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MARIAN THEMES IN THE WRITINGS OF HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

Although Hans Urs von Balthasar has never written a treatise on Mary, he refers to her again and again throughout his writings. The purpose of this paper is to pull together these many references so that something of the richness of his theological reflections on Mary might more easily be grasped. Since his work is relatively unknown in the English-speaking world, two introductory sections have been written: one on his life and the development of his thought and another on his basic theological approach.¹ A brief discussion of some of the criticisms which

¹ By 1966, von Balthasar had already authored nearly 40 books, some of them very long, and over 180 articles, not to mention numerous prefaces and translations. The 1975 issue of *Communio* lists, as his publications from 1965-1974, 19 books and 130 articles. There is no indication that over the last five years the flow of his publications has in any way been stemmed. In English, there are articles on von Balthasar by Louis Roberts, *A Critique of the Aesthetic Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, *ABenR*, 16 (1965) 486-504; D. M. MacKinnon, *Master of Israel III: Hans Urs von Balthasar*, *CR*, 54 (1969) 859-869; Gerard Reedy, *The Christology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, *Thought*, 45 (1970) 407-420; Leo J. O'Donovan, *Evolution under the Sign of the Cross*, *TS*, 32 (1971) 602-626; also O'Donovan's *The Problem of Revelation*, *CTSA*, 29 (1974) 77-106; J. K. Riches, *The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, *Theology* 75 (1972) 562-570 and 647-655. The Fall 1975 issue of *Communio*, dedicated entirely to the *Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, contains articles by Henri de Lubac, O'Donovan, Michael Proterra, Jeffrey Kay and Pedro Escobar; the Spring 1978 issue of *Communio* contains the papers presented at the von Balthasar seminar held at Catholic University of America in September of 1977, including papers by John B. Cobb, Jr., Donald J. Keefe, Daniel O'Hanlon, Kenneth Schmitz, and three by von Balthasar himself. The 1977 symposium concentrated on Catholicism and World Religions and the Trinitarian nature of Christian meditation. For a summary and personal impressions of the symposium, see John McDermott, *A New Voice for American Theology*, *America*, 137/17 (Nov. 26, 1977) 374-376.

may be made of his thought concludes the article.

I.

Von Balthasar was born in Lucerne in 1905.² From 1916 to 1923 he attended the Benedictine college of Engelberg and that of the Jesuits of Feldkirch. In 1923, he enrolled in the courses of German science and philosophy at the University of Munich. He continued his studies in Vienna where he enjoyed the friendship of Rudolph Allers, psychiatrist, philosopher and theologian, who provided, according to von Balthasar himself, "an almost inexhaustible source of stimulation" and who imparted "the feeling for inter-human love as the objective medium of human existence."³ Then, in Berlin, he followed the courses of Romano Guardini. In 1929, he received the doctorate in philosophy for a thesis he presented in Zurich on the history of eschatology in modern German literature. That same year, he entered the Jesuits and for the next eight years studied philosophy and theology, first near Munich, where for three years he, as he puts it, "languished in the desert of neo-scholasticism."⁴ It was there, however, that he met one of his great teachers, the Jesuit Erich Przywara, "whose work both on Augustine and Ignatius of Loyola and on *Analogia entis* is," according to the Anglican theologian and student of von Balthasar, J. K. Riches, "perhaps the most important single element in his theological formation."⁵

² For biographical sketches, see Vorgirmler's contribution to *Bilan de la théologie du XX^e siècle*, Vol. 2, 685-706 and von Balthasar's own *Rechenschaft* (translated as *In Retrospect*) in *Communio*, 2 (1975) 197-220.

³ Von Balthasar himself has twice (once in 1955 and again in 1965) provided us with an interpretation of this theological development: *Kleiner Lageplan zu meinem Büchern* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1955) and *Rechenschaft* (see note 2.). *Communio's* fine English translation was obtained from Kenneth Batinovich, who has made several helpful suggestions for this paper. The 1965 article is especially helpful for understanding the development of von Balthasar's thought; all references will be to the English version.

⁴ Von Balthasar, *Rechenschaft*, *Communio*, 2 (1975) 218.

⁵ Riches, *art. cit.* (See note 1.), in *Theology*, 75 (1972) 563. In 1962,

From 1934 to 1938 (He was ordained in 1936.), he studied at Lyon under the direction of his second great teacher, Henri de Lubac, from whom he, along with his fellow students Bouillard, Fessard and Daniélou, gained "an understanding of the Greek Fathers, the philosophical mysticism of Asia and the phenomenon of modern atheism."⁶ Some thirty years later, when evaluating the prolific work of his gifted student, de Lubac wrote that "no matter what subject he is treating, and even if he never mentions any of their names, it is very clear that Balthasar was formed in the school of the Fathers of the Church. . . . They have communicated to him their burning love of the Church." De Lubac explains further that von Balthasar, very much like the Fathers, "seeks to harness all the features of the culture of his time to make them achieve their full flowering in Christ." Because of his love for the Fathers, von Balthasar's thought offers "a profound ecumenical resonance."⁷ He has published works on, among others, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and most notably on Maximus the Confessor.⁸ His familiarity with the Fathers has had, as we shall see, a marked influence on his understanding of Mary, especially on the relationship between her and the Church.

von Balthasar published an edition in three volumes of Przywara's works.

⁶ Von Balthasar, *Rechenschaft, Communio*, 2 (1975) 198.

⁷ De Lubac, *A Witness of Christ in the Church: Hans Urs von Balthasar, Communio*, 2 (1975) 239-240. This article is a reprint of a chapter in *The Church: Paradox and Mystery* (New York: Alba House, 1969) to which he has added a three-page postscript written especially for that issue. All future references to de Lubac's article will be to *Communio's* reprint. Patriarch Athenagoras, a man deeply committed to ecumenism, sent to von Balthasar in 1965 the gift of the gold cross of Mount Athos. At the other end of the theological spectrum, so-to-speak, the Protestant Faculty of Theology at Edinburg University asked him to accept an honorary doctorate, as did, later that same year, the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Münster.

⁸ Von Balthasar, *Geist und Feuer* (1938); *Der versiegelte Quell* (1939), Gregory of Nyssa's commentary on the Canticle of Canticles; Augustine's *Über die Psalmen* (1936), preceded by an introduction and followed by

During the semester vacations between 1938 and 1939, he worked on his first philosophical writings in the offices of *Stimmen der Zeit*, where he met Hugo and Karl Rahner and with the latter outlined a new approach to dogmatics.⁹ From 1940 to 1948, he was a chaplain for students at Basel where he met Karl Barth and Adrienne von Speyr. Several authors¹⁰ believe that his book on Karl Barth is the best written. In 1965, von Balthasar explained what he had learned from Barth: "the vision of a comprehensive biblical theology, combined with the demand for a dogmatically serious ecumenical dialogue, without which the entire movement would lack foundation."¹¹ Barth's thought also strengthened the Christo-centric orientation of von Balthasar's theology.

The influence of Adrienne von Speyr (1902-1967), a doctor who worked in Basel and whom von Balthasar received into the Church, has been profound—much more so than it will be possible to indicate in this article.¹² Her "mission" (a favorite word of Von Balthasar) was in his estimation decisive:

three other books of and on Augustine; *Kosmische Liturgie: Maximus der Bekenner: Höhe und Krise des griechischen Weltbilds* (1941).

⁹ Published in 1954 by Rahner under his name only; see his *Theological Investigations*, Vol. I (Baltimore: (Helicon Press, 1961). For von Balthasar's criticisms of Rahner's theological method, see his *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 2nd ed., 1967; 3rd ed., with a new epilogue, 1968), in English, *The Moment of Christian Witness* (New York: Newman Press, 1968). See Vorgrimler's article (Cf. note 2.), 702, and, most recently, *Communio*, 5 (1978/1) 78-80.

¹⁰ See, for example, MacKinnon's article (note 1), in *CR*, 54 (1969) 859-860, where he states that von Balthasar's *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Köln: J. Hegner, 1962)—and the abridged English version, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971)—is "significantly superior" to Hans Küng's work and is "a greater creative theological achievement" than Bouillard's three-volume work.

¹¹ Von Balthasar, *Rechenschaft, Communio*, 2 (1975) 219.

¹² A sketch of her life and work with a complete bibliography (including over 40 volumes published by von Balthasar) is presented by von Balthasar in *Erster Blick auf Adrienne von Speyr* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1967).

What Ignatius intended in his time henceforth meant for me "secular institute"; the hard sacrifice which the transition demanded was accompanied by the certainty of serving the same idea more exactly. It was Adrienne von Speyr who showed the way in which Ignatius is fulfilled by John, and therewith laid the basis for most of what I have published since 1940. Her work and mine are neither psychologically nor philosophically to be separated: two halves of a single whole, which has as its center a unique foundation.¹³

Her meditative and visionary considerations, which she usually dictated to von Balthasar, touched upon fundamental Christian themes: Jesus in his passion, in His descent into hell, the imitation of Christ by the Christian and the Church and the saints, especially Mary. Von Speyr's first book—to date, von Balthasar has published forty of her volumes of meditations—was entitled *Magd des Herrn* (1948): *The Handmaid of the Lord*; it is a meditation on Mary's fiat. The first chapter, "The Light of Consent," describes Mary's total acceptance of the Word and the way in which that consent provided the model of all Christian fruitfulness—an insight that recurs frequently in von Balthasar's subsequent writings.¹⁴

Von Speyr convinced von Balthasar to found a secular institute. To do so, with the permission of his superiors, he left the Jesuits in 1950. The bishop of Coire accepted him into his diocese. About this same time he also founded his own publishing house, the *Johannes Verlag* at Einsiedeln; it has been quite successful, publishing not only his own works, but also many devotional works which he edited and others which he translated, among them those of Paul Claudel and Charles Péguy. He has written a book on prayer¹⁵ which Louis Bouyer has described

¹³ Von Balthasar, *Rechenschaft, Communio*, 2(1975)219.

¹⁴ See von Speyr, *The Handmaid of the Lord* (New York: David McKay Co., 1955) 44-50. See also the comments of J. K. Riches, *art. cit.*, in *Theology*, 75 (1975) 653-655.

¹⁵ Von Balthasar, *Das Betrachtende Gebet* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1957), entitled in English as *Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1967).

as "possibly the finest book on prayer that has appeared since the seventeenth century." In addition, he has published collections of essays on revelation, the Church and the Spirit,¹⁶ as well as a profound meditation on the *triduum mortis*, *Mysterium Paschale*.¹⁷ In 1969, he completed the last volume (seven in all, 3500 pages) of his major work, *Herrlichkeit: eine theologische Ästhetik*, the first part of a projected trilogy; the next two series were to constitute a Theo-Dramatic and a Theo-Logic. Despite all of this, there has been in English, until just recently, little serious discussion of his work.¹⁸

Von Balthasar was not invited to the Second Vatican Council because, according to Vorgrimler, the Roman members of the Jesuits distrusted an "ex-Jesuit." Moreover, the relative physical and social isolation of a Swiss theologian, the lack of translations of his major works,¹⁹ and the literally uncategorizable character of his thought render it somewhat understandable why so few know much about his thought. In the past decade or so, his ability as a major theologian has become more widely recognized. For example, the International Review of Theology, *Concilium*, asked him to be the editor of the volumes on "Spirituality." Many of the Swiss bishops have sought his advice and, upon their recommendation, in 1969 he was named by Pope Paul VI to the International Theological Commission on which he continues to serve. In 1972, along with de Lubac²⁰ and others, he

¹⁶ Von Balthasar, *Verbum Caro* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960) —in English, *Essays in Theology I: Word and Revelation and II: Word and Redemption* (1965); *Sponsa Verbi* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960); and *Creator Spiritus* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1967).

¹⁷ See *Mysterium Salutis* III/2, ed. by J. Feiner and F. Löhrer (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1969).

¹⁸ Two exceptions already mentioned stand out: 1) the Fall 1975 issue of *Communio* and 2) the Spring 1978 issue, which contains the proceedings of the von Balthasar symposium held at Catholic University (See note 1.).

¹⁹ All the volumes of *Herrlichkeit* are now in French translation, and there is word recently that Alba House is interested in bringing out an English translation.

²⁰ Von Balthasar has translated and published in German the better part

founded a review of theology, the *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift: Communio*, aimed at demonstrating that at the heart of the Church—before any analysis, evaluation, or criticisms—there is a unity which is given by God. De Lubac, remarked in 1975, at the end of an article filled with praise for von Balthasar's theological achievements, that:

... despite the silent hostility that superiority invariably encounters, and despite the remarkable resistance of certain professionals to take note of this unclassifiable man and acknowledge him as one of their own, even in France, ... von Balthasar's thought has captured one by one the spirit of an elite youth.²¹

II

Before presenting von Balthasar's reflections on Mary, it will be useful first to consider how he understands the nature and task of theology, the various approaches he sees one may take to revelation and something of the significance of the approach to theology that he has taken in his masterpiece, *Herrlichkeit*.

Theology, for von Balthasar, is first and foremost the product of contemplation. He is fond of quoting Anselm who wrote, "I cannot seek you, if you do not teach me how, nor find you if you do not show yourself." In this perspective, prayer becomes "the *realistic* attitude in which the mystery must be approached: obedient faith, the 'presuppositionless,' is the attitude where theology is concerned, because it corresponds to the *tabula rasa* of love, in which the heart awaits all and anticipates nothing."²² All of his writings have a contemplative dimension. He notes that the greatest theological works have been produced in an environment of prayer and contemplation. Even in pagan

of the works of de Lubac: *Gesammelte Werke*, in six volumes.

²¹ De Lubac, *art. cit.* (note 1), in *Communio*, 2 (1975) 247.

²² Von Balthasar, *Word and Redemption*, 83: from an important essay entitled *Theology and Sanctity* (49-86). He praises those who have devoted their lives "to the splendor of theology—theology, that devouring fire between the two nights, two abysses: adoration and obedience."

literature, this same law—that authentic theology flourishes only in a contemplative atmosphere—is evident:

The proud spirits who never prayed and who today pass for torch-bearers of culture vanish, with regularity, after a few years and are replaced by others. Those who pray are torn by the populace that does not pray, like Orpheus torn by Maenads, but even in their lacerations their song is still heard everywhere; and if because of their ill use by the multitude, they seem to lose their influence, they remain hidden in a protected place where, in the fullness of time, they will be found once again by men of prayer.²³

He deplores the split between God as an object for academic inquiry and God as a personal being for contemplation.²⁴ He explains that this took place in post-scholastic theology when “spiritual men were turned away from a theology that was overlaid and overloaded with secular philosophy.”²⁵ A parallel discipline, “Spirituality,” emerged in order to fill the void left behind by academic theology. The method of his contemplative theology he describes as a constant return to the center, a return marked both by faith and academic rigor, a return to the original simplicity, Jesus Christ Himself.²⁶ The contemplative theo-

²³ Quoted by de Lubac, *art. cit.*, in *Communio*, 2 (1975) 237.

²⁴ Reedy, *art. cit.* (See note 1.), in *Thought*, 45 (1970) 408.

²⁵ Von Balthasar, *Word and Redemption*, 57.

²⁶ J. M. Faux, *Un Théologien: Hans Urs von Balthasar*, NRT, 94 (1972) 1022. For further development of his Christo-centrism, besides his *Verbum Caro II* essays, already mentioned in note 16, see his *A Theological Anthropology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), Chapter 4, “History under the Norm of Christ”; see also Vorgrimler’s article (note 1), 693-696. D. M. MacKinnon writes that “it is in his Basel addresses (*Das Herz der Welt*) that von Balthasar, preaching rather than expounding, presents in a sustained form a considerable part of that *visio Christi* which is the material heart and centre of his theology. I say a considerable part: for it is an aspect of his strangely restless and wide-ranging, yet concentrated theological method (... whose full exposé is in *Herrlichkeit*) that almost prefers to set out what is materially central to his theology, half indirectly, only suddenly, as, for instance, in the study ‘The Word and Silence’ (*Word and Revelation*, 165 ff.), approaching directly his pivotal understanding of revelation” (*art. cit.*, in *CR*, 54 (1969) 862-863).

gian, obediently attentive to the Word of God, discovers not only that his mission is to transmit the Truth, which is not his own, to new situations, but also that this mission demands of him a costly personal involvement:

One sees this very clearly in the manner in which St. Paul transmits what has been confided to him. Anyone who would wish to insert himself without danger in the chain of tradition and transmit the treasure of theology almost as children who switch their hot buns from hand to hand in the hope of not being burnt would be the victim of a sorry illusion, quite simply because, from the morning of Easter, combat was joined between the material and the spiritual.²⁷

Von Balthasar has distinguished three approaches which theologians have employed to understand the meaning of revelation: the cosmological, the anthropological and the way of "love."²⁸ The cosmological approach, characteristic of philosophy and theology since the time of the Greeks, was indeed an advance beyond the magical and superstitious attitude toward the cosmos; on the other hand, it was deficient insofar as it over-rationalized and too-neatly organized the reality of God's revelation. It started with the world and then looked for its adequate reason and for the nature of its fulfillment. Once these were obtained, Christianity was presented as the reason and fulfillment of the world, and in its teachings and traditions were found the wisdom for which the world had always sought.²⁹ With this approach, "revelation," in some words of Lessing, "does not give man anything which he could not have derived from himself . . . but it does so more quickly and more easily."³⁰ With the Enlightenment, the typical approach shifted from

²⁷ Quoted by de Lubac, *art. cit.*, in *Communio*, 2 (1975) 234.

²⁸ See especially von Balthasar's *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation* (London: Burns and Oates, 1968), chapters 1-3.

²⁹ O'Donovan, *art. cit.* (note 1), in *Communio*, 2 (1975) 256.

³⁰ Lessing, *The Education of Mankind* (1780), cited by von Balthasar in *Love Alone*, 22.

the cosmological to the anthropological, from seeing man merely as a part of the world to seeing him as its epitome. With the anthropological, the emphasis is upon the interpersonal; encounter becomes the model through which all reality is explained. Since, however, "Christian revelation cannot be reduced to a system based on the principle of dialogue,"³¹ von Balthasar finds this approach deficient as well. He concludes that:

There is, in fact, no way of "backing" or "underpinning" the text of God's word with another text, and giving it another background in the hope of making it more easy to read and more comprehensible. God's word must interpret itself and wishes to do so. And if it does so, then one thing is clear from the outset: it will not be found to contain what man has thought out for himself about God, whether *a priori* or *a posteriori*, whether readily or after infinite pains, whether from the first or in the course of a long evolution.³²

If the criterion of genuine Christianity can be neither religious philosophy nor human existence, there must be another approach. For von Balthasar, that other approach is the approach of love, an uniquely objective approach, an attitude of service to the object. Such an approach "can perceive the divine as such, without obscuring it beforehand by a purposeful relationship to the cosmos (which imperfect, calls for divine completion) or to man (who still more imperfect and lost in sin, requires a Savior)."³³

It is at this point that we shall consider finally, and briefly, von Balthasar's great work *Herrlichkeit* (seven volumes, 1961-1969). The theological approach of love perceives how God expresses Himself; it is concerned with the form of revelation and the inner light by which faith can see as "through a glass darkly." *Herrlichkeit* (what Israel called "*kabod*" and

³¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

³² *Ibid.*, 41-42.

³³ Von Balthasar, *Rechenschaft, Communio*, 2 (1975) 213.

the New Testament "*gloria*," and what we might call "splendor" or "glory") rests on the belief that the splendor of God can be recognized, even in the Cross:

This means that God does not come primarily as teacher for us ("true"), as a purposeful "redeemer" for us ("good"), but for *himself*, to display and to radiate the splendor of his eternal triune love in that "disinterestedness" which true love has in common with true beauty.³⁴

As the scholastics had taught, beauty, along with truth and unity, are transcendentals; that is, they are fundamental determinations of being, and ultimately, therefore, are always bound together. J. K. Riches sums it up nicely when he writes that "truth without beauty leads to a chilly, charmless moralism; beauty without goodness and truth either falls into a sterile aestheticism or falls victim to the demonic."³⁵

Perceiving beauty is seeing reality, seeing the glory of the *Gestalt*, as it is; it is to be mastered by it. And *the* form of God's glory is Jesus Christ. Von Balthasar concentrates less on iconography than on experience, less on formal beauty than on aesthesis, that is, on sensation and perception, or on what is conveyed by the English word "sensible," including the actual physical sense of a presence through touch, hearing and sight (1 John 1:1-3).³⁶ In such a perspective, the experience of the early Church, of the Apostles and especially of Mary, becomes pivotal. The goal of the "theological aesthetic" (not "aesthetic theology"—which starts with categories of natural aesthetic experience and then uses them in theology) is to rediscover

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 212-213. For an excellent introduction to the role of "beauty" in von Balthasar's theology, see his *Revelation and the Beautiful* in his *Word and Revelation* (121-163); see also Riches' fine article, *The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, in *Theology*, 75 (1972) 565-569.

³⁵ Riches, *ibid.*, 565.

³⁶ René Laurentin, *Bulletin sur la Vierge*, in *RSPT* (1976) 484-485; see also his comments in *RSPT* (1968) 500 and in (1974) 279-280.

the beauty of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, and the form of his grace in his saints.³⁷

III

It is difficult enough to summarize the many-faceted thought of von Balthasar; it is even more difficult to present any sort of synthesis of his thought on Mary. He has never written a treatise on Mary. In fact, he has criticized much of the Mariology written before the Second Vatican Council as being isolated from the living tradition of the Church. He notes, in particular, two mistakes that the Church has made over the centuries with regard to Mary: one in that "popular piety" which sees in Mary more than in the Son a mediator to the Father, and the other within an academic theology which concentrates too much on the privileges of Mary.³⁸ If during the second millennium Mariology has tended to become an isolated form of devotion, during the first millennium it had remained an integral part of the Christian doctrine of salvation. Thus, during the first millennium, it was understood that:

The statement that Mary is *theotókos*, the one who gives birth to God, is in the first place a statement which has its rightful setting in Christology. The statement that her conception was immaculate is in the first place a statement whose setting is the doctrine of grace and redemption. The statement that she is a virgin, in order that she may become the Mother of Christ—in itself a simple repetition of the witness of Scripture—is in the reflection of the Church a statement taken from the theology of the Covenant and consequently

³⁷ O'Donovan, *art. cit.*, in *Communio*, 2 (1975) 253-254. In the sweeping perspective of von Balthasar's projected trilogy—*Theo-Aesthetics*, *Theo-Dramatics* and *Theo-Logics*—it is as though he were suggesting that before we can reason adequately about God, we must have already perceived His glory and acted on His Word.

³⁸ Von Balthasar, *The Marian Principle*, in *Elucidations* (London: SPCK, 1975), 65. Concerning this collection of essays, Laurentin has remarked: "Un livre d'amour et d'amertume, mais l'amour est le plus fort."

from the doctrine of the people of the Church. And the dogma of the Assumption of her body into heaven is, properly understood, a part of the universal Christian doctrine of the Last Things.³⁹

He adds, however, that this danger of isolation has been sufficiently countered by the eighth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, which integrates Mariology into the doctrine of the Church.⁴⁰

In his treatment of Mary, von Balthasar draws heavily upon the Fathers,⁴¹ and interprets their thought with his characteristic approach to theology: the emphasis on the contemplative and on the aesthetic, on the experience of Mary who, more than any other human creature, embodies the glory of God. She is his master work, the prototype and splendor, without stain or wrinkle, of the Church.

Von Balthasar recognizes in the great nineteenth-century theologian, Scheeben, someone who has shown more than any other thinker, at least in recent years, that "theology in the Church proceeds always as a continuous dialogue between bridegroom and bride (of whom Mary is the prototype)."⁴² Thus Scheeben, following the Greek fathers, interprets the union of the two natures of the God-man as a marriage of God and mankind in Mary's womb: Mary's act of faith before the power of the Holy Spirit reflects more the "personal" dimension, while her actual Motherhood represents the "physical" dimension.⁴³

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 66. Von Balthasar, going one step further, states: "If it is true that all Mariology must be imbedded in the doctrine of the Church and of the person of Christ, then it is also true that all Christology must be rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity." (66).

⁴⁰ See *Le complexe antiromain: Essai sur les structures ecclésiales* (Paris: Apostolat des Editions, 1976), trans. by Soeur Willibrorda, O.S.B., from *Der antirömische Affekt* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1974).

⁴¹ See his brief history of the Fathers' reflections on Mary in *Le complexe antiromain*, 199-210.

⁴² Von Balthasar, *Word and Redemption*, 76ff.

⁴³ Von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*, Vol. I, 327-328: "Because of Mary's faith on the one hand which is the foundation of her experience of Motherhood and which is still the faith of Abraham (and that of all Christians), and because on the other hand in bearing and giving birth Mary gestates and

It is Mary's faith that makes possible the bodily conception of Christ.

It is important to remember here that for von Balthasar all the faithful can participate in the archetypal experiences of the early Church, the Apostles and especially Mary. For "Mary's personal-physical experience of the Child who is her God and Redeemer is wholly open to Christianity; from the beginning and ever more so, she [is] a growing experience for the other, for everyone."⁴⁴ The Fathers of the Church frequently paralleled Mary's bringing forth Christ bodily with the Church's bringing forth individuals spiritually through Baptism. It is necessary, however, to see an even more profound relationship between Mary and the Church than this physical-spiritual parallel. Mary's act of consent, because of its uniqueness and eminence, really involves two realities at once: first, it is the personal and absolutely complete ground for the personal act of faith (consent) of the Church as such (always superior qualitatively to the act of each individual which is always defective) and second, it is the personal and absolutely complete ground of each individual's act of faith within the communion of saints because Mary is an individual believer within the Church).⁴⁵

A second favorite theme of von Balthasar is that of Mary as the perfect contemplative. In a conference entitled "Marie et l'Eglise dans l'oeuvre de la rédemption," given April 4, 1978, to a French association of priests called "Lumen Gentium," he speaks of the fundamental attitude of Mary. It is not a ques-

gives birth to the Son and Head of the Church (and so all Christians with their faith and experiences) there arises some kind of physical relationship" (Cited and translated by L. Roberts, *art. cit.* (note 1), in *ABenR*, 16 (1965) 495.). An indication of the importance that von Balthasar gives to Mariology may be seen in *Herrlichkeit*, Vol. I, 102-104, 326-330, 349-352, 518-521 and 540-541; in the French, *La Gloire et la Croix*, 30, 286-289, 356-357, and 474-478.

⁴⁴ Von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*, Vol. I, 328.

⁴⁵ Von Balthasar, *Church and World* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967), 136.

tion of special devotions which, although useful, could nonetheless be optional for everyone. Rather, he sees a profound general orientation which may be called "Marian," which is the motive power for the movement of the Church: consent to the fundamental exigencies of the Gospel, as they present themselves to us.⁴⁶ In another article, "The Gospel as Norm and Test of All Spirituality," published in volume 9 of *Concilium* (1965), he speaks of Marian spirituality being the same as the Church's spirituality, prior to all differentiations into more specific spiritualities.⁴⁷ It is, if you will, the spirituality of all spiritualities, and this because, as we have just seen, the Church is typified in Mary.

In this contemplative perspective, Mary is above all a hearer of the Word:

The hearer *par excellence* is the virgin who became pregnant with the Word, and bore Him as her own and the Father's Son. She herself, even when Mother, remained a servant; the Father alone is the Master together with the Son, who is her life and who moulds her life. She lives wholly for the fruit of her womb. Even after she has given him birth, she continues to carry him within her; she only needs to look into her heart, to find him.⁴⁸

She is, therefore, the perfect example of Christian living. "Because she was a virgin, which means a pure, exclusive hearer of the Word, she became mother, the place of the incarnation of the Word."⁴⁹ Because she heard the Word and kept it and pondered it in her heart, her womb was blessed:

⁴⁶ Von Balthasar, *Marie et l'Eglise*, a typed copy (15 p.), 9-10.

⁴⁷ Von Balthasar, *The Gospel as Norm and Test of All Spirituality*, in *Conc.* 9 (1965) 20.

⁴⁸ Von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 23. See also his book on the fifteen mysteries of the rosary, *Der Dreifache Kranz* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1976), subtitled *Das Heil der Welt im Mariengebete*; French translation entitled *Triple couronne* (Paris: Dessain et Tolra, 1978).

She is the model which should govern contemplation, if it is to keep clear of two dangers: one, that of seeing the Word only as something external, instead of the profoundest mystery within our own being, that in which we live and move and are; the other, that of regarding the word as so interior to us that we confuse it with our own being, with a natural wisdom given us once and for all, and ours to use as we will.⁵⁰

Protestants succumb to the first danger when they are unable to move from a study of the Word of God to a true contemplation and vision, a movement greatly facilitated by the presence of the Word in the Eucharist and in the Church as the mystical body. Catholics succumb to the second danger when they do not persevere in hearing the Word, content instead with the grace assured them in the sacraments.

In Mary, the model contemplative and hearer of the Word, both the "spiritual" form of communication (entered into through hearing the Scriptures) and the more "physical" form of communication (characterized by the sacramental life) are fully present. When the Church follows the example of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, who as the greatest of all the saints is the most adept at perceiving the beauty of the Word, then she too learns how to receive that same Word:

Just as a mother explains to her child what the world is, what there is in it to be seen, how to look at it, etc., so the Church, taking her cue from the mother of the Lord, the believer par excellence, teaches her children the word of God; she transmits, thanks to her dual experience of being both mother and spouse, not simply the sense but the taste and flavour, the concrete and incarnated character of this word.⁵¹

A third theme in von Balthasar's writings about Mary is that

⁵⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁵¹ Von Balthasar, *La Gloire et la Croix*, Vol. I: cited by de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 6.

of the masculine/feminine polarity.⁵² It is one of the most complex and difficult to grasp; only a sketch of it can be provided here. When he speaks of Mary as the perfect contemplative, it is because she is totally open to receiving the Word. In this she is totally feminine; God takes the initiative. From the first page of Genesis, we find that when God created man in his image, he created them male and female. Von Balthasar argues that "the more clearly the element of the opposition between the sexes is developed, the more strongly is expressed the interdependence, the relationship, the bracket of love."⁵³ Israel is described in the Old Testament as the chosen spouse of the Lord of the Covenant. In the New Testament, the relationship between a man and a woman is to reflect the relationship which exists between Christ and his Church.

The Marian element in the Church provides the authentic spirit of the Church: "the spirit of the handmaid of service, of inconspicuousness, the spirit which lives only to pass on what it has received, which lives only for others."⁵⁴ It need not be said, of course, that this contemplative posture, this receptivity and openness to the Word, is the norm for all Christians—men as well as women.⁵⁵ If this Marian spirit within the Church

⁵² This theme appears in many of his writings; see especially *A Theological Anthropology*, 306-314; *Church and World*, 156-165; *The Marian Principle* in *Elucidations*, and the 1978 conference, *Marie et l'Eglise*, especially 5-6.

⁵³ Von Balthasar, *The Marian Principle*, in *Elucidations*, 67. Or, as he says in *A Theological Anthropology* (p. 313-314): "Equality [by which I presume he means identity] of the sexes prevents the real interlocking of man and woman and levels out the organic and constructive unity to one that is abstract (the identity of human nature) and ineffectual. One sex is then unable to discover in the other, beyond the valuable difference, what is its own."

⁵⁴ *Art. cit.*, 71.

⁵⁵ See von Balthasar's *A Theological Anthropology*, 313, for some intriguing remarks on the feminine elements in Adam and in Christ. In his 1978 conference, *Marie et l'Eglise* (p. 4), he mentions that for the past century we have known that in the act of intercourse the woman is as active as the man, even though it is also true that the man gives the sperm and

is weakened or lost, von Balthasar states that the Church will become unisexual (homosexual)—that is, all male!

Without Mariology, Christianity threatens imperceptibly to become inhuman. The Church becomes functionalistic, soulless, a hectic enterprise without any point of rest, estranged from its true nature by the planners. And because, in this manly—masculine world, all that we have is one ideology replacing another, everything becomes polemical, bitter, humourless, and ultimately boring, and people in their masses run away from such a Church.⁵⁶

One interesting example of the male/female polarity is the relationship von Balthasar develops between the Marian and the Petrine “functions” in the Church.⁵⁷ The entire purpose of the Church, with its formal structures and sacraments, is to facilitate the personal encounter between God and man. These structures bring people to what they are meant to be, a people formed as a bride to the Son, to become, in a word, the Church. The bride is essentially woman, capable of receiving the seed of the Word, bringing it forth and bearing fruit. The structural/sacramental Church, which represents the male aspect, educates its members to such a womanly role. The entire purpose of the male aspect is to “lead the bride to her womanly function and

the woman receives it. He concludes that to receive, consent and accept is no less active and creative than to give and model and impose. Before God, as creatures we are all “feminine.”

⁵⁶ Von Balthasar, *The Marian Principle, in Elucidations*, 72. In a similarly pungent way, he observes that “the Church since the Council has to a large extent put off its mystical characteristics; it has become a Church of permanent conversations, organizations, advisory commissions, congresses, synods, commissions, academies, parties, pressure groups, functions, structures and restructurings, sociological experiments, statistics: that is to say, more than ever a male Church, if perhaps one should not say a sexless entity, in which woman may gain for herself a place to the extent that she is ready herself to become such an entity.” (*Ibid.*, 70).

⁵⁷ See von Balthasar, *Le complexe antiromain*, 213-235; see also his *Church and World*, 127-137.

fortify her in it.”⁵⁸ It is important to note that although canon law treats the officers in the Church as having the “masculine” role of giving, and the laity as having the “feminine” role of receiving, it does not follow that the clergy are on that account “more” or higher than the laity. “The reverse is, in fact, the case, since the active communication is instrumental, the passive reception is the end essentially ordered to, indeed basically one with, the female activity of seed-bearing, giving birth, and educating.”⁵⁹ According to von Balthasar, it is only when ecclesiology is in a close relationship with Mariology that the hierarchical element of the Church is “relativized,”⁶⁰ that is, does not become an end in itself. This happens because first, Mary’s *fiat* precedes in the time of the Incarnation the time of the institution of the twelve Apostles, and second, Mary’s act of faith becomes the interior determining form offered to every being and every activity in the Church, while Peter’s pastoral charge, which embraces the entire Church, is not communicable in its specific character.⁶¹

A fourth Marian theme is the paradox of Mary as both virgin and mother. In this world, the choice must be either marriage or virginity. Since Mary is both, she becomes “the source and foundation of both Christian states: the virginal state in a completely explicit way (Luke 1:35), but also of marriage, which was not wanting to her at Cana and under the Cross.”⁶² It is impossible to understand religious life without Mariology; Mary is a Mother because she is a virgin:

⁵⁸ Von Balthasar, *Church and World*, 129.

⁵⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁰ Von Balthasar, *The Marian Principle*, in *Elucidations*, 70. He also writes of an intimate relationship, a collaboration between Mary and the hierarchy, especially evident in the first chapters of Luke (See his 1978 conference, *Marie et l’Eglise*, 7.).

⁶¹ Von Balthasar, *Le complexe antiromain*, 215. Mary’s “yes” is perfect; Peter denied Christ.

⁶² Von Balthasar, *A Theology of the Evangelical Counsels*, in *CrCur*, 16 (1966) 228.

From her total gift of self to God, Mary earned her experience as mother, an experience whose ultimate ground is her virginity. If Mary's experience of virginity is the existential ground in which all virginal life of the New Testament after her is rooted, it means that together with the Marian grace, an experience of Motherhood is given to virgins.⁶³

Christian married people will look to Mary, the Virgin/Mother, in order to expand a narrow human love to a complete gift of self in Christ; following Paul's advice in Ephesians they will take as their model the selflessness of Christ's gift to the Church.

Von Balthasar's references to Mary's place under the cross introduce a fifth theme: that of self-effacement and self sacrifice.⁶⁴ It is because she is a contemplative, one who sees and accepts the Word as He reveals Himself to her, that she accepts the sword that pierced her heart:

She does not omit . . . to turn her gaze uninterruptedly upon the child growing up by her side, upon the youth and the man, whose ideas and actions seem to her ever more unpredictable and astonishing. More and more, she "understood not" what he meant—when he

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 229; also: "Her gift of self to the Holy Spirit is in no way negative or private, as virginity outside Christianity always remains—where it may be recommended on ascetical, body-hating grounds, or benefit from a sacral sanction (vestal virgins). It consists rather in the limitlessness of self-giving, over-flowing the limit set by nature to human marriage and standing as the most positive, fully-realized answer to the infinite love of God revealing Himself that can be thought of on earth" (229). Von Balthasar is one of the few major theologians who continues to speak, after the Second Vatican Council of the preferability of celibacy; see his article, *The Meaning of Celibacy*, in *Communio* 3 (1976/4) 318-329.

⁶⁴ De Lubac's article points out the central focus of von Balthasar's dogmatic on Christ's descent into hell. De Lubac "has described von Balthasar's theology by contrast with Hegel's 'speculative Good Friday' as a 'contemplative Holy Saturday.' This brings out clearly both the degree to which his material dogmatics is informed by his fundamental theological insights into the nature of faith as contemplation and the extent to which his theology centers on the kenosis of the Son of God which finds its term in the descent into Hell." (Riches, *art. cit.*, in *Theology*, 75 (1972) 647.

stayed behind in the temple without telling her, when he failed to receive her, when, in his public life, he concealed his power and spent himself in vain and, in the end, detached himself from her as she stood at the foot of the cross, substituting for himself a stranger, John, to be her son. With all the force of her body, she obeys the word that resounds ever more strongly and more divinely but seems more and more alien and almost tears her asunder, although, in spite of all, she has given herself to it wholly and radically in advance.⁶⁵

Thus it is that Mary is educated by Christ who, in her, transforms the faith of Israel into an ecclesial and crucified faith.⁶⁶ As long as one remembers that the faith of Mary is fundamentally acceptance and not properly initiative, it would be possible to speak of her "collaborating" with Christ.⁶⁷

Inspired by the insights of Adrienne von Speyr which are set forth in her commentary on the gospel of John, von Balthasar explains that the union with the sacrifice of the Lord is fundamentally a feminine mystery exemplified in the three Marys: Mary of Bethany (John 12:1-8) who said "yes" to his death

⁶⁵ Von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 24. If Christ purified the faith of his Mother, she nevertheless formed him, especially in his first years: "The reverence with which the Son encounters the Father's tradition in the world is as it were gathered up and given visible clarity in the relation of Jesus to his Mother Mary. She conceived and bore him, transmitted to him through the flesh everything that was to enter into him in his humanity from all the generations of his ancestors, both saints and sinners. But she also imparted to him, insofar as he was a man and could learn, the religious and spiritual tradition of his people. She shows him how man prays and lifts up his eyes towards God; it is from her lips that he first learns the human sound of the Father's name, learning to say it after her. She is authority for the child, an image, close at hand and never failing, of heavenly authority. In obeying the Father he obeys her." (Von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 56.)

⁶⁶ Von Balthasar, *Church and World*, 137: "Her presence with him at the cross, her agreement to his abandonment of her to the Church in the midst of his dereliction on the cross, her eternal role as the woman in labor (Rev. 12), show fully her self-surrender is universalized to become the common source, the productive womb, of all Christian grace."

⁶⁷ Von Balthasar, *Marie et l'Eglise*, in 7.

on the cross by anointing his feet; Mary the Mother of Jesus (John 19:25-27), the contemplative in total abandonment at the foot of the cross, who accepted the loss of Him whom she loved more than anyone; and Mary Magdalene, the pardoned sinner, who, on the morning of the Resurrection, was told by Christ not to cling to Him and to turn herself toward his brothers in order to find Him among them. The three Marys constitute the ecclesial acceptance of the fundamental moments of the Christ-event: the Incarnation, the Passion and the Resurrection.⁶⁸

IV

Several observations should be made by way of conclusion. First, in presenting von Balthasar's thought on Mary as five Marian themes, there is no assurance that the heart of his thought on this matter has been captured. To do so, it would have been necessary to have read most of his works and certainly to have read through his major work, *Herrlichkeit*; this has not been possible. A more competent summation of his thought on Mary will have to be done by someone more familiar with all of his writings—and there do not seem to be, at the moment, many of those people around. The few who are have said little or nothing about this aspect of his thought.

The fact that von Balthasar has not written a "Mariology" accounts for another difficulty facing anyone who would wish to grasp systematically his thought on Mary. It may, however, be safely assumed that at the center of his Marian thought is the image of Mary as Mother of the Lord and as type of the Church. He reiterates regularly his distrust of systems of any sort. The goals of the Christian, and especially of the theolo-

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-3. Also noted by R. Laurentin, *RSPT* (1968) 500-501 and by de Lubac, *art. cit.*, in *Communio*, 2 (1975) 245-246 especially. Central to von Balthasar's dogmatics is this concept of *kenosis*. At the end of his 1978 conference to the French priests, he said that they should read von Speyr to discover in a form marked with greater simplicity and urgency what he had tried to present to them in the conference.

gian, are to be "presuppositionless," to approach God by way of "love alone," to allow beauty to reveal itself as it is. Systems often end up being themselves worshipped, rather than being lenses through whose transparency our love for God may be more sharply focused. "Mary herself," von Balthasar has written, "had neither the vocation nor the inclination to concern herself with Mariology, and neither has the Church to construct an ecclesiology that goes beyond an outline guarding against error or explaining her own transcendence."⁶⁹

Besides the absence of a "Mariology,"⁷⁰ there are also the particular challenges to understanding his thought which are presented by his style of writing. Almost every author who has commented upon it has noted that his truly literary German is often garbled in translation and, even when translated well, remains elusive. Thus, Eric Mascall, who has the highest praise for his work, explains that he "appears often to be writing neither straight philosophy nor straight theology but a kind of imaginative theological rhapsody."⁷¹ Consequently, one meets an occasional "lapse into obscurity."⁷² Less complimentary, but not untypical of the reaction of English-speaking reviewers, are the comments of Charles Meyer writing for *The Jurist*:

Too many skeins complicate his search for a pattern in the woof and warp of this study (*A Theological Anthropology*). The immense erudition of the author, his easy familiarity with the history of theology, the ideas of the Fathers of the Church, the philosophy of history as propounded by myriad exponents, the cultures and the-

⁶⁹ Von Balthasar, *Church and World*, 24-25.

⁷⁰ We have noted already how von Balthasar stresses the necessity of integrating Christology and Mariology. It is unfortunate that a recent major study of his Christology, *La Cristologia*, by Giovanni Marchesi (Rome: Università Gregoriana Editrice, 1977), does not have a single reference to Mary in its over 400 pages.

⁷¹ Eric Mascall, *Review of MAN IN HISTORY*, *CR*, 53 (1968) 828.

⁷² Eric Mascall, *Review of ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY*, *Scpt B*, 2 (1970) 9. If he says this of von Balthasar, what might he say of some of the writings of Karl Rahner?

ologies of both eastern and western civilizations past and present, as well as his fanciful and poetic style make it all but impossible for the average reader to construct any sort of meaningful whole out of fragments which mystify rather than elucidate. The labyrinthian ways of von Balthasar's thought and the ponderosity of his sentences are formidable enough in themselves.⁷³

On the other hand, it may well be that the level of theological reflection in general, when compared to that of von Balthasar's, is, shall we say, quite pedestrian. There should be little doubt that his thought bears all the marks of a deep spirituality. Leo O'Donovan, an American Jesuit quite familiar with von Balthasar's thought, describes its pattern as "meditative and circular," "spiritual" rather than "romantic"—as Rosemary Ruether has suggested.⁷⁴ Suffice it to say that his style of writing is still another reason why people less gifted than he have difficulty understanding his thought.

Another important factor in understanding his thought, as well as in understanding the reluctance of most theologians to take up a thorough study of it, is his use of Scripture. If the Christian Church managed rather well for 1800 years without the historical-critical method, it is also true to say that most academic theology today gets along—well or not, depending on whether you love the exegesis of the Fathers—with that method

⁷³ Charles Meyer, *Review of A THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, The Jurist*, 28 (1968) 383.

⁷⁴ O'Donovan, *Review of A THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, TS*, 29 (1968) 785. He states further that von Balthasar's thought is "superb at casting new light on old symbols, at suggesting syntheses between the most disparate thinkers, at challenging every theological security which diminishes the *Deus semper major*. But it is less suited for assimilating new theological language (there is a notable absence of modern symbolism, for example); for concretizing the demands of faith, hope, and love; for explaining the status and value of the incredible variety and extent of human history. Just this feel for the vicissitudes and convulsions of the historical process, posing questions of meaning in their own right, is what many readers will find lacking in Balthasar's treatment." (*TS, loc. cit.*).

only. But then there is the approach of von Balthasar.⁷⁶ Given his love for the Fathers and his predilection for the spiritual and even mystical dimensions of theology (due, in no small part, to the influence of Adrienne von Speyr); von Balthasar's use of Scripture disconcerts most contemporary theologians.⁷⁶

Finally, given the profound ramifications von Balthasar attaches to the masculine/feminine polarity in his Marian thought, and, in particular, given the delicate question of the ordination of women—especially in this country, we could ask for more clarity from him on this distinction. To what extent is he speaking only of the relationship which obtains between the Creator (male) and the creature (female)? Is the image of Mary as the Valiant Woman crushing the head of the serpent an example of *animus* rather than *anima*? Is this idea of the masculine/feminine polarity rooted more in modern psychoanalytic thought (especially Karl Jung) and German Idealism than in the Scriptures? If it is, what normative character should be given it? It is clear, for example, that this polarity is key for von Balthasar's ruling out the ordination of women.⁷⁷ More clarity on this whole area would be very helpful.

⁷⁶ De Lubac in his article in *Communio*, 2 (1975) 263, has written that von Balthasar's "many observations on scriptural exegesis, on the need for a spiritual intelligence and, in particular, on the blindness of a certain historical-critical method of dealing with the meaning of the history of Israel and the person of Jesus, all deserve a wider audience."

⁷⁶ For an example of sympathetic criticism, see Henri Riedmatten's review of *Le complexe moderne* in *NV* (Jan/Mars, 1979) 69. Speaking about his interpretation of the relationships among Jesus, Peter and Paul and John he writes that "*l'exercice à coup sûr s'avère fécond et permet au théologien de nous ouvrir d'admirables perspectives. Elles sont dues, pensé-je, à sa familiarité avec le texte sacré, familiarité qui tient encore plus du contemporain que de l'ancien, comme ceux de Marie et de Jean, que de l'exégète, encore que le théologien soit un lecteur très attentif de la lettre jusque dans ses moindres détails. Mais ici, il n'échappe pas toujours au risque de forcer le sens ou de passer d'une typologie objective à une construction toute personnelle.*" And a little later, he speaks of "*un schématisme qui frôle l'artifice.*" (69).

⁷⁷ For example, he writes that: "If today, however, this fruitful tension

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Our purpose in this article has been to introduce von Balthasar and his thought, and especially his reflections on Mary, to the readers of *Marian Studies*. It is hoped also that this summary will interest others sufficiently that they might themselves read von Balthasar. Those few who are well-versed in his thought might wish to interpret more insightfully his thought on Mary. In either event, his rich reflections on Mary deserve more attention.

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is slackened because mariology is deprived of its position, and if women as a consequence of the democratization of the Church begin to invest the hierarchical offices, then they will merely have jumped out of the frying pan into the fire." (*The Marian Principle*, in *Elucidations*, 70).