

Gender and Intra-Trinitarian Love in the Theo-drama of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

John C. Médaille

“God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.” (Gen 1:27, NAB)

Feminists and the Feminine

We live at a time when the information given to us “from the beginning” (as it were) that men and women image God is being challenged by a world that seems indifferent or even hostile to previous notions of man and woman, giving rise to the feeling that the Church’s traditional and deeply gendered views are anachronistic and an obstacle to a truly mature faith. Such challenges, raised not only in the spheres of business and politics, but also in the realm of theology by “Feminist” theologians, can by no means simply be ignored or referred naively to past formulations, especially when such formulations often denied the feminine participation in the divine; rather we must with some honesty examine the basis of such challenges; we must “test everything; hold fast to what is good.”

Yet there is a peculiar ambivalence at the heart of feminism to the notion of the feminine itself. On the one hand, some feminists see gender as purely a cultural construct, with no meaning beyond that assigned by the particular time and place and no roots beyond the purely accidental facts of sexual

differentiation. They quite accurately point to the fact that gender is expressed in different ways in different cultures and that such a changeable and slippery notion can hardly be a just basis for the division of humanity.¹ We thus face the conundrum of a “Feminism” that denies the feminine. Other feminists seem to view gender in a Gnostic manner, with an absolute distinction between male and female; so far from denying a separation, they seem to make it an absolute, as in the concept of “Women Church”, thereby wielding a sword to rend humanity.

On the contrary, it seems clear that an authentic feminism must be rooted in the feminine, and that the feminine cannot be rooted in some mythical Gnostic division, but is a term that says something about how people are and how they are in fruitful relationship with each other;

¹ While it is certainly true that gender is a cultural category, this is only trivially true, in the sense that *all* things that humans do are cultural. For example, all cuisine is cultural; we eat *Wienerschnitzel* or *Spaghetti*, *Egg Foo Yong* or *Hamburgers*, all products of specific cultures; everything we put into our mouths is cultural but one could hardly argue that food is therefore a mere cultural construct.

it is therefore rooted in the ontological order. Now to root something in the ontological is ultimately to ascribe it to God, that is, to the Trinity. When we reflect that God is love and the Trinity a series of “processions” of that infinite love, we can perhaps make an intuitive connection with gender. However, by a sort of theological physics, there is also an equal and opposite reaction, by which we recoil at ascribing human characteristics to the Godhead, save by way of analogy, and this is even more risky for human attributes connected with sexuality. Nevertheless, assured by scripture that both male and female image God, and do so, apparently, as men and women in their gendered natures, we can proceed with confidence sufficient to overcome our trepidation, yet always keeping in mind the risks involved. And the proper place to start any search for the nature of the Trinity is precisely where the Trinity is revealed: The New Testament.

Images of God in the New Testament

Father and Son

When we examine the New Testament, we are immediately confronted with terms for God that appear to be exclusively masculine. The “Son of Man” insists that God is “Father”, specifically “his” father. This is the most oft-repeated

teaching of the Gospel. Some 350 – 400 times, God is referred to as “Father” or Jesus is referred to as His Son. Moreover, it seems to be the only way in which Christ does refer to God, save for the references to the Holy Spirit. At first glance, this poses an immediate problem in a search for reflections of the feminine in the Godhead. Two ways of “getting around” this highly gender specific term are frequently offered. The first posits that it is a cultural expression calculated to preserve the sensibilities of Christ’s first century peasant audience and can be dispensed with in any mature and modern consideration of the gospel. The second treats it as a synonym for the more gender inclusive term “parent”.

Of the first method, we can say that it is simply wrong; such a term was not pleasant to Palestinian ears; on the contrary, the term was radical and disturbing to his audience; it was for this that they wished to stone Him! So far from being a part of the culture, the term was unprecedented. The unitarian God of the Old Testament was the “I am” or “The Lord”, he was spirit that was never really an “he” at all. Whatever references there are to “father” are rare and only then by way of simile (“I shall be as a Father to him”). Thus, so far from being a “cultural” expression, it was in fact counter-cultural.

Gender and Intra-Trinitarian Love

in the Theo-Drama of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

Of the second method, we can say that it is merely condescending; it posits that Christ was incapable of saying what he meant. But as this term is repeated in nearly every part of the Gospel and is the exclusive term, it seems unlikely that we can dispose of it so cavalierly. Further, it really doesn't eliminate gender, as parent is an inclusive term which implies gender.

Relational Terms

If we cannot "work around" the masculine terms (either by cultural or semantic means) then we must work through them. If Christ insists on revealing God in gendered terms, then we must take those terms seriously. What immediately comes to mind when we speak of a "father" is offspring; likewise the term son implies another, the father; both terms imply an "other" who exists in relation to the "I". Thus the Trinity is revealed as relational in its very nature; I am a father, but that is something I became in the course of time, but the Father is Father in his very nature; what we become, He is, and is eternally. Likewise the Son is the one who receives his being from the Father. The relational nature of the Spirit may be less obvious, but since in Western theology he proceeds from both Father and Son, and is the Spirit of Love between them, this too is a relational term; it is the "spirit" of a relationship. Thus, in these gendered terms the entire

Trinity revealed as relational. The divine nature is constituted by the giving and receiving of Love, not as something they do but as something they *are*. As G. F. O'Hanlon has put it "... the reality that to be a person in the Trinity is to be a pure relation, to be for another, and , accordingly, that love is at the heart of the Trinitarian *circumincessio*." (O'Hanlon 111)

Intra-Trinitarian Love

The Procession of the Persons and the Super-Genders

In the theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar, not merely the relational character of the Trinity is asserted, but that the specific relationships involved are gendered, by which Von Balthasar means generativity and receptivity, "letting go" and "letting be", giving and receiving, qualities which he identifies with the (super-) masculine and the (super-) feminine. Von Balthasar does not shrink from the analogy with human love; on the contrary he asserts the Trinity as the transcendent origin of what we actually see! As such, he sees it as dynamic, reciprocal and fruitful.

"Finally, the divine unity of action and consent – which, as we have seen, share equal dignity within love – is expressed in the world in the duality of the sexes. In Trinitarian terms, of course, the Father, who begets him who

Gender and Intra-Trinitarian Love

in the Theo-Drama of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

is without origin, appears primarily as (super-) masculine; the Son, in consenting, appears as (super-) feminine, but in the act (together with the Father) of breathing forth the Spirit, he is (super-) masculine. As for the Spirit, he is (super-) feminine. There is even something (super-) feminine about the Father too, since as we have shown, in the action of begetting and breathing forth he allows himself to be determined by the Persons who thus proceed from him; however, this does not affect his primacy in the order of the Trinity. The very fact of the Trinity forbids us to project any secular sexuality into the Godhead (as happens in many religions and in the gnostic *syzygia*). It must be enough for us to regard the ever-new reciprocity of acting and consenting, which in turn is a form of activity and fruitfulness, as the transcendent origin of what we see realized in the world of creation: in the form and actualization of love and its fruitfulness in sexuality.” (Von Balthasar 91)

In presenting this view of the processions, Von Balthasar makes bold use of the analogies of human love. In doing so, he presents us with a series of paradoxes which shed new light on some ancient problems, problems such as generativity, receptivity, death and immutability.

Gender and Intra-Trinitarian Love

in the Theo-Drama of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

In doing so, he is able to enlighten us about the way in which we image God, and image him in the way we are: as gendered persons, as male and female. This represents, to a certain degree a radical departure from the Medieval tradition, which was reluctant to assign the feminine a place within the Godhead, a reluctance which centered around the supposed imperfection implied by receptivity.

Receptivity

We can intuitively grasp the reason for this reluctance since to “receive” means to get something we lack, and a lack implies imperfection – impossible for God! Moreover, “The classical – Aristotelian – philosophical tradition anchors the meaning of the feminine in ‘matter,’ and thus in ‘potency’ rather than ‘act’; and Aquinas follows Aristotle in this.” (Schindler 203) Since potency lacks the perfection of act, the feminine principle is excluded *a priori* from the Godhead. It is certainly true that as *ex nihilo* creations, when we receive being, we receive something we lack. However, Von Balthasar asserts what is intuitively obvious, that “without this receptive letting be and all it involves – gratitude for the gift of oneself and a turning in love toward the Giver – the giving itself is impossible.” (Von Balthasar 86) Thus the receptive principle, far from being an imperfection, is a necessity.

The Son, unlike us, is not an *ex nihilo* creation, but eternally begotten, God from God; thus “The Son even cooperates in his begetting by *letting* himself be begotten, by holding himself in readiness to be begotten.” (Von Balthasar 87) This letting himself be is the Son’s perfect *fiat* to the Father, which anticipates the *fiat* of Mary. Without this receptivity, the “I/Thou” necessary for love would be impossible.

“Part of the divine joy consists precisely in *receiving* the love of another, as well as the different modalities of that love, and this always remains a mysterious occurrence within the intensity of divine eternal life because it involves, beyond knowledge, the creatively free revelation and self-giving of a person. Receptivity, then, is intrinsic to the perfection of the dialogic I/Thou relationship with God.” (O’Hanlon 122)

The divine receptivity is not confined to the Son (and the Spirit), but there is a sense in which the Father is also receptive.

“Precisely in engendering filial activity (see Jn 14:9-11), divine paternal activity entails a receptivity that is inherently generative. For the generative *fiat*, ‘Let there be’ an absolute Thou with whom the Father establishes relationship of mutual love, must itself be receptive to

the distinct self-disposing of this Thou. We might put it this way: the Father’s self-giving as Primal Lover is one with his utterance of the Son as Beloved – an utterance that bespeaks the Father’s absolute openness of the Thou.” (Turek 197)

It should be noted that this “femininity” of the Father is “asymmetric”; the Father remains primarily as Father and primary with the Trinity. Nonetheless, “calling God ‘Father’ does not prevent one from ascribing a genuine analogous sense of ‘femininity’ and ‘maternity’ as Balthasar does” (Kouyoumdjian 3)

The inclusion of receptivity in the Trinity is not without effect on our understanding; indeed it sheds new light on the significance of the intra-Trinitarian relationships. Further, it enlightens not only the Trinity, but our own lives, as it allows us to use concepts and terms that arise from our own experience of ourselves and our relationships. Of course, we must always keep in mind that such terms are used analogously, noting the “*maior disimultudo*”. And one of the major things that it accomplishes is that the Trinity is no longer a static event, but a Divine one; not a remote given, but as an eternal dynamic.

The Divine Event

For Von Balthasar it is vitally important not to treat the Trinity as a static event, but as an “eternal” one. Thus, just as we cannot posit a “before the son” (as in Arianism), neither can we posit an “after.” (O’Hanlon 113) Rather the Trinity exists in constant vitality wherein the Father eternally begets the Son, where together they eternally breath forth the Spirit, and where eternally they live in the constant interchange of love.

This Trinitarian vitality is seen as the link between divine being and creaturely becoming:

“A second conclusion refers to the dynamic relationship between creature and Creator, or the way in which becoming is rooted in absolute *Being*. We cannot avoid using the concept ‘process’, ‘procession’ in the context of the life of the Trinity to denote its constant vitality; this concept is the link between creature and Creator, between being and becoming.” (Von Balthasar 77)

This Trinitarian vitality leads to an even more surprising result; although the Trinity is complete in itself and the fullness of life, it is a superabundant fullness that is “ever-greater.”

“Yet this peace, or rest, is not inert, but ‘eternal movement’,

since the divine processions that give rise to the fellowship of Persons are not subject to temporal limitations but are eternally operative. ‘Eternal’ here also means infinite, which cannot be expressed by an ultimate superlative (like ‘highest good’) but only by a comparative that is open to the ‘ever-greater.’” (Von Balthasar 78)

This is just not an “ever-greater” in relation to man, but even to God himself!

“... yet, though God himself is perfectly ‘light’, he is also ever greater’ even to himself: he is that ‘exuberance’ which is most vividly expressed in personal terms by the Holy Spirit: ‘He is the eternal superabundance, that which is ever more, ever greater – the fountain of life. That is why everything living is three, ... and must be taken up and plunged into the trinitarian life if it is to live.” (Von Balthasar 78)

Divine Surprise

But if God is “ever-greater”, even to himself, then we cannot eliminate the element of divine “surprise” even from a Godhead whose knowledge is complete!

“So we can say that, if human love is enlivened by the element of surprise, something

Gender and Intra-Trinitarian Love

in the Theo-Drama of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

analogous to it cannot be excluded from divine love. It is as if the Son born of the Father 'from the outset surpasses the Father's wildest expectations'. 'God loves despite his omniscience, constantly allowing himself to be surpassed and surprised by the Beloved.' The vitality and freedom of eternal love in the realm of Divine Being constitutes the prototype for what love can be, at its best, in the realm of creaturely existence and development." (Von Balthasar 79-80)

This "ever-greater" element of surprise poses the logical absurdity of "self-transcendence" within the perfection of the Trinity. G. F. O'Hanlon connects this with patristic thought in an image used by Gregory of Nyssa, who "proposes that there is a paradoxical identity of rest and movement in God's eternal life... "

"Gregory uses the image of a spring or fountain. The divine life in Scripture is more than just living water: it is a fountain of living water which, in its constant springing forth, has an appearance of fullness and sameness and yet is always renewing itself from within. The fountain is an image of the paradoxical unity of repose and movement in God; and the onlooker is amazed at its infinite

streaming forth from within so that the whole is never seen and there are always new outpourings in and from the same depths." (O'Hanlon 125)

Super-Death (Kenosis)

But the greatest of the Divine "ever-greater" may be in the notion of death in the Trinity. In receiving himself from the Father, the Son consents to a *kenosis*, a complete self-emptying: the Father "lets the Son go", the Son allows himself to be determined by the Father. In a flash of insight, Von Balthasar identifies this as "the good death":

"This total self-giving, to which and Son and the Spirit respond by an equal self-giving, is a kind of 'death', a first, radical 'kenosis', as one might say. It is a kind of 'super-death' that is a component of all love and that forms the basis in creation for all instances of 'the good death', from self-forgetfulness in favor of the beloved right up to that highest love by which a man 'gives up his life for his friends'" (Von Balthasar 84)

The implies that death, far from being a sad anomaly, pushed to the end of life, becomes, in the context of love, central to both love and life; Von Balthasar quotes Ferdinand Ulrich:

Gender and Intra-Trinitarian Love

in the Theo-Drama of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

“Life is only genuinely alive insofar as it ... grows beyond itself, lets go of itself. It is rich only insofar as it can be poor, insofar as it loves ... Death will not allow itself to be pushed to the very end of life; it belongs right at the center, not in mere knowledge, but in action. Death characterizes our breakthrough into a life that is ever greater. It is through this positive that we amass life.” (Von Balthasar 84)

As in all things having to do with the Trinity, Von Balthasar reconciles the opposites – life and death in this case – by subsuming them into the drama that is love, whether human or divine.

Creation

Creation as the Image of God

The eternal event of the Trinity is not isolated from the temporal event of creation, on the contrary, for God

“in creating the Son, expresses not only himself but also his whole power as Creator (and thus, everything that God can create, ‘so the Father’s love, which goes out toward the Son, is the basis of all the effects of love that God imparts to creatures; so too the Holy Spirit, who is the love of the Father for the Son, is also his love for the creature,

since he imparts perfection to it. (Von Balthasar 63)

Thus in Von Balthasar, we have a God who is not merely “absolutely other”, but also intimately connected to his creation.

“So the procession of love can be regarded in two ways: insofar as it goes out to an eternal Beloved (and thus it is an eternal procession), and insofar as it is love for a created beloved ... , and so it is termed a temporal procession, since, because of the new effect, the creature acquires a new relation to God. It is clear from this that, once we presuppose the creation *processio* within the Godhead and *missio* outside it are one and the same as far as the Divine Persons are concerned... ” (Von Balthasar 63)

Because of this intimate relationship, the world can be nothing other than the image of God:

“With time, even a space and its fulfillment by a multiplicity that is initially material (and whose meaning is ultimately spiritual) acquires its role as an image, which originates in the positivity of otherness in God. Insofar as it is an image of God, the temporal/material becomes something vital and living; insofar as it is an image of the

Gender and Intra-Trinitarian Love

in the Theo-Drama of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

Trinity, it becomes generative and fruitful.” (Von Balthasar 101)

The Role of Christ and of the Church

We have noted that the Second Person of the Trinity is (super-) feminine in respect to the Father. However, in respect of the world he is (super-) masculine in that he represents the Father as origin; it is not his own glory that he reveals, but the glory of the Father. He thus performs the “priestly” role of representing the Father, and does so in the context of the “already ... not yet” of the Kingdom, whereby the Kingdom is “already” established in Christ and in His Church, and “not yet” established in the world or in the Church to the extent that the Church is corrupted by the world.

“The Son of God, already feminine (bearing a ‘receptive womb’) within himself, in turn generates the feminine in the created order, in order to be received in the created order, thus making possible his Incarnation! ... The Son’s mission, ‘already’ perfectly effective within the Son himself, needs ‘yet’ to be made effective in and through the unconditional receptivity of Mary and the Church. The seed of the Father, ‘already’ perfectly received and completely actual in the Son,

needs ‘yet’ to be infallibly received and actualized in the womb of Mary and the Church. (Schindler 215)

This theology repeats the traditional notions of the Church as feminine and Marian. But by grounding it in the intra-personal and gendered relationships of the Trinity, we may perhaps see it with new vitality. The Trinity is the archetype for the Church; the two priesthoods, the ordained and common, reflect the relation of Christ and creation. The Son, representing the Father nevertheless cannot “be” the Father; the personal distinctions of the Trinity are real. In the same way, the priest represents Christ, though he cannot be Christ. Like Christ however the ordained priest is first dependent upon the Marian fiat and received into the Church through baptism, the common priesthood of all believers. This common priesthood is feminine in that it receives the Word from the ordained priest and makes it fruitful in the world.

Creation as Feminine

Insofar as the world images the Trinity, and insofar as the Trinity is identified with gendered processions, the world must share in this. Creation is feminine in that the first thing the world does is receive its being. It is this fact which allows David Schindler to assert:

Gender and Intra-Trinitarian Love

in the Theo-Drama of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

“Thus there is an important sense in which the woman more than the man represents the character of creaturely being and activity in its full purity. It is only through the woman’s (active) receptivity of the seed that new life can begin. Properly speaking, of course, that receptivity is spiritual before it is physical.” (221)

It follows that if creation is primarily feminine, “men too, must both be and become receptive and thus feminine, if they are to realize their own reality as created.” (Schindler 222) While this may strike us as an odd idea, it is perfectly in accord both with Von Balthasar’s analysis and with our own experience as gendered beings, that is, as men and women.

For Von Balthasar the Trinity as we have seen contains both genders and each of the Divine Persons contain both genders asymmetrically; when we image God, this is what we image. In our actual experience, this is what actually happens; although the physical expression of gender, sexual differentiation, is categorical, (we are either male or female), this is not true either psychologically or spiritually, which can be easily seen when we meet persons who attempt to portray themselves as pure type: the macho cowboy or the wilting

maiden. Of such people we usually pose the ontological question “Is he for real?”

What precisely this “feminization” should mean is perhaps the key question, on the level of *practicum*, that faces us in regards to developing a feminism which ministers to what the world currently lacks. I might point out that the whole course of civilization is, to some degree, an attempt to bring out the feminine characteristics of the male of the species, at least long enough for him to be bound to the intrinsically maternal task of raising children. Yet our culture has taken on an ever increasing masculinity. One actual example of this is discussed by Schindler while commenting on Von Balthasar’s *Unless You Become Like This Child*, and concerns the modern notion of knowledge. This notion, derived in part from Bacon and Descartes, connects knowledge with *power*; its hallmarks are *effectivity* in terms of forceful activity, *skepticism* whereby primacy is accorded to doubt, *control* whereby the world (and the people in it) are something to be manipulated, *analysis* whereby everything is broken into ever smaller bits and meaning is essentially bounded, *nominalistic and atomistic*, whereby the relation to the whole is extrinsic, etc.

“In sum, the link of knowledge and power leads to patterns of thought marked by

Gender and Intra-Trinitarian Love

extroversion (turning outward, staying on the surface), power, domination, and fragmentation.” (Schindler 228)

While there are elements of truth in this conception of knowledge, it cannot be a complete picture.

“Assuming that we need both (masculine) distance (externality of relation, transcendence, action, effectivity-doubt) and (feminine) nearness (internality of relation, immanence, contemplation, receptivity-‘faith’) in our conception of knowledge, it makes all the difference which of these features is first (logically). There is in Bacon and Descartes a priority of distance that leads to a logic of power that of its very nature tends toward the exclusion of the receptive and immanent features proper to love, or in any case toward setting these aside as arbitrary or too ‘soft’ (not rational). The results of this logic can be seen in what Balthasar judges to be contemporary culture’s suffocation by technology and cybernetics.” (Schindler 229)

This is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion of the role of the feminine in the world, yet perhaps it can hint at the possibilities and problems in a world that has

taken its masculine nature too much to heart.

Conclusion

We are told from the very beginning that we image God, and do so as men and women. Moreover, the first and primal command from the Most High, the command prior to the 10 commandments, prior to The Law, prior to the Sermon on the Mount, is the command to intimacy and fruitfulness. Yet, we live in a world in the process of reducing the personal, gendered roles of “man” and “women” to the androgynous and impersonal roles of producer and consumer. Sex and sexuality have become commodities and marketing tools, mere products in a world of products. Such a view is inherently distant, rational, and masculine and its burdens fall most heavily on women. Indeed, the purely female role becomes increasingly suspect and even when a woman chooses it, she must often do so *in addition* to her “masculine” tasks, with motherhood no longer a role, but another “consumer choice.” In such a world, the Catholic Church has a special responsibility to proclaim the true nature of man and women, a nature firmly rooted in the Trinitarian exchange of love. In this sense, feminism is not really “optional” for the Church, but intrinsic to her mission of ministering to the world as She finds the world.

Gender and Intra-Trinitarian Love

in the Theo-Drama of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

But in order to accomplish this mission, the Church herself must recover a real sense of the feminine. Marian in herself, the Church presents us a rich tableau of gendered images, and in the middle of our sacred literature there is an erotic marriage poem. But despite this, our own theology has perhaps become “masculine”, in the sense of being dependent upon the purely analytic and therefore somewhat static. In the words of G. F. O’Hanlon:

“The language of ‘processions’ and ‘love’ is full of movement and life, but Balthasar clearly believes that these inherently dynamic elements have not been exploited sufficiently by the tradition itself, with the result that the Trinity has appeared as a rather abstract, undramatic, fixed order of relations... ” (O’Hanlon 111)

Von Balthasar’s Theo-Drama recaptures the interplay of a dynamic Godhead. The origin of this dynamic view of the Trinity is the inclusion of the receptive, super-feminine principle. And we may ask, at this point, that if we can recover the dynamic of the Trinity by including, as it were, a feminism, can we not also recover the true dynamics of society, politics, economics and family life by the re-birth of an authentic social feminism, a feminism rooted not in a denial but

in an affirmation, at the highest levels, of the feminine.

Gender and Intra-Trinitarian Love

in the Theo-Drama of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

Bibliography

Primary Text

Von Balthasar, Hans Urs, "The World is From God", *Theo-Drama, Vol. V; The Last Act*, (Ignatius Press, 1998), pp. 61-110.

Secondary Sources

Kouyoumdjian, Michael, unpublished letter to the author.

O'Hanlon, G. F., *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, (Cambridge University Press, 1990)

Schindler, David L., "Catholic Theology and Gender, and the Future of Western Civilization", *Communio* 20, (Summer, 1993)

Turek, Margaret, *Toward a Theology of God the Father: Hans Urs Von Balthasar's Theodramtic Approach*, unpublished doctoral thesis.