

The Daring Hope of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

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Justice and Joseph Mengele

Of the many horrors unleashed by the Nazi terror, one stands out in the person of Joseph Mengele, the "Angel of Death" of Auschwitz. Acting, no doubt, from a sadism thinly disguised as scientific experimentation, he engaged in tortures which defy description, especially against women and children. While I make no judgment on the fate of Dr. Mengele, it is obvious that any consideration of "universal salvation" must extend even to him. And when we consider him, we must also consider how justice can be satisfied by having the torturer sit down, at the Lord's table, with his victims. Would not such a feast be, for the victims, a second hell? Could they remain blissful, seeing their tormenter in bliss? It is clear that any discussion of love, even Infinite Love itself, must also involve a discussion of justice. But who can dare hope that justice will be satisfied by such a scene?

Yet that is precisely the hope that Hans Urs Von Balthasar dares. Is it too bold? Does it go too far, so far as to destroy not only justice, but love itself? Von Balthasar would exhort us to live in hope that all men are saved, even Judas. Even the Angel of Death from Auschwitz. Can such a hope be maintained without destroying justice (and with it love)? Does Von Balthasar's bold hope amount to "compassion to a fault" as Fr. Regis Scanlon would have us believe?

The Daring Hope of Von Balthasar

In the March edition of the *New Oxford Review* ("The Inflated

Reputation of Hans Urs Von Balthasar"), Fr. Scanlon finds that "A hope like this really seems to be a *doubt* that the natural law and 'unchangeable truth' exist and could be known by the Church." Fr. Scanlon rightly points out that a "hope which contradicts Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church would be an absurd hope." Moreover, if even one person could be shown to be in hell, then a universal hope must universally collapse. Fr. Scanlon believes that we can indeed identify at least one resident of hell, namely the traitor Judas. Scanlon's reading of John 17:12, which follows the interpretation of St. Augustine, reads the verse as indicating that Judas is "foreordained to perdition". There is little doubt that this reading is well supported by a certain interpretive tradition cited in the article.

However, the question remains whether this is the *only* possible orthodox reading. It is only necessary here to cite another hopeful book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* by His Holiness John Paul II:

The silence of the Church [on the subject of universal salvation] is, therefore, the only appropriate position for Christian faith. Even when Jesus says of Judas, the traitor, "it would be better for that man if he had never been born" (Mt 26:24), his words do not allude for certain to eternal damnation. (186)

Indeed there is a tremendous problem with reading the scripture to "foreordain" Judas to hell, for that would be a clear example of double

predestination. It seems that to avoid the "heresy" of Von Balthasar, Fr. Scanlon has wandered into Calvinism.

Fr. Scanlon also finds that:

Even though the Magisterium has not yet condemned Judas *by name* or the mere 'hope' for universal salvation, the Church is not in doubt about this matter. Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium certify that Judas and others have perished.

One can only wonder that despite its failure to condemn the "mere hope" or to place Judas (or anyone else) in hell, Fr. Scanlon can determine that the question is firmly settled for the Church. But the fact is that Von Balthasar is not as isolated from Catholic Tradition as the article would have us believe. Indeed, there is a long tradition of "universal hope" (or even outright *apocotastasis*) within the Church. As Prof. Margaret Turek points out:

Among those theologians and philosophers whose work supports the possibility of universal salvation can be counted Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzen, Theodore of Mosuestia, Evagrius Ponticus, (on occasion) Jerome of Bethlehem, Maximus the Confessor, Henri Cardinal de Lubac, Jean Cardinal Daniélou, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Walter Kaspar, Romano Guardini, Karl Rahner, Gisbert Greshake, Medhard Kehl, Herman-Josef Lauter, (St.) Edith Stein, Erich Przywara, and Gabriel Marcel.¹

¹ Margaret M. Turek, "Dare We Hope 'That All Men Be Saved' (1 Tim 2:4)?: On von Balthasar's Trinitarian

Other names could be added to this list. Julian of Norwich records that God told her concerning this matter that "all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." And St. Thérèse writes:

After this comes the voice of the Child: "I will listen to your request: every soul will find forgiveness. ... Beautiful Angel [the Angel of Vengeance], lower your sword. It is not for you to judge the nature that I desired to set in being and to redeem. I myself am the Judge of the world and my name is Jesus." (cited in DWH 104-105)

If Tradition is not as univocal as Fr. Scanlon would have us believe, neither is the Magisterium. For we read in the *The Church's Confession of Faith*:

In the natural order, *God's salvific will in Jesus Christ has effect from the very beginning*. God's willing is always effective; it accomplishes what it wills. For that reason, the universal salvific will of God takes its effect in a universal yearning for salvation and in a universal hope for salvation. (CCF, 116)

And from the Universal Catechism we read "In hope, the Church prays for 'all men to be saved' (1 Tim 2:4)" 1821

The Church prays that no one should be lost: "Lord, let me never be parted from you." If it is true that no one can save himself, it is also true that God "desires all men to be saved" (1 Tim 2:4), and that for him all things are possible (Mt 19:26). 1058

Grounds for Christian Hope", *Logos* 1:3 1997

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must consult the prayer of the Church, for it is axiomatic that the Church believes as she prays. Throughout the liturgy, we find prayers for the salvation of all men. We find that the Church does indeed obey the Scriptures which command her to make "supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings ... for all men" (1 Tim 2:1) The Eucharist is obviously offered (as was the sacrifice it re-enacts) "for all men." The Third Eucharistic Prayer asks "Lord, may this sacrifice that has made our peace with you, advance the peace and salvation of all the world." Or the 22nd Collect, "Let the whole of forlorn mankind find its way to you." Examples of this kind could easily be multiplied in examining the liturgy of the Church. Would such prayers make sense if there were not at least the "mere hope" for all men? Or should, perhaps, these prayers be recited with a "mental reservation" so that they read "we pray for all [good] men"?

Two strains in the New Testament

The above survey, though brief indeed, should still be sufficient to show that Von Balthasar does not stand isolated from the Tradition, in opposition to the Magisterium, or apart from the prayer of the Church. But that is hardly enough to justify a universal hope. To see the matter more clearly, we must look at the Scriptures, particularly the New Testament. There we find two distinct series of statements about the fate of man. The first series speaks of being lost for all eternity; the second, of God's will and ability to save all men. Among the first series, we have Jesus' portrayal of the last judgement in Matthew 25. Here the decision is placed before men unequivocally as one with an

"either-or" outcome, with the "or" being both grim and "everlasting". In this passage, eternal life and eternal punishment are presented as the only two possible outcomes.

Nor is this the only passage that threatens eternal damnation.² It is clear that Christ himself, the Just Judge, places man under judgement, a judgement that is both serious and irrevocable. However, that is not the only statement that the New Testament makes, for there is a second series which allude to a universalist outcome of salvation history. Among these are Titus 2:11, "For the grace of God has appeared, saving all"; 2 Pt 3:9, "The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard "delay," but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"; Rom 11:32, "For God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all"; and especially Jn 12:31-32, "Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself".³

² See also the parables of Jesus in Mt 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50; 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Lk 16:19-31; in regard to the preaching of Jesus which refers to eternal punishment Mt 5:22, 29-30; 8:12; 10:28; 13:42, 50; 18:8-9; 23:33; 25:30,41,46; Mk 16:16. Among the Johannine writings see Jn 5:29; 12:48; and Rev 19:20-21; 20:7-9; 21:8. Among the Epistles Rom 2:2-11; 1 Cor 6:9-10, 2 Cor 5:10, Gal5:20-21; Eph 5:5; 2 Thess 1:8-9; Heb 6:4-9; 10:26-32.

³ See also 1Tim 2:4f; 4:10; Rom 5:12-21; 11:26,32; 1 Cor 3:11-15; 15:22-28; 2 Cor 5:14, 19; Eph 1:10; Phil 2:10f;

Several "methods" could be proposed for harmonizing these statements by multiplying distinctions between God's absolute will and his "conditional will", or between objective redemption through Christ and its subjective acceptance by man. Fr. Scanlon apparently favors the former approach, treating the "universalist" statements as "statements of desire," presumably a hopeless and unattainable desire on God's part. But either method leads to difficulties; the former posits "two wills" in God; the later, an unattainable will in God. The former method seems to duplicate Luther's doctrine of a double will in God. In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther finds, when dealing with the text in Ezekiel that "God wills not the death of a sinner, but rather that he be converted and live," that the mystery of God contains two wills:

But God hidden in his majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, death, and all in all. For there he has not bound himself by his word, but has kept himself free over all things. ... *Thus he does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his.* (emphasis added)⁴

Of course, it is easy to find flaws in a double will that pits God's word against

God's will, inscrutable or otherwise, but it is fair to ask whether the every notion of "double will" will not have similar problems. For it certainly seems no more possible, at first glance, that God's will could be contingent any more than His love could be contingent. Although this approach has been enshrined in theology, one wonders how necessary it really is. For the reality of hell (and it certainly *is* a reality) must depend on the free refusal of man rather than the will of God; a "space" can be found for hell not within the will of God, but only within the will of man and of the demonic forces.

The problem with the second method, limiting the objective will of God by the subjective will of man, is just as great, for it seems merely to replace an "inscrutable" will with an ineffectual one. This will not do. For one thing, it places an enormous limit on the infinite freedom of God. For another, it poses enormous problems for the theology of Grace. As von Balthasar puts the problem:

Can human defiance really resist to the end the representative assumption of its sins by the incarnate God? If one replies to this confidently and flatly: "Yes, man can do that" and thereby fills hell with naysayers, then the theologians will again have to set up strange distinctions within God's will for grace: there is, then, a "sufficient grace" (*gratia sufficiens*), characterized as something that, from God's viewpoint, would have to be sufficient for converting the sinner yet is rejected by the sinner in such a way that it is actually *not* sufficient for achieving its purpose; and an "efficacious grace" (*gratia efficax*), which is capable of

Col 1:20; Heb 9:27f; Mt 18:14; Jn 3:16; 5:24; 6:37; 12:31-32; 16:33; 17:2; Rev 21:1-2.

⁴ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* in "Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation," E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, editors, pg.

attaining its goal. On the other hand, we will not be allowed to say that this latter simply takes the sinner's will by surprise, since his assent has to be freely given. Into what sort of darkness are we straying here? (DWH 208)

The Limits of Theological Speculation

It seems at this point that we are confronted with an impossible task: to "reconcile" two seemingly contradictory series of statements about the fate of men. *Both* series must be maintained with their full force and vitality; this means that we must not simply subsume one series of statements under the other so as to deprive it of any force. Indeed the Church has magisterially condemned any such attempts when she condemns both "apocatastasis" (universal salvation) *and* double predestination; She condemns both the doctrine that "all are necessarily saved" or that any are "necessarily damned". Behind both of these stances lurks the error of presumption, namely, that we presume to know the outcome of God's judgement either in any particular case or even merely in general. Between these two poles, it is necessary to form a theology that maintains the full force of *both* series without anticipating the judgement of Christ.

It is clear that these series are mutually exclusive; at the end of time, it will be shown that either *all* are saved, or that *at least one* is damned. Margaret Turek frames the problem thus:

Nevertheless, in order to uphold the situation of humankind under judgement as proclaimed by scripture, the divine economy must be understood in such a way that

both outcomes can be affirmed as *real possibilities*. In short: although the results are mutually exclusive, the possibilities are not.⁵

But it is fair to ask, what is the advantage of maintaining the "possibilities" when only one outcome is possible? Further, is there not a grave danger in maintaining a universalist possibility that we risk giving free reign to a naïve optimism about our own salvation? Might not a Mengele feel that his actions do not matter except insofar as they fulfill his own desires? Might not I let things slip in hope that the end is secure? But of course, since the Scripture gives us both possibilities, it is not possible for us, either on a pastoral or theological level, to ignore one series in favor of the other. Rather, both series must be seen in relation to each other, and as *reinforcing* the other.

With that task in mind, let us return to Mathew 25, the parable of the last judgement, a judgement that places "the nations" either on the right or left of God, according to their deeds. This certainly can be treated, and usually is, as an anticipatory report of the last judgement. But the overriding effect, it seems to me, is to direct our attention to the present moment, the moment in which we have time and scope to fulfill the Gospel morality. And what is this morality? It is nothing less than the revelation of the solidarity of Christ with "the least of his brethren." Only in the here and now can we actualize this gospel, and only by treating the least among us as if he or she were Christ himself. This is the message of the last judgement, even though the judgement takes place, as it were, every day. The

⁵ Margaret M. Turek, pg 99

consequences of failing to live the gospel are terrible and irrevocable; were they not, human freedom would lack all seriousness. Our reading must not close off the possibilities of an irrevocable choice; but precisely for that reason, it must bring us to the present moment and to the present needs of those around us. Thus, the passage is not merely a threat, but a summons to live the gospel in love.

At the same time, we cannot presume to say with certainty that any will actually end up on the left hand of God. Such a certainty would bring us into conflict with the Church's prayer (and hence her hope) for "all men to be saved"; it would commit the error of presumption, which the Church eschews when she condemns the "certainties" of universalism or double predestination. The problems with either presumption is made clear by Joseph Pieper:

"There are two kinds of hopelessness. One is despair; the other, *praesumptio*. *Praesumptio* is usually translated as presumption, although translation as anticipation not only is more literal but also catches the sense quite precisely. *Praesumptio* is a perverse anticipation of the fulfillment of hope. Despair is also an anticipation---a perverse anticipation of the nonfulfillment of hope: 'to despair is to descend into hell' (*Isidore of Seville*)" (DWH 28)

Dare we not hope that all will be saved?

It should be clear that the hope for all men cannot be improper since it is the prayer of the Church. Moreover, since it can be shown from Scripture, with any degree of clarity one may desire, that the salvation of all is the will of God, then

such a hope cannot be unorthodox, unless one is willing to declare the will of God unorthodox (and it matters not whether you call this his "absolute" or his "conditional" will). And if such a hope is permissible, are there sufficient grounds for refusing such hope? In other words, dare we *not* hope that all will be saved?

Two grounds can be offered for such a hopelessness: that the Church's prayer arises from ignorance and that the will of God is, in this instance, contingent. The first objection is given in a rather remarkable passage from St. Augustine:

Now, to be sure, the Church prays for those who are her enemies because they still have time for fruitful repentance. If, of course, she knew with full certainty that some of those who are still living were predestined to go into the eternal fire with the devil, she would pray as little for them as for him. (*De Civitate Dei*, XXI, cited in DWH 67-68)

Thus the Church's prayer is not a matter of hope, but of ignorance; better knowledge will lead to more limited prayer. But such a refusal of hope must also amount to a refusal of love, since "the separation of faith, hope and love is at best artificial and accidental." (DWH 82) It is but a short distance from refusing this hope (love) to one and a doctrine of double predestination, a doctrine that makes *all* prayer superfluous. The danger of presumption here becomes crystal clear.

Yet the prayer for "all" cannot merely be a matter of ignorance. St. Thomas points to the connection between our prayers for all and God's love for all. Discussing the *Our Father*, he says, "God's love is not restricted to

any individual, but embraces all in common." Hence,

Consequently, in Cyprian's words, "our prayer is public and is offered for all; and when we pray, we do not pray for one person alone, but for the whole people, because we are all together one people." Or, as Chrysostom says, "Necessity forces us to pray for ourselves, but fraternal charity impels us to pray for others." This is why we say, "our Father," and not simply "my Father."⁶

If treating common prayer as a matter of ignorance leads to dangers, no less so is the matter of making God's will contingent. For as Isaiah 46:10 says, "My counsel shall stand, and all my will shall be done." And again in Romans 9:19 "for who can oppose his will?" While it is certainly true that man has true freedom and that God takes this freedom quite seriously, nonetheless there always remains an asymmetry between the infinite freedom of God and the finite freedom of man. We are herein faced with a mystery that has no simple resolution. As von Balthasar points out:

...there must be an interplay, in the liberation of man, between the *gratia sola*, on the one hand, and man's creaturely freedom, on the other --- a freedom that has *not* been eradicated by sin.

God cannot function here as mere Spectator, allegedly immutable and

not susceptible to influence; ...Nor, on the other hand, can man, guilty as he is in God's sight, lie passive and anaesthetized on the operating table while the cancer of his sin is cut out. (*Theo-Drama IV*, 318)

It is beyond the scope of this article to detail von Balthasar's Trinitarian explication of this problem. Suffice to say here that a "solution" which denies the hope of universal salvation can only do so by making the prayer of the Church ineffectual, and either by making the will of God contingent, or by extending that will to include the damnation of at least some; in other words, to subscribe to a doctrine of double predestination. The dangers of a universalist *doctrine* were recognized from the beginning; St. Maximus taught it only to his most spiritually mature disciples. Yet there seems to be equal or even greater dangers in denying a universalist *hope*.

This much at least can be said. God places man under judgement on account of his sins, a judgement that has the potential to be terrible and irrevocable; yet he does not will that any of us should fail, but rather sends his own Son to be judged in our place and bear the burden of sin. He pursues us, like Frances Thompson's "Hound of Heaven"; or rather, he pursues us as a Lover his beloved; no matter how much disdain the beloved displays, the Great Lover will not be deterred; he will not overwhelm the will of the beloved, but neither will He be denied. How this will turn out in any individual case, we cannot say. But we can hope, and perhaps *must* hope, that in the end the "Theo-drama" is a romance, and that like all good romances, it has a happy ending.

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Light of Faith (The Compendium of Theology)*, Sophia Institute Press, pg 341.

What then are we to do with the judgement of God? If hope, as deriving from love, extends to all, we must at the same time apply this notion of judgement to ourselves. Soren Kierkegaard catches the thing precisely when he says,

I have never been so far in my life, and am never like to get farther than to the point of "fear and trembling", where if find it literally quite certain that every other person will easily be blessed--only I will not. To say to the others: you are eternally lost--that I cannot do. For me, the situation remains constantly this: all the others will be blessed, that is certain enough--only with me may there be difficulties.

Further, we can note that if the eschatological vision of Matthew 25 directs our attention to the present moment with a call to live the gospel, it does the same with our vision of hell. For hell may indeed be the ultimate reality for at least some men; but it is undeniably a *present* reality for all men. Ratzinger joins von Balthasar in drawing this to our attention, as he writes:

For the saints, "Hell" is not so much a threat to be hurled at other people but a challenge to oneself. It is a challenge to suffer in the dark night of faith, to experience communion with Christ in solidarity with his descent into the Night. ...Hell is so real that it reaches right into the existence of the saints. Hope can take it on, only if one shares in the suffering of Hell's night by the side of the one who came to transform our night by his suffering. Here hope does not emerge from the neutral logic of a system. ...It must

place its petition into the hands of its Lord and leave it there.

Mengele and the Children

But now we must come back to where we started, for if we find that "every other person will be blessed," then we must include Joseph Mengele; we must envision the impossible: a joyful feast of love and forgiveness. Now, is there really any way to imagine that the torturer will sit down in love and forgiveness with his victims? Does not such a vision deprive us even of the consolation of ultimate justice when faced with the horror of sin? I, who bear grudges for the slightest offense, cannot imagine such a feast. But neither do I imagine that such a feast is unimaginable. This I know: were it to take place, it would constitute the greatest miracle of forgiveness aside from the miracle of the Cross itself. And since it is a miracle (as opposed to a mere contradiction), I must believe that it is possible, for all things are possible with God.