does not conceal, however, the tension. We must acknowledge at least a possibility that the "hour" and the crucifixion were not the moments of placid communion between Father and Son that are the hallmarks of the immanent Trinity.

Balthasar treats this possibility by speaking of a "Trinitarian Inversion." Inversion is his word for the reversal in relationship between the Son and the Spirit. In John's Gospel, Jesus promised a paraclete or counselor. From this viewpoint, the Father sent the Son first, before sending the Spirit, and the Spirit is the Son's later gift. But at the same time, Balthasar observed that Jesus grew from childhood to manhood as obedient to his heavenly Father. This obedience was the work of the Spirit. As Balthasar wrote, Jesus "entrusts himself to the activity of the Spirit in accord with the Father's will."²² From this viewpoint, the Spirit preceded the incarnation. Balthasar even says in the same place that Jesus became a "product of the Spirit." The Spirit led the Son.

So we see in Balthasar's "Trinitarian inversion" a distinction. In the immanent Trinity, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, who are united in perfect communion. But in the economic Trinity, Jesus has been under the Spirit's tutelage. In the weakness of "the hour" at Gethsemane, and in the crucifixion on Golgotha, Jesus felt

²¹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, Vol. III, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, originally published in 1978, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 184.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

burdened and abandoned. Balthasar made sense of the alienation between Father and Son by attributing Jesus' burden and despair to the economic Trinity. What appeared in the economy of history is not the fullness of God's immanent life. Balthasar wrote:

What we have termed "inversion" is ultimately only the projection of the immanent Trinity onto the "economic" plane, whereby the Son's "correspondence" to the Father is articulated as "obedience."²³

From the standpoint of the immanent Trinity, we can never imagine one divine person having to obey another. In God, all is one except for the opposition of the relations of Fatherhood, Sonship, and Spiration. Balthasar's concept of the Trinitarian inversion helps us to see why the distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity first arose. The correspondence between Father and Son in the Godhead is "articulated" within the economy as obedience. Without seeing what Balthasar called "the projection of the immanent Trinity onto the 'economic' plane," we could not understand the prayers of Jesus at Gethsemane and on the cross.

Conclusion

As we compare the soteriologies of Rahner and Balthasar, their dissimilarity strikes us first. Balthasar embraced the traditional concepts of soteriology to such an extent that he appears to stand in the line of St. Anselm. For Balthasar, the death of Christ renders satisfaction, makes reparation, substitutes for our own deaths, and merits forgiveness. Rahner, as we saw, put each of these traditional concepts in question. He feared that they might lead to a legalistic understanding of salvation. So between Rahner and Balthasar there appears, at first sight, a wide gap.

But the gap is not completely unbridgeable. While Rahner never rejected the traditional concepts of soteriology outright, he reinterpreted them. We can appreciate the challenge he faced in confronting the "fundamental problem" of soteriology.²⁴ It is the problem of understanding the crucifixion as the "cause" of salvation. Rahner solved that problem by redefining the cause as an effect. The crucifixion as *cause*, he said, is actually the *effect* of God's will to forgive. Balthasar did something similar. He viewed the crucifixion as an expression of the Father's will to save. The death of the Son, he said, is the saving action by which sin is judged and by which the Son manifested perfect obedience to the Father's will. So while Balthasar once criticized Rahner's anonymous Christianity for devaluing the cross, both theologians struggled with the teaching about the crucifixion as a cause. Both saw it as the expression of God's constant saving will.

Their theologies of the cross are closely linked to their theologies of the Trinity. Rahner gained renown in 1967 for identifying the economic and the immanent Trinity. Balthasar indirectly acknowledged Rahner's insight in his 1978 *Theo-Drama*. The correspondence of the economic to the immanent Trinity, wrote Balthasar, amounts to an unwavering "law." But in Balthasar we discover a subtle change in terminology. Recall that, for Rahner, the economic Trinity "is" the immanent Trinity. For Balthasar,

²³ Ibid., p. 191.

²⁴ Rahner, "Salvation, Part IV.A: Redemption," in *Sacramentum mundi*, Vol. V, p. 430.

however, the two merely “correspond.” Balthasar avoided the identification of the two because the distinction helped him explain the biblical record. The image of Jesus as being burdened and abandoned during the passion is not compatible, for Balthasar, with the immanent Trinity. It makes sense, however, in the Trinity of history. This economic Trinity *corresponds* to the immanent Trinity, for Balthasar, but is subordinate to it.

Balthasar’s Christology exemplifies what Rahner called the “official Christology of the Church.” The official Christology, said Rahner, “a straightforward descending Christology which develops the basic assertion: God in his Logos becomes man.”²⁵ Balthasar represented this Christology well. He started with the divine Father sending his only-begotten Son. Rahner’s Christology, by contrast, begins with the man Jesus. Burdened with fear and crying out from the cross, Jesus is the Father’s Word. Through him, through a man like ourselves, we encounter the fullness of God. He does not compensate God for our sin or offer a legal satisfaction, but shows how a human being can receive the life of God and respond to it. And that, I would venture to say, is how we experience salvation.

If Balthasar’s Christology reflects the *official* Christology of the Church, is Balthasar closer to the *sensus fidelium*? Certainly we can say that Balthasar’s traditional Christology from above, with its emphasis on the vicarious suffering of Jesus, better reflects the church’s “official” Christology. Rahner’s low Christology, by contrast, does not represent the belief of most of my students and the liturgy does not emphasize it. Most Catholics would pause at Rahner’s statement that “We are saved because this man who is one of us has been saved.” It does not seem to adequately express the faith that Jesus died as a ransom for many. Balthasar’s more traditional emphasis on satisfaction, reparation, and merit seems closer to the *sensus fidelium*.

But that is not the last word. We can appreciate Balthasar’s rehabilitation of the distinction between immanent and economic Trinities while still acknowledging that Rahner, with his identification of the two, had the deeper insight. The God revealed in Jesus and in the economy of history is not (as Balthasar wrote) merely a projection of the immanent Trinity onto the economic plane. No, we would say with Rahner that Jesus is the fullness of God united to our human nature. Gregory Semeniuk’s dissertation on sacrifice in the biblical theology of Balthasar describes how Christianity has always recognized the death of Jesus as the self-offering of the divine Son. Transposing this into Rahner’s language, we would say that Jesus’ self-offering is one that we are meant to complete with the offering to God of our own lives. To meet this challenge, we have to elaborate the insights of Rahner, but we cannot do so exclusively within our own Karl Rahner Society. Meeting the challenge requires us to engage with the wider theological world, and that includes the partisans of Balthasar.

²⁵ Rahner, *Foundations*, p. 286.