

Eucharist, Drama, and Cosmos: A Response to Nicholas Healy

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Healy's fine treatment of Balthasar on the Eucharist might be enhanced by incorporating something more of the Theodramatic context in which Balthasar sets forth his teaching: the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice is ritual theater surpassing and releasing all ordinary theater to be what it is: a fragment with the Grand Story. This dramatic nature of the Eucharist is underscored by Balthasar's teaching on the dramatic nature not only of salvation history and the paschal events but of the Godhead itself in which the "opposition" of the persons of the Father and the Son encompasses all worldly opposition.

Introductory note: Eucharist and Theater

Before discussing Nicholas Healy's paper on Balthasar and the Eucharist, I think I should fill in a key element from outside the scope of Healy's paper: Balthasar's understanding of the Eucharist vis-à-vis theatrical performance.

For Balthasar, the celebration of the Eucharist is the theater to end all theater, for it presents the drama to end all dramas. Greek tragedy—whole-hearted, honest, semi-liturgical theater—expressed a profound understanding of the realities of anguished mortal human life, touched by divine Glory. Balthasar says somewhere that Greek tragedy may be more important for us in theology today than Greek philosophy. Yet the Greeks awaited a transcendence of tragedy and comedy—that is, of both immersion in the pain of life, and the speculative, objective laughter at life—in the Paschal Mystery, whose glorious consummation never allows us to conclude that the preceding passion was all a dream. In the Christian narrative, the puzzle of Divine distance and suffering, death-bound human immanence is overcome—in the incarnate God's actually joining us, without losing his divinity. For the Christian, we not only tell the story, we live it; the Eucharist is the bridge to that living, giving us access to its full dimensions, empowering us to live in Christ. Tragedy and comedy are transcended in the glorious narrative and its continual re-enactment.

This is the point at which Hegel maintains that, through Christianity, theater is *aufgehoben* – that there can be no Christian theater. Balthasar, however, ushers in a new rapprochement between the Church and worldly theater – one based on a healthy tension. For what can happen, and has happened, is a divinely initiated dynamic participative exchange, a *sui generis* relationship of Infinite and finite freedom through the Mediator, who is the “concrete analogy of being.”

Consider: What is the central idea of the *Theodrama*?—that each person is called to a unique mission, participating thereby in the mission of Christ. We are actors in a play, a play in which the script keeps having to be adjusted because we refuse our role, or play it half-heartedly, or only to a degree. This new vision of a distinctly individual nature of salvation is adumbrated precisely by theater. Now, however, through the drama of salvation history and of our own call, a

new relationship is established between theater and Church. Just as Glory transcends and yet validates beauty, the Eucharist transcends and incorporates secular theater. The Eucharist and what it represents has already trumped theater as *meaning*; what remains is the human need for self-reflective enactment.

And so, after all, there comes Christian theater—at first, the Theater of the World, in which (explicitly or implicitly) a Divine power stands behind the scenes and sees the whole unfolding human tangle. Yet, in a Christian context, this subverts itself, turns idealist or pantheist; after all, the God who watches us (the Theater of the World) is not the God who joins us (the Eucharist). The post-Christian fragmentation of theater in our time—the humble slice of life, where the temptation to identify a backdrop inducing epic *apatheia* is removed—is, paradoxically, Christian theater *par excellence*.

The Eucharist affirms the world by embracing it in the one Sacrifice which permeates it. The Eucharist sends us out into the world—to embrace it, to be in it but not of it. But truly to be in the world, especially today, involves a sensitivity to the immanent operation of the Spirit in our human choices for an elusive good, in the midst of the confusion, the everyday muddle, that is real life. Balthasar, a great lover of the theater, teaches us to love the theater, and not only for some iconic beauty pointing directly to God, but because it challenges us to integrate real life into a Eucharistic ordering, and so extends and deepens the meaning of the Eucharist for us.

The Drama of Eternal Love

Taken in a (so to speak) contemporary *Communio* register, as Healy does, Hans Urs von Balthasar's thought on the Eucharist shows forth rich personalist implications, obscured in this section by his long disputation with the Lutherans on the issue of sacrifice. For Balthasar, the prime question was: How implicated are we, the individual members of the Body of Christ, in the total sacrifice of Christ and his return to the Father? His answer was: Greatly, deeply, though few realize the depth of what is involved.¹

However, Balthasar tells us that this treatment presupposes all that has gone before, particularly in vol. IV, and it is this “all” that Healy is unpacking. The “all” brings us right into the Trinity, where, we see, the inclusiveness of the Son's identification with the sinning and suffering world enacts an interpersonal dynamism within the Godhead itself.

Balthasar keeps reminding us that his is a dramatic view of the Eucharist. So, I ask: where exactly is the drama? How is the metaphysics of being as love *dramatic*? How is it like a play or, for that matter, like Greek tragedy?

Aside from (and beyond) the whole foregoing analysis of the theater, the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist calls for the intense self-abnegation to which I have already alluded—few

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar *Theodrama* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), vol. IV, 398.

truly grasp this; it is, to him, a painful submission to a stripping in which it is always up to me how far I am willing to go. The glory, of course, is there in proportion; the agony and the ecstasy coexist.

Secondly, the Eucharistic life is itself a battle:

The fact that the world is in God means that when men, with their finite freedom, stray from the path, the Son has to go to the most extreme form of self-surrender—Eucharist, Cross, the descent into hell. . . . This entire, central world drama is of such importance that it automatically attracts every power hostile to God . . . and as for the man who has been “liberated for freedom” and joins in the action, he is put in a much more exposed position, between God and the anti-god forces, than he ever imagined. . . .²

Finally, and most importantly, this points to something agonic *within* the Godhead itself, wherein lies a “primal drama” independent of, and prior to, the concrete drama introduced by actual refusal on the part of free will creatures. “The persons are perfectly transparent to each other and they possess a kind of impenetrable ‘personal’ mystery . . . the hypostatic modes of being constitute the greatest imaginable opposition one to another . . . in order that they can mutually interpenetrate in the most intimate manner conceivable.”³ God, who is neither “mutable nor immutable,” incorporates all the intervals of infinity in this transcendence—expressed ultimately in the Son “made to be sin for us,” identifying with the remotest opposition to the Good. To the notion of “distinction” among the persons of the immanent Trinity, we must add between Father and Son distance, separation, even opposition—overcome instantaneously, if you will, by the complicity of the Spirit’s interpenetrating love.

In short, there is nothing outside the infinite God. If the aim—a fair one—is to pack the whole dynamism of the divine Life and Love into the Eucharist, we cannot downplay the *sturm und drang* in Balthasar. To do so would be to miss the full richness of the tone of Eucharistic life and celebration, as well as the radical metaphysics of infinity toward which this teaching points.

Cosmos

“The ‘liquefaction’ of the earthly substance of Jesus into a Eucharistic substance is irreversible. It does not continue only to the ‘end’ of world time—like some ‘means’—but is the radiant core around which the cosmos crystallizes (according to the vision of the young Teilhard de Chardin). Or better: that from which it is set ablaze.”⁴ Healy cites these words from Balthasar’s *Spirit and Institution*, which seem to indicate openness to a cosmic and eschatological vision of the Eucharist. This vision, proposed most radically (though not

² Balthasar *Theodrama* II, 88

³ Balthasar *Theodrama* II, 258

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Spirit and Institution,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4, *Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 228-229.

uniquely) by Teilhard, recasts the hierarchy of being in which we had ordered our human lives as *process*, a gradual upward progression toward higher levels of complexity, greater consciousness.

But we find little of this sort here; indeed, there is little or nothing to find. The *Theodrama*, from which Healy draws most of his material, yields not a word. To be sure, Healy does quote recent magisterial documents, particularly from Benedict XVI; but that, while important in its own right, is another matter.

Let me start by saying bluntly: in the end, the mature Balthasar shortchanges the cosmos. Consider: Balthasar claims that Christianity released man in principle from slavery to the cosmos, and that full realization of this liberation has taken time to sink in. But the fullness of Divine revelation gradually brought enough pressure to bear on the comfortable world of cosmic enclosure still represented by medieval Aristotelian metaphysics, that the redirection of modern philosophy/theology's concentration on God and the soul is progress of a sort.⁵ Yet he gives no attention to the very physical sciences which actually spurred this change in perspective, by decentering us and delivering us over to Pascal's empty spaces. This omission makes it all the easier to overlook the fact that contemporary science has brought us a new cosmic picture—and, with it, a new opportunity of finding our place within the universe.⁶

Yet perhaps it is no accident. Balthasar is unwilling to let the cosmos dictate, or to place cosmic constraints on human freedom. For him, the Gospel has freed us from cosmic entanglement, released us into direct relationship with the living God; we need not consult the cosmos over how to live, or what to do next. Called to a deadly serious drama, we do not rest in

⁵ Balthasar *Theodrama* II 346-355 "Rooted in the cosmos."

⁶ Of course, there are arguments for ignoring the present cosmic picture. One could object that the evolutionary story is a product of the scientific method which is automatically jaundiced by a scientific reductionism; as Goethe said, modern physical color theory explains everything but the color—which is true, in a way. Yet while these limitations of scientific explanation need to be taken seriously, to use them to justify ignoring the evolutionary picture is seriously missing the point. The new cosmic picture is less a matter of detailed explanation, than a unifying *gestalt* which has emerged imperatively before the eyes of modern scientists. We have exchanged a static view of the cosmos for a developing one—this is the key apart from the details, and is untouched by legitimate cautions about the limitations of positive science when it comes to seeing nature.

Another objection might be the *mere probability* of the cosmic picture, any cosmic picture, no matter how currently persuasive. In the older view, theology engaged with philosophy, including the philosophy of nature, which in principle brought forth necessary propositions. Now a different state of affairs confronts us: the epistemological status of our most cherished scientific theories has been demoted. The old cosmic picture, even in its most general outlines, was itself merely probable (who knew?); the current one is no less so—and theology, the story goes, should abstain from building on shifting sands. So: Do theologians back off, in the name of this ideal, from taking account of what is currently "known" about the universe? Or do they plunge in, recognizing thereby a further dimension of incompleteness of theology itself?

The former choice, I would argue, is costly, introducing a subtle dualism up and down the line. Any contemporary picture of "nature" is tinged with the developmental paradigm; to avoid this, we surrender all hope of an integration of the material and the spiritual. The latter choice merely entails a mortification of theological pride, one in accord with Balthasar's own emphasis on the difference between theology and dogma: "truth is symphonic," etc. Theology is contingent upon, among other things, what is currently known and generally surmised.

our natural home; to be sure, the redemption affects the whole universe, indeed through us—but not the converse. Thus he is wary, not only of a new “place in the universe,” but of any place within the universe at all, as a potential contamination of Gospel liberation. His reference to Teilhard in *Theodrama II* is telling:

. . . people set out on spiritual paths that aim to outstrip the freedom of the individual and see it, either from below or from above, as one element within some overarching context. From below, it is seen in the context of those universal, determining laws of life that we enumerated earlier. . . . From above, the individual appears as one element within the history of a nation or of mankind, within a cosmic evolution. . . . Fundamentally, where personal freedom is overtaken in this way, it signals the abdication of drama in favor of a narrative philosophy of history, an epic story of the Spirit or of mankind, however much such an epic development may be pushed forward by means of a dialectic (Hegel, Marx) of an evolution (Teilhard) claiming to be “dramatic.” In either case, people claim to know the world’s universal law embracing freedom, a priori or a posteriori.⁷

Yet the cosmos is our home, whether we like it or not. And there actually *was* something of a problem with the old Aristotelian cosmos, since we are going somewhere and the cosmos, as far as we could tell, was not. But that is what is exciting about the new picture; it can at least be construed as “going somewhere”—which may go so far as to give a certain salvific heft to our being on earth in the first place.

Eucharist

This issue throws a new light on our thinking about the Eucharist. Healy describes two visions: one headed by Aquinas and concentrating on the conversion of bread and wine into the body of Christ; another taking Balthasar’s route of discussing the Eucharist as a drama of love, and ultimately a participation in the Trinitarian exchange among the persons. His way of handling the division is to say that Balthasar’s approach presupposes the truth of Thomas’ distinctions and enfolds it into a larger picture. I would suggest that both Eucharistic visions, transubstantiation and the drama of love, are together enfolded into a third paradigm—one to which Balthasar turns a blind eye.

Consider: In the conversion of the species we see an eschatological promise, but we also see a culmination which has been unfolding since the beginning of the universe—an evolutionary process. However foreign these ideas are to the Balthasarian mindset, a theological adoption of this eschatological/evolutionary paradigm results in a picture in which *a descending, incarnational line is met at every point by an ascending line of active receptivity.*

⁷ Balthasar *Theodrama II*, 40.

Applied to the Eucharist, Balthasar himself treats of the descending line—the Son going as it were all the way out from the Father, to include even the sinful rebellion of autonomous creatures, descending into hell and bringing it all back within the eternal positive differences of the Trinitarian persons, as part of the Eucharistic gift. At the same time, we have the entire 13.5 billion years of development, from the formation of the first particles, up through levels of complexity in which we finally reach man, capable of speaking the definitive *fiat* to the Divine ingression. But we do not now leave the cosmos behind; human operation turns grain into bread, grapes into wine, and now that cosmic stuff becomes by the operation of the Spirit transparent as the medium of personal exchange at the highest level. The relation between Eucharistic conversion and cosmic transformation swings into view.⁸ In this light, it is not surprising to see Benedict XVI saying the following:

The role of the priesthood is to consecrate the world so that it may become a living host, a liturgy: so that the liturgy may not be something alongside the reality of the world, but that the world itself shall become a living host, a liturgy. This is also the great vision of Teilhard de Chardin: in the end we shall achieve a true cosmic liturgy, where the cosmos becomes a living host.⁹

When we look at things from this evolutionary perspective, it becomes easier to see how the good creation is implicated in the redemption—creation groaning in anticipation, as Saint Paul has it. Furthermore, our very belief in and understanding of the Eucharistic transformation is bolstered and illuminated by a rational grasp of the ascending pattern. This emphasis, in turn, validates and encourages the practice of adoration and exposition, which has so recently been catching on again: When we gaze at the Host, we contemplate, among other things (as Healy rightly says), an element of the restored creation—revealing the Eucharist as both prophesy and image of the cosmic culmination, the restoration of all things in Christ.

⁸ This also clarifies another point. As Healy notes, one of the most interesting features of St. Thomas' account of transubstantiation is that it is not substantial transformation; nothing is destroyed. Yet here precisely is the paradox, more than in any discourse about accidents and substance: there is a total change—A changes into B, such that there is nothing left of A as such, but only B. Yet nothing of A has been destroyed. Aligning the Eucharistic transformation with the cosmic transformation, we can note a similarity: on the one hand, the old cosmos passes away and we are left with the new; on the other hand, the old is fulfilled in the new—the Bible warrants both apocalyptic and transitional models. To this we might add the problem of the Old Covenant and the New—the old Law is done away with, nailed to the Cross, yet not an iota of it is removed (Mt. 5:18); indeed, it may be seen as enduring still, “for the call of the Lord is irrevocable” (Rom 11: 29).

⁹ Benedict XVI, Homily, Celebration of Vespers with the Faithful of Aosta, July 24, 2009.