Matthew Rothaus Moser

Love Itself Is Understanding: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of the Saints.

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Scholars of the ex-Jesuit theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88) have long recognized that the saints occupy a prominent position in his theology, yet careful studies of this feature of his thought are still acutely needed. In *Love Itself Is Understanding*, Matthew Rothaus Moser endeavors to fill this lacuna through a meticulous examination of von Balthasar's treatment of the saints, and the result is the most detailed, engaging, and creative discussion of the topic in Balthasar's theology to date. Of greatest interest to Moser is von Balthasar's view of "saintly knowing" (xxi), or the ways in which the saints offer a distinctive and noteworthy religious epistemology. As Moser summarizes this form of knowledge, "[t]he saints know as lovers do, that is, by loving. Love is a disposition of receptivity, surrender, and obedience, an ecstatic charity toward something beyond the self [...]. By loving, the saints are conformed or attuned to truth. Their entire existence is adequated to the truth of Being" (xxiii). Moser argues that it is precisely through the saints that von Balthasar seeks to bridge the divide between the "speculative and the affective" and, in so doing, to make spiritually edifying theology academically rigorous, and vice versa.

Chapter One, "Balthasar, the Ignatian Theologian," notes the centrality of Ignatius and Ignatian spirituality for von Balthasar, as seen especially in the prominence of receptivity and obedience as themes in von Balthasar's theology. Moser highlights the fact that, for Balthasar, theology is born in the encounter with Christ, and Ignatius is the paragon of the sort of indifferent obedience that allows this encounter to be most fruitful.

Chapter Two, "Balthasar on Mission," takes the Ignatian insights from the first chapter and applies them to von Balthasar's missional concerns, which entail both enriching the church and "an interpretation, critique, and redemption of the broader culture" (25). The two tasks converge when the church engages with the culture of which it is a part instead of walling itself off from the world. From this well-known Balthasarian call for the church to raze the bastions, Moser proceeds to treat von Balthasar's critique of modernity with reference to Hegel, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, among others. A familiar contrast between von Balthasar and the German Jesuit Karl Rahner follows, but Moser adds the salutary point that von Balthasar's emphasis on the distinctively Catholic *Denkform* over Rahnerian accommodationism takes a "saintly shape." As Moser puts it, "[i]t is the captivating form of saintly lives, especially the splendor of their sanctity, that will enliven, enrich, and guide the church" (65).

Chapter Three, “Saints, Truth, and Theology,” takes another tour through von Balthasar’s engagement with modernity, this time with sustained attention to the sundering of theology and holiness. Here Moser focuses on von Balthasar’s concern with the loss of the saints as one of the most lamentable developments during the modern period. This loss has its origins in Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Meister Eckhart and the privileging of the speculative over the affective in their thought. Von Balthasar’s turn to the saints, according to Moser, is meant to re-enliven a model of knowledge as *participation* that involves dialogical encounter centered in prayer.

Chapter Four, “Truth as Love,” argues that von Balthasar’s *Theo-Logic* (3 vols., San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000–5) portrays the God-world relationship in a manner that supports Moser’s thesis. Specifically, Moser notes in the first place that von Balthasar here characterizes knowledge as the loving encounter between the object and subject. In the second place he claims that von Balthasar’s view of the philosophical as in fact theological (even if only implicitly) means that, fittingly for a theologian associated with *la nouvelle théologie*, nature is always already graced. To Moser, von Balthasar’s critique of pure nature reflects in yet another way his Ignatian inheritance, as it shows his desire to find God in all things.

Chapter Five, “I am the Truth,” organizes discussions of truth around the figure of Christ, and Moser draws on von Balthasar’s dramatic Christology to claim that truth is *performed* by Christ in his kenotic movement into the world, his receptivity to God, and his obedience. These actions do nothing less than bridge the distance between God and the world, the union of which serves as the condition for knowledge.

Chapter Six, “Spirit of Truth, Spirit of Love,” treats von Balthasar’s understanding of the Holy Spirit, in particular the notion that the Spirit enables the subject’s participation in the object that is known. Moser brings von Balthasar’s pneumatology into explicit relation to his thesis with the claim, “It is the vocation of the Spirit to take believers and form them into knowers and lovers of God. It is the Spirit who makes saints” (193).

Chapter Seven, “Love Itself is Understanding,” develops in considerable detail Moser’s claim that von Balthasar offers through his treatment of the saints a transformed epistemology that involves loving participation in the object known. Moser additionally takes the opportunity in this chapter to drive home just how differently the saints are viewed when this epistemology is fully appreciated. As he puts it, “[b]y arguing that truth is known through the humble receptivity of love and obedience, von Balthasar rescues the saints from mere devotion, and contemplation from an Idealist, intellectualist hegemony” (xxx).

The final chapter of the study, “Saintly Styles: A Case Study on Adrienne von Speyr,” focuses on von Balthasar’s controversial spiritual directee, whom Moser claims is a veritable embodiment of von Balthasar’s theology of the saints. Particularly significant are not Speyr’s mystical experiences as such, but instead the absolute surrender (*Gelassenheit*) to God that she demonstrated in her life of faith.

Moser’s study is highly ambitious, and one wonders at a few moments if quite so many Balthasarian ideas need to be packed into its pages in order to advance his central claim. The upshot of Moser’s comprehensiveness, however, is that his reader emerges with a new appreciation for just how pervasive the saints are in von Balthasar’s theology, and how essential they are to his theological task.

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