

Christ's Eucharist and the Nature of Love: The Contribution of Hans Urs von Balthasar

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At the heart of the Church's faith in the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist is a grateful acknowledgment that Christ has communicated the very substance of his life to the Church. The consecrated host and the chalice of blood contain in truth the totality of Christ's life, death, and Resurrection and the drama of our salvation. This article presents Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology of the Eucharist, with a particular focus on the ecclesial and eschatological dimensions of the Sacrament. The unifying theme is an understanding of love as a total-gift-of-self whose innermost form and fruit is reciprocal communion. The mid-point and heart of von Balthasar's eucharistic theology is the idea of a personal and free exchange of life—a Holy Communion or covenant constituted by Christ giving himself to the Father and to the Church. Through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, the Church participates inwardly in this sacrificial communion by receiving this gift and offering herself and all of creation back to the Father in thanksgiving and adoration.

In a letter sent to his son Michael at the height of World War II, J. R. R. Tolkien recalls the story of his courtship of his future wife and then offers the following words of guidance:

Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament. . . . There you will find romance, glory, honor, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves on earth, and more than that: Death: by the divine paradox, that which ends life, and demands the surrender of all, and yet by the taste (or foretaste) of which alone can what you seek in your earthly relationships (love, faithfulness, joy) be maintained, or take on that complexion of reality, of eternal endurance, which every man's heart desires.¹

At the heart of the Church's faith in the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist is a grateful acknowledgment that Christ has communicated the very substance of his life to the Church. Tolkien's words shed light on the breadth and depth of this supreme gift of God. The consecrated host and the chalice of blood contain in truth the totality of Christ's life, death, and Resurrection *and* the drama of our salvation. Christ not only gives himself in the Eucharist, he also "*receives each of us*. He enters into friendship with us. . . . Indeed, it is because of him that we have life."² Both at the foot of the Cross and at the heart of the Church's Liturgy, Christ's Eucharist includes the Church's reception of this gift in faith and love. The Eucharist is

¹ "Letter to Michael Tolkien, March 6-8, 1941," in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 53-54.

² John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 22.

constitutive of the Church. The figure of Mary, to whom Christ is entrusted at birth and at death, shows us the meaning of this gift in its ecclesial and eschatological fullness.

The task assigned to me is twofold: to present Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology of the Eucharist, with a particular focus on the role of metaphysics within his theological synthesis.³ Secondly, to suggest some points of contact between the Swiss theologian and St. Thomas Aquinas on the theme of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic Sacrament. In order to frame a discussion, I will outline five theses on von Balthasar's distinctive approach to the mystery of the Eucharist. The unifying theme is an understanding of love as a total-gift-of-self whose innermost form and fruit is reciprocal communion. For Balthasar, Christ's Eucharist is at once the revelation of God's being love and a gift that draws us into his life and love thereby allowing us to give the entirety of our life (and ultimately the entire cosmos) back to God.

Before presenting the five theses, I want to register a difficulty regarding the relationship between Hans Urs von Balthasar and Thomas Aquinas, the common doctor of the Church. It is difficult to bring these two authors into a fruitful conversation or dialogue on the theme of Christ's presence in the Eucharist.⁴ Their respective points of departure, language and modes of discourse, and even their deepest concerns, seem worlds apart. To take just one example, a glance at the treatise on the Eucharist in the third part of the *Summa* suggests that Aquinas tends to focus our attention on the mystery of the conversion of bread and wine into the true body and blood of the Risen Lord. "This sacrament," Aquinas writes, "is completed (*perficitur*) in the consecration of the matter: while the usage of the faithful is not essential to the sacrament, but only a consequence thereof."⁵ With great care and a synthetic knowledge of the tradition, Aquinas safeguards the truth of Christ's saving presence in the Sacrament using the concepts of matter and form, substance and accidents, instrumental causality, etc. The Swiss theologian, by contrast, focuses our attention on the Eucharist as a drama or event of reciprocal love between

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar did not compose a treatise on the Eucharist. However, this mystery is present in a central way in almost everything that he wrote. Of particular importance are *Theo-Drama*, vol. IV, *The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994) and the following essays: "Eucharistic Congress 1960," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. II, *Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991); "The Mass, a Sacrifice of the Church?," *Explorations in Theology*, vol. III, *Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993); "Spirit and Institution," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. IV, *Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995); "The Veneration of the Holy of Holies," in *Elucidations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998); "The Mystery of the Eucharist," in *New Elucidations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986); "The Holy Church and the Eucharistic Sacrifice," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 12 (1985): 139-45.

⁴ For a general account of the relation between Balthasar and Aquinas, see Adrian Walker, "Love Alone: Hans Urs von Balthasar as a Master of Theological Renewal," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32 (2005): 517-40; D. C. Schindler, "Towards a Non-possessive Concept of Knowledge: On the Relation Between Reason and Love in Aquinas and Balthasar," *Modern Theology* 22 (2006): 577-607; James J. Buckley, "Balthasar's Use of the Theology of Aquinas," *The Thomist* 59 (1995) 517-45; Markus Enders, "Die Schönheit der Seinsordnung im Licht der Herrlichkeit Gottes : Die exemplarische Synthese zwischen heidnisch-antiker Ästhetik und der Herrlichkeit des biblischen Gottes im philosophischen Denken des Thomas von Aquin nach Hans Urs von Balthasar," in *Logik der Liebe und Herrlichkeit Gottes : Hans Urs von Balthasar im Gespräch: Festgabe für Karl Kardinal Lehmann zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Walter Kasper (Ostfildern: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 2006).

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 7, a. 7: "hoc sacramentum perficitur in consecratione materiae, usus autem fidelium non est de necessitate sacramenti, sed est aliquid consequens ad sacramentum."

persons—between Christ and the Church (concretized and symbolized in Mary), and ultimately as an expression and communication of the trinitarian exchange of life and love. The mid-point and heart of von Balthasar’s eucharistic theology is not the conversion of the elements, but a personal and free exchange of life—a Holy Communion or covenant constituted by Christ giving himself to the Father and to the Church.⁶ Through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, the Church participates inwardly in this sacrificial communion by receiving this gift and offering herself and all of creation back to the Father in thanksgiving and adoration.

Of course, this contrast is over-simplified and misleading. Thomas speaks of the Eucharist as an expression of Christ’s desire for friendship with us and as a sign of his supreme charity.⁷ As a faithful interpreter of Paul and Augustine, Thomas also teaches that the Eucharist is a sign and cause of the unity of the Church.⁸ On the other side, Balthasar does not neglect the language of being and the “transubstantiation” of bread and wine, which he deems essential for safeguarding the truth and objectivity of Christ’s gift of himself.⁹ In his writings on the Eucharist, Balthasar presupposes the enduring validity of Aquinas’s account of the conversion of the substance of bread and wine into the true body and blood of Christ. More generally, Balthasar’s entire theological synthesis is grounded in Aquinas’s metaphysical doctrine on the *actus essendi* and the real distinction in created beings between *esse* and *essentia*.

Accordingly, I am assuming a basic harmony between these two authors, as well as the dependence of Balthasar on Aquinas. I am also assuming that the thought of the *doctor communis* bears an inner openness to the entire Catholic tradition, including developments that come after his death.¹⁰ What I hope to show is that Balthasar brings to light aspects of the

⁶ In his essay “The Mass, a Sacrifice of the Church,” op. cit., p. 238, Balthasar suggests that it is necessary to overcome “the separation between the Mass as sacrificial act and the Eucharist as sacrificial meal; it would not be possible any longer, as with De la Taille, to limit the sacrificial act to *oblatio* and *immolatio* (on the Cross or, liturgically, in the Consecration) and to handle the meal as an almost irrelevant postlude (*Mysterium Fidei*, 182). For the Bible, sacrifice and meal are inseparable and together form one single *eidos*, not only on the basis of the Old Covenant but also in Christ’s intention to make the gift of himself in such a way that he is at the same time received and consumed.”

⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 75, a. 1.

⁸ Cf. Giles Emery, “The Ecclesial Fruit of the Eucharist in St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Nova et Vetera* 2 (2004): 43–60.

⁹ Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Introduction,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 12 (1985): “St. Paul remarks: ‘. . . every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death’ (1 Cor 11:26-27). This intimate connection does not indicate a new sacrifice or something in addition to Christ’s own ‘surrender,’ indeed, the disciples were already included in his sufferings during the Last Supper; but one can speak of a ‘making present’ [*Vergegenwartigung*]. This is the true meaning of *memoria* and *anamnesis*. Undoubtedly this making present remains an inscrutable mystery which, in the words of the Council of Trent, can be expressed ‘in perfectly adequate form’ by the term ‘transubstantiation’ of bread and wine into the living body of Christ, i.e. ‘flesh and blood,’ as both man and God.”

¹⁰ Cf. Adrian Walker, “Personal Singularity and the *Communio Personarum*: A Creative Development of Thomas Aquinas’ Doctrine of *Esse Commune*,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 31 (2004): 457-79, at 461: “If Thomas is indeed the ‘common doctor,’ then no one order or school can claim to have a monopoly on him. Thomas is *communis* in a way analogous to *esse commune* itself: freely available to all as a source for Christian thinking. This does not mean, of course, that anyone is entitled to force the Thomistic texts to say something that Aquinas did not say, or would not have countenanced. What it does mean, though, is that the Thomistic texts are so fruitful that no one, not even Thomas himself, can or could control the wealth of their implications, which will continue for all

Eucharistic mystery that perhaps have received less attention in the Thomistic school. The central insight of Balthasar concerns the mystery of Christ's Eucharist as a personal gift of love—a gift that makes visible the trinitarian mystery of God and the deepest truth of creation in all of its distinct dimensions. Without in the least supplanting or replacing a metaphysical analysis of the conversion of bread and wine, Balthasar's personalistic and trinitarian approach to the Eucharist helps to ground and illuminate the ecclesial, social, and eschatological dimensions of the Sacrament that recent magisterial teaching has emphasized.¹¹ The Liturgy of the Church is truly a cosmic liturgy that embraces all of God's creation.

In a section devoted to the mystery of the Trinity, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the interplay between philosophy and theology in the development of doctrine:

In order to articulate the dogma of the Trinity, the Church had to develop her own terminology with the help of certain notions of philosophical origin: “substance,” “person” or “hypostasis,” “relation” and so on. In doing this, she did not submit the faith to human wisdom, but gave a new and unprecedented meaning to these terms, which from then on would be used to signify an ineffable mystery.¹²

The Church's teaching on the mystery of the Eucharist also requires a form of philosophical reflection that is open to and transformed by the higher wisdom of faith. Accordingly, my first thesis presents an aspect of the metaphysical underpinnings of Balthasar's theology of the Eucharist.

1st Thesis. The Meaning of Being (*actus essendi*) is Love

In his 1986 interview with Fr. Angelo Scola,¹³ and again in his “Résumé of My Thought,” written a few weeks before his death, Balthasar described his philosophy as “meta-anthropology.” He writes:

Let us say above all that the traditional term “metaphysics” signified the act of transcending physics, which for the Greeks signified the totality of the cosmos, of which man was a part. . . . For us the cosmos perfects itself in man, who at the same time sums up the world and surpasses it. Thus our philosophy will be essentially a meta-anthropology, presupposing not only the cosmological sciences but also the anthropological sciences, and surpassing them toward the question of the being and essence of man.¹⁴

ages to unfold throughout the life of the Church.”

¹¹ Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*; Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 251.

¹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Test Everything: Hold Fast to What is Good* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 25.

¹⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 114.

The distinctive claim of meta-anthropology is the idea that the acts proper to human persons, above all the acts of receiving and giving one's self in love, reveal the meaning of being. As John Paul II teaches in *Fides et Ratio*, "the person constitutes a privileged locus for the encounter with being, and hence with metaphysical enquiry."¹⁵

There are two distinct but related aspects of meta-anthropology. The first concerns the uniqueness and irreducibility of human persons, who are characterized by rationality and freedom. Here we can recall the teaching of *Gaudium et spes* that "man is the only creature on earth created for his own sake."¹⁶ Or Thomas Aquinas's dictum that "person signifies that which is most perfect in the whole of nature, namely, that which subsists in rational nature."¹⁷ In some sense, everything else in the cosmos is created for mankind. Created in the image of God, human beings are called to exercise dominion over the whole of creation. Balthasar follows Maximus the Confessor in conceiving the human person as microcosm and mediator. This leads to the second aspect.

Meta-anthropology is not simply a shift from the category of "being" to "person."¹⁸ On the contrary, the "meta" of meta-anthropology implies that human persons are given the task of embodying and bringing to light the meaning of being itself. Thus, while it is true that person signifies a certain transcendence—"the human person sums up the world and surpasses it"—this movement of transcendence does not go beyond being but discloses, by analogy, what is proper to the act of being as such. The crucial point is that the original and abiding access to, and measure of, the unlimited fullness and perfection of being is love between persons.

For Balthasar, the task of developing a meta-anthropology involves an interpretation of the Thomistic real distinction in the context of love between persons.¹⁹ According to Thomas, *esse* or the act of being "signifies something complete and simple but non-subsistent."²⁰ Being is "complete and simple" because it is actual or in act. And, as Thomas writes elsewhere, "it is the nature of every actuality to communicate itself insofar as it is possible. Hence every agent acts according as it exists in actuality, and to act is nothing else than to communicate as far as possible that whereby the agent is in act."²¹ By virtue of the act of being, every created reality without exception bears within itself an inexhaustible fullness or generosity. And yet this fullness

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 83.

¹⁶ *Gaudium et spes*, 24.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 29, a. 3.

¹⁸ Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama II*, vol. II, *The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 314-15: "We should recall that, in speaking of God, we are not restricted to personal categories, particularly if they are played off against ontic categories; the dimension of the personal is itself ontic."

¹⁹ Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. V, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 611-56; Walker, "Personal Singularity and the *Communio Personarum*."

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia dei*, q. 1, a. 1: "esse significat aliquid completum et simplex sed non subsistens."

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia dei*, q. 2, a. 1: "natura cuiuslibet actus est, quod seipsum communicet quantum possibile Est. Unde unumquodque agens agit secundum quod in actu Est. Agere vero nihil aliud est quam communicare illud per quod agens est actu, secundum quod est possibile."

of the *actus essendi* is non-subsistent; it stands in need of an essence to attain subsistence. Balthasar characterizes the mysterious interplay between *esse* and essence as a reciprocal, asymmetrical generosity that is analogous to the giving and receiving proper to love. Being, which Thomas calls a likeness of the divine goodness, is transparent to the divine generosity of the Creator. Human beings are responsible for receiving and creatively unfolding this “sense” of being as gift. In other words, human persons are called to receive themselves and being as a whole as a gift from God and, in gratitude and thanksgiving, to offer themselves together with the gift of being back to God.

The idea of meta-anthropology presupposes the doctrine of creation interpreted within the logic of gift. The ground and final meaning of the gift of creation is revealed in the life, death, and Resurrection of the Incarnate Son, the one in whom, through whom, and for whom all things were created. By assuming human nature and going to the end of love (cf. Jn 13:1), the Logos “established himself as the innermost depth of the Father’s goodness while also displaying in himself the very goal for which his creatures manifestly received the beginning of their existence.”²²

Let me conclude this first thesis with a summary text from Balthasar.

[In the event of God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ] Being itself unveils its final countenance, which for us receives the name of trinitarian love; only with this final mystery does light fall at last on that other mystery: why there is being at all and why it enters our horizon as light and truth and goodness and beauty.²³

2nd Thesis. *Eucharistia* (Thanksgiving) as the Form of Christ’s Life

At the heart of the Church’s faith in the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament is an affirmation that Christ has communicated nothing less than himself. Responding to currents of Catholic thought that tended to undermine the Church’s faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Pope Paul VI affirmed that “this presence is called ‘real’—by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as though they could not be ‘real’ too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.”²⁴

One way to approach this mystery of Christ’s real or substantial presence in the Eucharist is to reflect on the relationship between the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper and the crucifixion of Jesus. Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar suggest that each of these events illumines the other and, in fact, requires the other to be understood in its full significance.

²² Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium*, 60.

²³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. I, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 158.

²⁴ Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, 39.

It is precisely the institution of the Eucharist before the passion that allows us to understand in faith that Jesus' suffering and his violent death are, at the deepest level, a loving self-surrender or gift-of-self. Balthasar writes,

Chronologically, the gesture of self-giving precedes the violent Passion event and thus shows that his free self-surrender wants to go 'to the end' (Jn 13:1); and the end is that self-disposition passes over into pure letting oneself be disposed of and *being* disposed of.²⁵

At the same time, his death on the cross reveals the extent or totality of his gift—what we receive in the Sacrament of the Eucharist is nothing less than the very Person of Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for us. Christ's flesh and blood contain and mediate a personal communication or gift-of-self. "Perfect love," Balthasar writes, "consists in the unconditional surrender of self."²⁶ Or, in the formulation of Aquinas: "for the perfection of love it is required not only that a man renounce earthly goods, but that, in a certain sense, he also renounce himself. Dionysius says . . . that divine love causes ecstasy, that is, that it takes a man out of himself by not allowing him to belong to himself, but to him whom he loves."²⁷

Here we have an initial key to understanding why the Church has always affirmed the "real" or "substantial" presence of Christ in the Sacrament: *the gift communicated is nothing less than Christ himself*. "The Church," writes John Paul II, "has received the Eucharist from Christ her Lord not as one gift—however precious—among so many others, but as the gift par excellence, for it is the gift of himself, of his person in his sacred humanity, as well as the gift of his saving work."²⁸

What does it mean to give or to surrender one's "self"? What is included in this gift? The crucial point for Balthasar is the note of totality. All that Christ is and all that Christ does *pro nobis* (his "saving work") is present in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The entire historical life of the Incarnate Son is, as it were, concentrated and included in this gift. Drawing on the work of Odo Casel, von Balthasar elaborates this point as follows:

Christ, in surrendering his sacrificed flesh and shed blood for his disciples, was communicating, not merely the material side of his bodily substance, but the

²⁵ Balthasar, "The Mystery of the Eucharist," op. cit., 114. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *God is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 29: "The words he spoke at the Last Supper then represent the final shaping of [his life and his preaching]. They offer nothing entirely unexpected, but rather what has already been shaped adumbrated in all these paths, and yet they reveal anew what was signified throughout: the institution of the Eucharist is an anticipation of his death; it is the undergoing of a spiritual death. . . . Both are essentially interdependent: the words at the Last Supper without the death would be, so to speak, an issue of unsecured currency; and again, the death without the words would be a mere execution without any discernible point to it. Yet the two together constitute the new event."

²⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 59.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *De Perfectione Spiritualis Vitae*, chap. 10.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 11.

saving events wrought by it. . . . The fundamental presupposition is that the person of Jesus is really present; but *along with the person comes his entire temporal history and, in particular, its climax in cross and Resurrection.*²⁹

This suggests a further question. How can the totality of Christ's historical life be included in the Sacrament of the Eucharist? Here we arrive at one of the seminal insights of von Balthasar. Christ can give the whole of his life in this Sacrament because his entire life was already eucharistic. The Greek word *eucharistia* means thanksgiving. The form of Christ's historical life from the first moment of the Incarnation is a grateful reception of his existence from the Father coincident with an offering of his life back to the Father. The Eucharist does not come simply at the end of (or after) Christ's historical life, perhaps as a reminder of his passion, death, and Resurrection. The Eucharist is an expression of the deepest identity and mission of Christ as the beloved Son of the Father sent into the world to reconcile the world to God. Balthasar writes,

The Son's form of existence, which makes him the Son from all eternity, is the uninterrupted reception of everything that he is, of his very self, from the Father. It is indeed this receiving of himself which gives him his "I," his own inner dimension, his spontaneity, that sonship with which he can answer the Father in a reciprocal giving . . . in the eternally uninterrupted act of his own generation, in which alone he is image and word and response. In the selfsame act in which he receives himself (and hence his divine understanding) he receives, too, the entire will of the Father concerning God and the world, and assents to it as his own.³⁰

The Son is obedient to the Father in his spontaneous surrender. And he understands this obedience as a permission [*als ein Dürfen*], because he owes himself and everything that comes to him from the Father, including the possibility of his self-surrender, to the Father. In this sense he is, as Son, the Eucharist: that is, thanksgiving absolutely.³¹

The Eucharist is a form of life, a way of being and acting that encompasses the totality of Christ's historical life and mission. In his existing from and for the Father, Christ's discloses a new sense of personhood and subsistence as relational, or grounded in gift. This brings me to the third thesis.

3rd Thesis. The Eucharist as a Trinitarian Gift

The third thesis approaches the Eucharist as a Trinitarian gift that discloses the innermost mystery that God is love, an eternal exchange of Father, Son, and Spirit. In giving himself, Christ

²⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, 391-392.

³⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 30-31.

³¹ Balthasar, "Spirit and Institution," 230.

gives, as it were, more than himself. He reveals his eternal origin and he shares with us the love that his Father has for him and that he has for the Father. Again and again, Balthasar highlights the mystery of the Father as the ultimate source of the eucharistic mystery:

In all three Synoptic Gospels the true Lord of the table in the eucharistic banquet is the heavenly Father, who sets out for us the best he has to offer. Similarly, the precious taste of the gifts welling up within all of the sacraments comes from the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father who gives and the Son who allows himself to be given as food and drink. It is the Spirit who enables us, when we pray the Canon of the Mass with the Church, to address all thanks and gratitude, all honor and glory, through him and with the Son to the Father.³²

It is God the Father who distributes to us the eucharistic Son, and it is God the Spirit who again and again brings about the unutterable multiplication of the unique into that which is universal. But, above all, he who was once given, slain on the Cross, poured out, pierced, will never again take back his gift, his gift of Himself.³³

Two principles need to be kept in mind in approaching the Eucharist as a sacrament of trinitarian love. The first states that “the whole divine economy is the common work of the three divine persons. For as the Trinity has only one and the same nature, so too does it have only one and the same operation.”³⁴ The second principle states that “each divine person performs the common work according to his unique personal property.”³⁵ The co-working of each person in the economy of salvation discloses or reveals their distinct relations of origin. The common and personal work of the three divine persons in bestowing the Eucharist is a revelation that the very nature or being of God is love. “In the sacrament of the Eucharist,” writes Pope Benedict XVI, “Jesus shows us in particular the truth about the love which is the very essence of God.”³⁶

The Father is “*fons et origo totius trinitatis*.”³⁷ The unfathomable love of the Father is also the source and end of the whole economy of salvation. As the Fourth Lateran Council teaches, “the Father gives his substance to the Son, generating Him from eternity. . . . One cannot say that he gave him a part of his substance and retained a part for himself . . . nor can one say that he gave it to the Son in such way as not to retain it for himself.”³⁸ The Son, who eternally receives his being as a gift from the Father, is a perfect image or icon of the Father. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as the form and fruit of their reciprocal love. In the felicitous phrase of John Paul II, the Holy Spirit is “Person-Gift.”³⁹

³² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 117.

³³ Balthasar, “The Veneration of the Holy of Holies,” *op. cit.*, p. 183.

³⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 258.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 2.

³⁷ Sixth Council of Toledo (638).

³⁸ Denz.-Schön., 805.

³⁹ Cf. John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 10: “It can be said that in the Holy Spirit the intimate life of the

In going to the end of love by dying and communicating the substance of his life in the gift of the Eucharist, Christ reveals the mystery of the Father as the source and origin of the whole divinity. While Christ's entire existence serves to make known the love of the Father, the gift of Eucharist is a perfect image of a Father who is eternally giving himself in the generation of the Son and the procession of Spirit. "[W]hen the Son allows himself to be poured out," writes von Balthasar, "he directly reveals the love of the Father, who manifests himself in his Son's eucharistia . . . we begin to appreciate the ultimate meaning of Jesus' saying, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn 14:9)."⁴⁰

Christ's Eucharist is simultaneously a perfect expression his own identity as the only-begotten Son of the Father. Both as God and as man, the Incarnate Son receives his being as a gift from the Father and offers himself back to the Father in love. The mystery of the Eucharist reveals and concretizes the Incarnate Son's readiness to give the whole of his life unto death. In allowing his life to be taken and his side pierced so that blood and water flow forth (cf. Jn 19:34), Christ gives himself in a filial mode. He allows himself to be given or distributed by the Father and the Holy Spirit.

In one sense, the Holy Spirit himself is the ultimate gift that is bestowed as the fruit of Christ's death and Resurrection. Christ gives the whole of himself precisely by giving us the Holy Spirit who co-accomplishes Christ's Eucharistic giving by distributing the spiritualized body and blood of the Risen Christ thereby gathering creation into the body of Christ.

Christ's gift of himself does not simply disclose God's love for humanity; at a deeper level the mystery of the Eucharist contains and mediates the Father's eternal love for the Son and the Son's eternal love for the Father. The supreme mystery of God's being as love is, as it were, concentrated and unveiled in this sacrament:

The Eucharist implies much more than that [Christ] merely stands before the Father as mediator in virtue of his acquired merits; likewise more than that he merely continues in an unbloody manner in heaven the "self-giving" he accomplishes in a bloody manner on earth. It ultimately means that the Father's act of self-giving by which, throughout all created space and time, he pours out the Son is the definitive revelation of the trinitarian act itself in which the "Persons" are God's "relations," forms of absolute self-giving and loving fluidity. In the Eucharist the Creator has succeeded in making the finite creaturely

Triune God becomes totally gift, an exchange of mutual love between the divine Persons and that through the Holy Spirit God exists in the mode of gift. It is the Holy Spirit who is the personal expression of this self-giving, of this being-love."

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. V, *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 384.

structure so fluid—without fragmenting or violating it (“No one takes my life from me” Jn 10:18)—that it is able to become the bearer of the triune life.⁴¹

4th Thesis. The Ecclesial Dimension of the Church – On the Threefold Body of Christ

In his seminal book *Corpus Mysticum*, Henri de Lubac established that the term “mystical body” originally referred to the Eucharist. For St. Paul, for St. Augustine, and for early medieval theologians, the Eucharist corresponds to the Church as cause to effect, as sign to reality. Christ instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist in order to build up his body, the Church.⁴² For this reason the Church was described as *corpus Christi verum*, the true body of Christ. Within this great tradition, the relationship between the Church and the Eucharist is one of reciprocal causality. In the words of de Lubac, “each has been entrusted to the other, so to speak, by Christ: the Church produces the Eucharist, but the Eucharist also produces the Church.”⁴³ “The Church, like the Eucharist, is a mystery of unity, and one with inexhaustible riches. Both are the Body of Christ—the same Body. If we are to be faithful to the teaching of Scripture, as Tradition interprets it, and wish not to lose anything of its essential riches, we must be careful not make the smallest break between the mystical body and the Eucharist.”⁴⁴

Balthasar’s account of the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church is deeply indebted to de Lubac. The Eucharist, he writes, “is the birthplace and center of the Church.”⁴⁵ The “first principle” for Balthasar’s account of the relation between the Holy Spirit and the Church concerns the concrete universality of the Eucharist:

there can be nothing of the Spirit in the Church that does not also coincide with Christ’s reality, christologically, that does not let itself be translated into the language of the Eucharist—the surrender of Christ’s own flesh and blood, the streaming outward from Christ’s self up to the very point of his heart being pierced and his side flowing with water and blood.⁴⁶

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the mystery of reciprocal causality between the Eucharist and the Church, it is helpful to reflect on the unity-in-distinction of the threefold body of Christ.

i.) First, there is the historical body of Jesus of Nazareth, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified for our sake and Risen from the dead.

ii.) Secondly, there is the sacramental body that is the Eucharist; the body and blood of Christ that comes to be through the transubstantiation of bread and wine in the Church’s Liturgy.

⁴¹ Balthasar, “The Mystery of the Eucharist,” 118-19.

⁴² Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds (London: SCM Press, 2006).

⁴³ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 134.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 156.

⁴⁵ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 57.

⁴⁶ Balthasar, “Spirit and Institution,” 237-38.

iii.) Thirdly, there is the ecclesial body that is the Church—the unity of believers with Christ and with one another.

The supreme mystery of our faith—which is confirmed and communicated by the Holy Spirit as the fruit of Christ’s going the end of love on the Cross and rising to new life—is that this threefold body of Christ is one. Each mode of Christ’s bodily existence presupposes and reveals something essential about the other two. Let me elaborate this claim by reflecting on each aspect of the threefold body.

Beginning and remaining with the historical body of Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary during the reign Pontius Pilate, is the key to the abiding concreteness of God’s gift of love. But the point that needs to be emphasized is that precisely as historical, Christ’s body is Eucharistic and ecclesial from beginning to end. Christ’s historical body is ecclesial in the sense that his coming into the world depends on Mary’s faith and Mary’s body. His historical body is also ecclesial by virtue of being totally and irrevocably given to his bride, the Church, in order to establish a new and eternal covenant. Christ’s historical body is already the sign and instrument of unity or communion between God and creation.

Christ’s historical body is eucharistic in the sense that the whole of Christ’s Incarnate life is a thanksgiving to the Father and offering of himself back to the Father and to the Church. *Eucharistia*—thanksgiving—is the form of the Christ’s historical life (*1st Thesis*). This leads to the second aspect of the threefold body.

The sacramental body—precisely as sacramental—is historical and ecclesial. As Catholics we confess that in the gift of the Eucharist, Christ communicates the very substance of his life; he gives himself—that is why we speak of his “real presence” as the heart of the mystery of the Sacrament. To say that he communicates his substance or his being is another way of saying that he communicates the totality of his human and divine life. The saving mysteries of Christ’s historical life—especially his dying on the Cross and his rising from the dead—are included in the Sacrament.

In giving the Church the Sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ communicates more than the substance of his life—he bestows the gift of unity or communion with all of the faithful in heaven and on earth. As *Lumen Gentium* teaches, “partaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up onto communion with him and with one another.”⁴⁷ The Eucharist is the abiding source of the Church.

Thirdly, the ecclesial body of Christ—the community of believers—is historical and sacramental. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “The bread we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because it is one bread, we, the many, are one body” (1 Cor 10:16). The Church

⁴⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 7.

is, as it were, Christ's body extended in history through the mediation of the Holy Spirit. "One should not believe," writes Augustine, "that Christ is in the head but not in the body; rather he is complete in the head and in the body"⁴⁸—*Christus totus*. Because of her unity with Christ, the Church is sacrament of communion. The ecclesial body of Christ—*corpus mysticum et verum*—is a real symbol and cause of communion between God and creation. "The Church originates in the incorporation of Christ's Body and Blood in each one who communicates with him at the eucharistic table."⁴⁹

Two conclusions can be drawn from Balthasar's understanding of the inseparable connection between the Eucharist and the Church. The first point to note is that each modality of the threefold body of Christ accomplishes and bears witness to a true union between God and creation. The historical, sacramental, and ecclesial body of Christ is the archetype of the relationship between nature and grace, the church and the world. In other words, the church-world relation begins in the womb of Mary. Mary's fiat together with the unabridged humanity of Jesus Christ represents the deepest truth of the world or creation itself.

The second point concerns the dynamic unity of the historical, sacramental, and ecclesial body of Christ. Undergirding the mystery that these three are one is the plan of God to gather up all of creation into union with Christ. We might say that the eternal Son of the Father entered history and assumed an historical body in order to communicate or share his life by giving himself eucharistically. The Sacrament of the Eucharist was instituted by Christ in order to build up the Church as mystery of communion. The Church, continually born from the pierced side of Christ, is the "universal sacrament of salvation." Her mission is to gather the entire human family and ultimately all of creation into communion with Christ's body.

This leads to my fifth and final thesis.

5th Thesis. Toward a Cosmic Liturgy: Transubstantiation and Eschatology

The transubstantiation of bread and wine is an anticipatory and effective sign of the eschatological transformation of the entire material cosmos. From Ignatius of Antioch, who calls the Eucharist the medicine of immortality, through Irenaeus and Augustine, the ancient tradition bears witness to the close connection between the mystery of Christ's Eucharist and the final destiny of the cosmos. Jesus' words in the Gospel of John remain a touchstone for Catholic eschatology: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day" (Jn 6:54).

Recent magisterial teaching has called for a "rediscovery" and deepening of this tradition. In *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, John Paul II describes the Eucharist as "a straining towards the goal, a foretaste of the fullness of joy promised by Christ (cf. Jn 15:11); it is in some way the

⁴⁸ Augustine, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 28, 1: PL 35, 1622.

⁴⁹ Balthasar, "The Mystery of the Eucharist," 112.

anticipation of heaven, the ‘pledge of future glory.’”⁵⁰ “Those who feed on Christ in the Eucharist,” he writes, “need not wait until the hereafter to receive eternal life: they already possess it on earth, as the first-fruits of a future fullness which will embrace man in his totality. . . . With the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the ‘secret’ of the Resurrection.”⁵¹ Similarly, Benedict XVI devotes a section of his apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* to “the Eucharist and eschatology.” “The Eucharistic celebration,” he writes, “sacramentally accomplishes the eschatological gathering of the People of God. [It is] a real foretaste of the final banquet . . . ‘the marriage-feast of the Lamb’ (Rev 19:7-9).”⁵² Benedict concludes this section of *Sacramentum Caritatis* with an exhortation to the faithful to “rediscover . . . the eschatological dimension inherent in the Eucharist.”⁵³

Before presenting Balthasar’s understanding of the connection between the Eucharist and eschatology, it may be helpful to note two difficulties or obstacles that serve to weaken or attenuate this link. The first difficulty stems from a certain understanding of the sacramental economy as essentially instrumental. Abbot Vonier’s influential book *A Key to the Doctrine of the Eucharist* provides an example of this line of thinking. He writes:

There is . . . in the Catholic sacramental system a certain transitoriness which it is very important to remember. Saint Thomas never tires of alluding to the instrumental character of the sacraments. They are the tools of God to bring about definitive results, and when those ends are completely achieved the tools will be laid aside by the divine Artificer. Sacraments belong to the work Christ does here on earth; they are not permanent glories of the everlasting triumph. . . . There will be no Eucharistic sacrifice in heaven.⁵⁴

For Vonier, the Eucharist provides the means to help us attain our end—union with God in the beatific vision. It is a tool that will be laid aside. It follows that for Vonier the Eucharistic mystery does not reveal anything essential about the nature or form of the final fulfillment of the created order in its eschatological union with God.

This leads to the second difficulty, which is closely related to the first. In neo-scholasticism, eschatology was a chapter or part of dogmatic theology (titled *De Novissimis*) that considered the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. It was essentially concerned with the afterlife, or what happens to the soul after death. For the most part, neo-scholastic reflection on the last things turned on differing accounts of how (after death) an individual human soul can attain a vision of the divine essence. There are, of course, good philosophical and biblical grounds for conceiving our final perfection or union with God in terms

⁵⁰ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 18.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 31.

⁵³ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 32.

⁵⁴ Abbot Vonier, *A Key to the Doctrine of the Eucharist* (Bethesda, MD: Zaccheus Press, 2003), 171-73.

of intellectual vision. The limitations or one-sidedness of neo-scholastic eschatology stem from a certain abstractness both on the side of the creature—the subject of the beatific vision is the individual soul who is disembodied and removed from history—and on the side of heaven—the object of vision is the divine essence, as distinct from communion with the trinitarian processions mediated by the humanity of Jesus Christ and the Church.

According to von Balthasar, both of these difficulties or obstacles can be addressed by reflecting more deeply on the figure of Jesus Christ as the *alpha* and the *omega*. Christ is the *autobasileia*, the kingdom of God in Person—“the whole essence of the last things.”⁵⁵ In the event of the Incarnation, existence in history and embodiment are not opposed to the Son’s perfect relation to the Father, but are the very medium which allows the incarnate Son to express both God’s trinitarian love and the perfect human response to this love. At the consummation of the Son’s mission, his resurrected human nature is not abandoned but fully taken into the divine life.

A renewed understanding of the catholicity or universality of Christ’s saving mission provides resources for overcoming the one-sidedness of neo-scholastic eschatology. The mission of the Son, which culminates in the twofold gift of Eucharist and Spirit, provides a pattern for understanding how the material order of creation can be taken into or “included” within the divine life. Already present as mediating and establishing the hypostatic union, at the consummation of the Son’s mission the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father (Jn 14:26) and the Son (Jn 15:26) in order to reveal the full depths of what has been accomplished in Christ. As the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit does not issue a new revelation, but rather makes known the full truth of Christ’s words and deeds (Jn 16:14). Only in the Son’s “return” to the Father through the Cross and Resurrection can his concrete existence be distributed and universalized as Eucharist. While it is necessary that Christ depart in order for the Spirit to be given (Jn 16:7), his departure (through the cross, Resurrection, and Ascension) is not a simple absence but coincides with the gift of the Spirit and the promise of his return in the Eucharist. A text from the essay “Spirit and Institution,” formulates the decisive point:

the eucharistic gesture of Jesus’ self-distribution is a definitive, eschatological and thus irreversible gesture. The Word of God that has become flesh in order to be distributed has been definitively distributed by God and, once given, will never be revoked or retracted. Neither the Resurrection from the dead nor the Ascension into heaven as a “return to the Father” (Jn 16:18) are the counter-movement to the Incarnation, Passion and Eucharist. . . . 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. . . .

⁵⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Some Points of Eschatology,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. I, *The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 260-61.

Consequently, there is no fundamental difference between his heavenly and his eucharistic condition.⁵⁶

The realm of creation is taken into the life and mission of Christ (and thus deified) to the extent that it shares in his mission of mediating the trinitarian love of Father, Son, and Spirit by realizing its original purpose in being created. This is what Balthasar means when he says, at the end of the final volume of the *Theo-Drama*, that “the world acquires an inward share in the divine exchange of life; as a result the world is able to take the divine things it has received from God, together with the gift of being created, and return them to God as a divine gift.”⁵⁷

There are two presuppositions undergirding this image of the world receiving an inward share in the trinitarian life. The first concerns the doctrine of creation as gift noted above. The world was created in, through, and for the Incarnate Son. As Paul teaches, “all things hold together in him” (Col 1:17). The second presupposition concerns the universality or catholicity of the Son’s mission. The mission of the Son is to reconcile the world to God, to return to the Father in communion with all that the Father has made. The question, then, is how is possible? How can the material cosmos be included in the life and mission of the Son?

A partial answer consists in reflecting on the symbolic meaning of bread and wine as well as the crucial difference between transubstantiation and annihilation.⁵⁸ Bread and wine symbolize God’s good creation as received and cultivated by human beings. In the Church’s Liturgy the gifts of creation are acknowledged and offered back to God in gratitude. Through the words of institution and the work of the Holy Spirit, these created gifts are changed into the body and blood of Christ. The bread and wine are not annihilated, but transubstantiated and fulfilled by becoming signs of Christ’s real presence among us. The accidents of bread and wine that remain are not an embarrassment but a sign of Christ’s sacrificed and risen humanity, which is our true food and drink. Christ gives himself to the Father and to us in all that he is and all that he does. In his Eucharist he includes the material order of creation, as well as human work and human celebration, within this exchange of gifts. Nothing of creation is disdained or lost in the ontological conversion in the Church’s Liturgy. The world itself was destined to share in God’s eternal life by mediating the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father.

Tolkien described the Blessed Sacrament as “the one great thing to love on earth.” Christ’s Eucharist is the one thing to love because in loving this Sacrament we are given a share in God’s own Incarnate love. We learn to love what he loves and to love in the way that he loves. At the school of Mary, we learn to say “yes” and “amen”—to receive this gift of Christ’s

⁵⁶ Balthasar, “Spirit and Institution,” 228-29.

⁵⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. V, *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 521.

⁵⁸ The following reflections are indebted to Roch Kereszty’s outstanding book, *Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eucharistic Theology from a Historical, Biblical and Systematic Perspective* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004).

presence in the Blessed Sacrament as invitation to offer our lives and the entire created order back to God in gratitude.