

“The Spirit of Truth: Receiving and Communicating the Word in Dialog”

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Introduction

Last year, when given the opportunity to respond to Fr. Doran's and Prof. Dadosky's papers, and now, this year, given the privilege to offer a more sustained contribution to this colloquium, I am humbled in the face of the extremely demanding, imperative question behind this event: how do we do our work as Catholic systematic theologians with particular attentiveness to the fact that we are doing so within a multireligious world? In attending to this question, more questions abound. What does it *mean* to do Catholic systematic theology in a multireligious world? What are some of the goals we should be striving for as we answer this question? What sorts of resources can we turn to that will aid us in our efforts? One of the many things that doing Catholic systematic theology in a multireligious world means, is to talk about how the theologian can communicate Christian understandings of God and humanity in a way that can be heard across religious boundaries. One of the goals that we can strive for in answering this need is to consciously offer a diverse audience compelling reasons for why Christian discourse is relevant and necessary within our contemporary situation. And, one of the many resources that we can consult in our efforts is the trinitarian theology of the twentieth century, Swiss, Catholic theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar. Today, I will be utilizing Balthasar's Christology and Pneumatology in order to apply his theological insights to the task of doing Catholic systematic theology in a multireligious world. Though

Balthasar would not have defined his task as a Catholic systematic theologian in precisely this way--that is, as an effort performed in a multireligious context--he did devote his life to offering compelling reasons for why Christian discourse is meaningful and indispensable in our contemporary situation. My desire is to follow along with Balthasar and take him by the hand to go further in order to consciously, passionately enter into the multireligious world where we are doing systematic theology today.

In my present employment of Balthasar's theology, I will remain attentive to the question that I posed as a responder to last year's speakers, regarding the nature of the Spirit's relationship to the Word in the kind of pneumatologically driven systematic theology that they had executed. I am maintaining this emphasis, because for Balthasar (and for where I am going to take him), the goal of communicating Christianity's meaning to a diverse audience requires an accounting of Christ's relevance, as that relevance is communicated by the Spirit. I will therefore begin by outlining the main character of Balthasar's Christology, continue by explaining why and how his Pneumatology is never separated from his Christology due to his belief that Christ is the all-defining center of Christian systematic theology, and conclude by suggesting that we take the ecclesiological consequences for his Christologically-oriented Pneumatology and move forward by proposing the community's embodiment of Christic obedience as the starting point for a Christian approach to interreligious dialog. The upshot of such a proposal would be that the Christian community must not only speak the contents

of her trinitarian theology when in dialog, but also represent it through the embodiment of Christic obedience.

The performative language of Christian embodiment of cruciform existence has the potential to be more broadly understood by other dialog partners and can therefore be a means to explaining the theological presuppositions that underlie it. One of the best ways to begin communicating Christian understandings of God and humanity across religious boundaries is to perform that vision through action according to the Christic life-form. For Balthasar and for us today, this means, for example, offering our lives up in self-sacrifice to the sick, the dying, the poor, the abandoned, the victims of war and violence, and all those to whom Christ himself is reaching out through the impulse of the Spirit in our lives. The reason that this will make Christ and Christian discourse most readily meaningful and necessary to our dialog partner, is that she too experiences the woundedness of humanity and responds to the same needs from within her tradition. We are both reaching out to each others' sick, dying, poor, and abandoned ones. From within that precise place of vulnerability that we universally share, Christ can be communicated and received through the inspiration of the Spirit. At that point, the Christian offering of Christic embodiment can be broken open to reveal the crucified and risen Christ along with the story of salvation history that is both his and ours through his self-gift. Through this means of accomplishing the goal of communicating Christ within our contemporary situation, another facet of doing Catholic systematic theology in a multireligious world emerges: the promise of fashioning the Christian interlocutor

into the Christ who desires to meet and dialog with the Other in all of the beauty of such Otherness for the sake of a unity in difference that mirrors the trinitarian unity between the distinct persons of Father, Son, and Spirit.

And, so now we begin with...

Balthasar's Chalcedonian Christology

Balthasar wants his Christology to faithfully navigate the relationship between the divine and human in Christ in the way that Chalcedon intended. Far from emphasizing either divinity or humanity with the consequence of deleteriously eliminating its counterpart in Christ, Balthasar always speaks of the one in its relationship to the other according to what I will term the 'incarnational principle.' This principle means that the Christ we meet in scripture, tradition, and contemporary liturgical worship is the Word made flesh; the way that he relates to the Father in the context of his life on earth echoes the eternal, divine relation of Son to Father through the Spirit's love that is the dynamism of divine *perichoresis*. The incarnational principle dictates that in witnessing the actions of Christ's economic mission, we are seeing who the Son is in the inter-trinitarian dance of Father, Son and Spirit. For Balthasar, Christ's form of being in the world that reveals his divine Sonship can be predominantly characterized as 'obedience.' Within the single quality of 'obedience,' lies a wealth of Christological characteristics such as self-sacrifice, humility, poverty, and transparency. The obedience of Christ shows itself in the transparency of his human will to the divine will, the translucent quality of a life lived in solidarity with

the poor and the marginalized that is daily offered up until the supreme sacrifice of death for the sake of human salvation.

When depicting the obedient Christ, Balthasar relies heavily upon Maximus the Confessor for a theology of the bond between Christ's human and divine wills. Christ's obedient human will indicates a complete harmony between human and divine that manifests the eternal relation of the Word to the Father as the Father's self-expression. To insist that Christ's human will is transparent to the divine will of the Logos does not mean that the divine overshadows or manipulates the human in Christ. Balthasar follows Maximus's example when he turns to the Christ found in the Garden of Gethsemane, the one whose humanity is so patently devoted to the intense struggle of remaining faithful to the divine will. The blood, sweat, and tears of this man do not bespeak obedience as a divine feat that simply deploys humanity as a device for divine purposes. Viewing Christ in the Garden through the lens of the 'incarnational principle' also cautions us to avoid the elimination of Christ's divinity that would result from positing a human will in Christ that merely accepts God's injunction in the exact same way that a prophet would acquiesce to God's command. On the contrary, this is the human will in perfect harmony with the divine will in a way that could happen in no other, for only Christ is the divine Logos made flesh. Balthasar's Christology is profoundly Johannine in this regard, without being exclusively so since he is fully committed to placing John's portrait of Christ in constant conversation with those of the synoptic gospels. John's 'Word made flesh' is

Mark's suffering servant who desires that the cup should pass from him, but who nevertheless chooses this cup in praying for the Father's will to be done.

As one of the chief scriptural sources for the incarnational principle, John's gospel provides the raw material for Balthasar's theology of the relationship between the economic and the immanent Trinity. Christ's human obedience is the economic expression of his eternal faithfulness to the Father as Son; he is the Father's eternal self-expression who takes on human form to communicate the Father in the space and time of human history. Balthasar then reads John's gospel in the light of chapter two of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Placing these two texts in dialog with each other yields a theology of the kenotic Son who empties himself in his descent into the human condition, experiencing all manner of human suffering, tragedy and death as a result of willingly embracing 'the form of the slave.'

In his *Mysterium Paschale*, Balthasar adopts the Christological vision of Phil. 2, and uses it to examine several layers of kenotic movement in the Son's incarnational descent. The first is 'birth in human likeness' (Phil. 2: 7), the second is 'obedience to the point of death on the Cross' (Phil. 2: 8), and the third (not elucidated in Phil. 2) is Christ's descent into Hell to experience the fullness of human separation from God in death so as to transform that very disunion into union with God. All three movements of descent are facets of the Son's mission to save humanity: 1) complete appropriation of the human condition, 2) unreserved submission to death as a result of taking the vastness of human sin

upon himself, and 3) unequivocal self-surrender to the darkness of human separation from God in death. The Son willingly abandons himself to these multiple levels of 'descent,' and is thereby obedient to the Father in all things. In turn, the Father responds to the Son's incontestable obedience by glorifying him and raising him from the dead (Phil. 2: 9). Along with Paul, Balthasar's contemplation of the Son's obedience as Incarnate One through these 'descents' leads directly to the resurrection as the confirmation that ultimate obedience to God means life, the gift of eternal life that is participation in triune love.

The Son's obedient taking hold of his economic mission for the sake of human regeneration requires that humanity itself grasp ahold of God in Christ. Thus, no talk of the Word's 'descents' into human existence would be complete without elaborating upon Christ's human obedience that is the source for human rebirth because of its complete consonance with divine will. Only the humanity of Christ as the humanity of the Logos could effectively respond to God with unadulterated obedience and thus be raised up to perfect union with God. Rather than negating Christ's humanity, the centrality of the agency of the Logos insures that this humanity will be renewed and exalted to reign at the right hand of the Father. This is the crucified and risen Christ through whom, with whom, and in whom all of humanity is lifted up to become one with God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Every aspect of Balthasar's Christology illuminates the earth-shattering reality of the Logos taking on human flesh in such a way that Christ's humanity could never be misconstrued as a mere contrivance to be used for accomplishing

salvation, as if redemption meant the forgiveness of human sin while keeping unworthy humanity at arm's length. To voice the word 'salvation' is to automatically invoke the act of the Son wedding humanity so completely to divine life that humanity is raised up to its intended status as the imaging of God in the world. God restores humanity to the fullness of covenantal relationship with God from within that humanity itself, such that Christ's humanity is responding to God in the way that God had always intended for human beings from the first moment of creation. Christ, the new Adam, brings the God of covenantal intimacy to humanity by bringing humanity into God's presence within Christ's own being. In Christ, the divine will does not coerce the human will to do its bidding; rather, Christ's obedience entails the human will's free cooperation with the divine. This partnership between the divine and the human in Christ is what restores humanity to the perfection of its originally intended intimacy with God, and Christ's inner harmony between human and divine points to the union of activity in Father, Son and Spirit for the creation, salvation, and sanctification of humanity.

Balthasar is intent upon maintaining this Christology that is indebted to Chalcedon, not only because it preserves the orthodox view of Christ's identity as fully human and fully divine. He is also committed to it, because it defines and safeguards the divinely intended dignity of human beings as created in the image of God for freely committed participation in triune life. According to this view, humanity's destiny is perfect union with God through grace, a relationship that is analogous to Christ's unrepeatable union of divine and human in the Incarnation.

Therefore, Christ's humanity—characterized by obedience—reveals the eternal deference of Son to Father *and* the authentic nature of all humanity in its utter dependence upon God for existence, salvation, and sanctification according to the Spirit's economic mission on our behalf. The Spirit sanctifies in order to inform the Christian with Christ; the Christian becomes Christ through adopting Christ-like obedience. For the Christian, imitation of the Inimitable One is the path for becoming fully human by freely choosing to receive God's grace that enacts the ultimate goal of union with and participation in divine life.

Balthasar's successful attempts at maintaining the Chalcedonian profession of Christ's full divinity and full humanity--with such doctrinal safeguarding as absolutely essential to understanding who Christ is and who the human person is who has been transformed by his life, death, and resurrection—will become paramount for us as we take Balthasar further into the doing of systematic theology within a multireligious world. If the perfect union of humanity and divinity in Christ has brought human beings into union with God through participation in Christ, then the possibility arises for this transformed community to embody within themselves a spiritually motivated Christic life-form that is revealing the essence of humanity that Christ achieved for humanity's sake. The first moment of encounter for interreligious dialog can then be one of meeting each other as flesh and blood human beings with human questions regarding the nature and goal of our being and existence. In asking these questions together, the Christian then offers a Christological answer that is relevant across interreligious boundaries, because it begins with the Christ whom everyone can

see as active in the community. In order to more convincingly attest to this entrance into dialog, we must continue on with Balthasar's Pneumatology. For, the Spirit is the one who is actively forming the community into Christ.

So, we turn now to...

Balthasar's Christological Pneumatology and its Ecclesiological Consequences

The instant that the Christian aspires to imitation of Christ, she is reaching out to the Spirit. This process of Christic imitation in the Spirit is at the heart of Balthasar's *Theo-Drama*. In this second portion of his trilogy, he explores the Spirit's birthing of the 'theological person' whose embodiment of Christic obedience takes place within the Christian community that is meant to be Christ's body for the contemporary world. The Spirit comes to dwell in the Christian in the form of Christic obedience, in a way that can be likened to the Spirit's empowerment of Christ's earthly mission to wed humanity with the divine through acts of humble service and self-giving.

The Spirit is the catalyst for the event of the incarnation and every historical moment of Jesus' life that it contains. In this respect, Balthasar reads John's gospel in relation to the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. According to Matthew, "Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 1: 18). And, Luke relates the angel's words to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..." (Lk 1: 35). Following the synoptic gospels' rendition of the role of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism, Balthasar sees Christ as the supreme bearer of the Spirit who

communicates the Spirit's life by freely acquiescing to the Father's will throughout every moment of his earthly existence. This is something that the gospels shed particular light on when accounting for his temptation in the desert and his final struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane. Such human obedience that is empowered by the Spirit is also evident through every action of self-sacrifice and poverty leading up to Jesus' death on the Cross: Christ's healing of the sick, his forgiveness of the sinner, his banqueting with the poor and the dispossessed, his teaching (and sometimes reprimanding) of the scribes and Pharisees, are all acts of Spirit-filled obedience to God that means constant giving of self to others. The Son and the Spirit have a combined ministry to meet the needs of a suffering and broken humanity in order to reunite humanity to God in every mode of human existence. The historical body of Christ empties itself in touching sickness, sin, death, and disobedience with the restorative, healing touch of the fully human one who is in unison with the Spirit—the very power of God to recreate human life from within.

The Spirit's post-resurrection mission is the same for the Church as mystical Body of Christ that it was for the historical body of Christ. Within the context of the Spirit's animation of the Church's sacramental life, the Christian community is called to empty itself in touching sickness, sin, death and disobedience with the restorative, healing touch of the resurrected Christ. This Spirit of sanctifying grace is the Spirit of truth, because the Spirit brings Christ—the way, the truth, and the life—directly to the community when infusing it with Christic obedience through the sacraments. At the same time, the Spirit gifts the

members of the Christian community with the receptivity to accept the gift of Christic obedience and to embody it in imitation of Christ.

With Balthasar, we can attest to the fact that the Spirit forms the Church into a Christic people. The Spirit 'overshadows' Christians for the sake of producing Christ within them through grace. Balthasar's theological aesthetics suggests that one can look through the window of this glorious grace to see the glorious risen Christ who is responsible for it, thereby encountering the truth of Christian faith in all its fullness. This is sufficient Balthasarian impetus for taking the further step—that this would be a fitting place for the beginning of a systematic theological expression of Christian faith performed with particular attention to its diverse audience within a multireligious context. Christians must dialog with others by embodying the Christ whom they profess. The Spirit inspires Christians with Christ's own life, and therefore speaks the words of Christian truth on their behalf. If the Christian community is embodying Christ through the Spirit by imitating Christic obedience, it has something practical, concrete, and relevant to offer at the table of interreligious dialog that can successfully illuminate the path of theoretical discussion. The truth of Christic embodiment in the Spirit meets the Other with a way of life that will echo the roots of self-sacrifice and compassion in her own tradition, while remaining unflinchingly pneumatological and thereby Christological. The dialog partner meets Christ, the resurrected Christ of salvation history, who now lives in the contemporary Christian community through the power of the Spirit. The language of Christic embodiment can then lead to a fuller rendition of the

moments of the divine economy, the story of Christ's redemption of humanity that reveals both the Triune God of Father, Son, and Spirit *and* humanity's authentic nature in relationship to the divine.

This language of truth is the performance of Christic imitation that is the Spirit's gift to the Christian community. When we as theologians, as members of the Christian community, speak this language of Christic embodiment, two things are happening simultaneously. The first 'happening' is the process of the dialog partner's encounter with the resurrected Jesus in the mystical Body of Christ. Christ comes to meet our dialog partner through our Christic form of being in the world. This encounter based upon a pneumatically-driven Christic life-form, provides a space within which dialog can mature and strengthen. A meeting grounded in Christic embodiment can then explain the meaning of this manner of existence on the basis of the Spirit who makes such 'Christic being' possible in us through the grace of the Christ-event. This grace is ongoing as it continues to flow forth from the Spirit who realizes Christ's life in us. Our dialog partner is introduced to us, to the Spirit who animates us, to the Son whose life we live through the power of the Spirit, and to the Father with whom we are united because of the economic missions of Son and Spirit. We may now speak the narrative of salvation history as it is told in the Scriptures in a convincing and meaningful way, because we are taking part in its contemporary drama that is lived and told through lives united as one in Christ's Body.

The Christian story of creation, fall, and redemption can be told through the very life of the Christian dialog partner who witnesses to this pattern both

personally and communally. We can point to precedence for such an approach in a patristic text like Augustine's *Confessions*, wherein Augustine recalls the examples of others whose lives witnessed the meaning of Christianity to him. He then reenacts his own conversion within the text as further proof that the content of the Christian message is first encountered in the form of Christian life and then explained when providing context for that life-form. Applying this method to interreligious dialog would mean that the Christian emphasizes *her* conversion to the way of Christic obedience and all the challenges that this entails so that the Christian dialog partner is putting herself forward in all the vulnerability of her struggle to accept the Spirit's gift of Christic embodiment. A focus upon the Christian's never-ending process of conversion would remove any temptation to monopolize the dialog with a plea for the conversion of the Other that would diminish or completely eradicate the Otherness of relationship in dialog.

This kind of Christian conversion is the source for the second 'occurrence' in the act of speaking the language of Christic embodiment that happens at the same time as the first: the movement of self-emptying to make room for the Other. Authentic Christian conversion entails adopting the posture of Christic kenosis that willingly bends toward the Other in order to hear the Other's articulation of religious experience in ways that truly impact the Christian community and cause it to further embody its own commitment to Christic obedience. In imitation of Christ, we earnestly desire to encounter other interpretations of human being and knowing so as to foster relationship and communion in the midst of difference. A willingness to be humble in receiving

the word of the dialog partner is a faithful embodiment of the kenotic movement of Christ: to bring God to the Other is to receive the Other into oneself.

The two occurrences enabled by dialog from the perspective of Christic embodiment—1) Christian receptivity to welcome the Other into one's home and to be transformed by her presence, and 2) the Other's meeting with Christ in the *ecclesia*—advocate a heartfelt conversation that does not evacuate either dialog partner of her identity in favor of reaching a common denominator. Rather, the Christian's act of meeting the Other in the mode of Christic obedience entails becoming ever more Christ-like in openness to the Other precisely as Other. Balthasar's plea for the Church to be the spiritual presence of Christ in the world promotes only one way of speaking the Word in dialog. The way to speak the Word is to live the Word, so that the word of dialog becomes real to both the hearer and the speaker who are walking together into God's Kingdom. And, when it becomes most real, relevant and indispensable as the very life-blood of the Christian speaker, it can then be communicated as such to the hearer. The Christian enters the eschatological age alongside her sisters and brothers of other religious traditions by fully participating in the liturgical life that shapes her into Christ through communal prayer and reception of the sacraments. The Spirit of communion makes us 'Christ bearers' in imitation of Mary. However, the Spirit does not bring Christ to birth in us so that we might triumphantly proclaim this feat to exclude the reality of the Spirit's work in the religious experience of our partner in dialog. Rather, we are to become the humble, vulnerable, childlike Christ who meets the Other in order to wholeheartedly embrace her as Other and

to build a relationship of unity in difference that patterns itself after the relationship that the triune God has established with all of humanity through the Incarnation.

Conclusion

Today, I have presented a rendition of Balthasar's Chalcedonian Christology, articulated the relationship between his Christology and his Pneumatology and its ecclesiological consequences—all for the purpose of taking Balthasar further by suggesting a means for the language of systematic theology to be spoken in a multireligious world through the performative language of Christic embodiment that has the potential to be more broadly accessible and relevant and therefore ultimately explanatory of the Christological and pneumatological doctrine that underlies it. With Balthasar's aid, we proceeded in a deductive fashion from Christological to pneumatological to ecclesiological principles, gleaning the ecclesiological from the Spirit's communication of the Christological truth of the human's graced participation in divine life through the salvific power of the Christ event. With this, we can step further into a place where ecclesiological embodiment of Christ is what speaks effectively to others and what provides a satisfying, inductive entryway back to the Christological and pneumatological principles that undergird it. If the structure of the communication of Christian truth is pneumatologically Christological in ecclesiological embodiment, then systematic theology becomes communicable across religious boundaries.

This thesis uses Balthasar's exhortation that the Christian must speak the Spirit through the Spirit's communication of the Word—to offer one possible means for the theologian to compellingly communicate Christian truth to a diverse audience by giving Christ to the Other through the *ecclesia*. It also walks with Balthasar to go further along this path by insisting that it is exactly this form of 'Christological Pneumatology in ecclesiological action' that can praise God for the many and varied ways in which God's Spirit chooses to move among the peoples of the earth. An apophatic recognition of the ineffability of the Spirit's dynamism begins with a kataphatic view of the Spirit's economic mission in union with the redemptive mission of the Son. Thus, on the ecclesiological level, to embody Christ's obedience is the only way to be open to the indescribable movements of the Spirit in the Other. Beginning with Christ in the Spirit makes dialog possible, rather than stymieing it. Opening dialog with the living Christ present in the community does not shortchange the historical Jesus or the Christ of faith. Rather, this starting point makes Christ accessible to those who would otherwise not meet him. Likewise, without the Spirit's bestowal of Christ's receptivity in obedience upon the Christian community, the beauty of the Other's difference would remain inaccessible.