

The Trinity as the Pattern of the World in the Theo-Drama

John C. Médaille

"[B]eing totally dependent on divine freedom, the world can receive its possibility and reality nowhere else but the eternal Son, who eternally owes his divine being to the Father's generosity. If the Son is the Father's eternal word, the world in its totality is created by this Word (Jn 1:3), not only instrumentally but in the sense that the Word is the world's pattern and goal"

Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Why a Theo-drama?

Before tackling the Trinity in the Theo-drama, we must first ask "why a theo-drama?" After all, we generally expect, on opening a theological treatise, to encounter the language of philosophy, the terms of logic and dialectic. This is so true that we even, unconsciously perhaps, regard theology as the mere specialization within philosophy that it too often appears to be. What we do not expect is the language of action, plot, character and dialog around which any drama, theological or otherwise, is built. And yet it is fair to ask whether theology need be confined to the language of philosophy. After all, whether we are dealing with God through the revelation of the natural world, or through the special revelation of the scriptures, it is not the language of philosophy that confronts us; nature speaks her own language, an organic language quite apart from philosophy or even science, while revelation speaks to us through history, poetry, prophecy and precept, and reaches its apex in the personal history of a particular man, the Son of Man. Theology certainly cannot ignore the language of philosophy, but it is fair to ask if it must accept philosophy as the normative or final interpretation of God's self-revelation, that is, to ask whether God, ultimately, can be grasped within the confines of logical systems,

systems that often tend to render him remote and abstract.

Or one may attempt to break out of such remote notions of God to envision Him as a dialectical partner of creation in general and man in particular; to see him no longer as immutable and impassible, but as changeable and growing along with creation. In such a system, the great God "I am who am" becomes the questing God "who am I?", a god who has gone out to look for himself and finds the record of his self-discovery written in the pages of human history. But if this dynamic God of "becoming" offends our sense of God's infinite being, it must be admitted that such a God, continually interacting with his creation, is at least more in tune with the biblical data, data which clearly proclaims a compassionate God. Moreover, if take seriously the notions of God as a community of persons, living its own life of that conversation which is prayer, communing with man in those conversations known as history, nature, and grace, then we must also admit that, as with any real conversation, there is the element of the unpredictable, the element that escapes logical analysis. Thus, God, as we actually encounter Him, emerges as neither purely logical nor purely dialectical, but as dia-logical, and dialog is the language of the drama. Of course, no one would deny the drama that is man's life and human history, but von Balthasar's

insight is that a similar dynamism cannot be denied to the Trinity in itself. Thus the same techniques that we use to analyze human and historical action can be applied, at least analogously, to the Trinity itself, and it is therefore our business, as theologians, to take into account not only the language of the sciences, but of the arts as well. Thus we can say that in the business of revealing the Trinity, be it the Trinity immanent or Trinity *ad extra*, that theologically speaking, Ethel Merman was right: "there's no business like show business."

However one should not get the idea that von Balthasar is setting up a "system" in opposition to either logic or dialectics; at each and every point the theo-drama presumes the theo-logic. Further, von Balthasar maintains the time-honored formulations of theology and philosophy, while also taking seriously the challenges posed by the dialectics and dynamism of Hegel. With only a small exaggeration, we may say that his writing reflects the dynamism of Georg Hegel as re-written by Thomas Aquinas. It is precisely in meeting the requirements both of the Church's intellectual tradition and of the modern challenges that makes von Balthasar so important for theology today. At the core of von Balthasar's theo-drama is the recognition of the dramatic aspect of the immanent Trinity, a "primal drama" that begins and is sustained by the Father's total self-giving in the begetting of the Son, and the Son's eternal thanksgiving (eucharist) to the Father, united in the "We" that is the "I" of the Holy Spirit.¹ Thus it is unnecessary to go outside the

immanent Trinity, as Hegel did, to find the dynamism revealed in Scripture.

It is pointless to call this primal drama, which is above all time, "static", "abstract", "self-enclosed". Those who do so imagine that the divine drama only acquires its dynamism and its many hues by going through a created, temporal world and only acquires its seriousness and depth by going through sin, the Cross and hell. This view betrays a hubris, an exaggerated self-importance that man's ability to say No to God actually limits the divine omnipotence.²

"On the contrary, it is the drama of the 'emptying' of the Father's heart, in the generation of the Son, that contains and surpasses all possible drama between God and a world."³ In order to grasp this divine drama, it is necessary to approach the mystery from two sides: from the standpoint of negative theology, which excludes any notion that God *has* to be involved in the world process, and from the standpoint of that same world drama itself, a drama whose possibilities are grounded in God.⁴ Key to understanding von Balthasar's view of this divine drama is his view of the Trinity as "eternal event."

The Eternal Event

The Church has long since disposed of arguments that placed an implicit "before" in the Trinity, as for example Arianism. Yet, do we not

¹ TD II 256.

² TD IV 326

³ TD IV 327

⁴ TD IV 327.

implicitly place an "after" in the processions? We tend to think, "Christ *was* begotten, the Spirit *was* breathed forth". Although no *formal* declaration would have it thus, nonetheless, it requires a certain effort to remember that in God there is *neither* before *nor* after; we deal with what is, from our temporal point of view, an already completed fact. But from the standpoint of God, this cannot be so; for God is constituted by total and *continuous* self-giving.

[The Father] *is always* himself by giving himself. The Son, too, is always himself by allowing himself to be generated and by allowing the Father to do with him as he pleases. The Spirit is always himself by understanding his "I" as the "We" of Father and Son, by being "expropriated" for the sake of what is most proper to them. (Without grasping this, there is no escape from the machinery of the Hegelian dialectic.)⁵

Even the term "always" is inadequate here, since it remains a temporal term. Nonetheless, this "always" implies vitality and liveliness; without it, we are back to a static Trinity, one that either contains an implicit "after", or else one that is frozen in eternity and immobile; it becomes a *nunc stans* where nothing can happen, certainly nothing as remarkable as, say, creation.

Von Balthasar's understanding of the trinitarian processions allows them to contain, in some fashion, *all* of what we see in the created world; even "godlessness" is (as we shall see) not foreign to

God. As G. F. O'Hanlon summarizes the position:

The trinitarian processions are understood already to involve in God an interaction of an inter-personal and dramatic nature, the different modalities of which are then expressed in the economy of salvation, and in particular in that most extreme moment of the cross where Father and Son are distinct to the point of apparent separation. Does this 'theodramatic' notion of the trinitarian processions imply a downgrading or indeed elimination of the divine unity?⁶

O'Hanlon has placed his finger on both the power and the problem of the theo-drama: how can we posit a unity in the dramatic interactions of the Divine Persons alongside total, even infinite distinctions? For the moment, we will delay the question of the unity of God in order to more fully examine the dramatic distinctions.

A "vital" notion of the Trinity leads von Balthasar to a surprising result: although the Trinity is complete in itself and the fullness of life, it is, for that very reason, a superabundant fullness that is "ever-greater."

...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

⁵ TD II 256.

⁶ O'Hanlon, G. F., *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, (Cambridge University Press, 1990) 116.

is three, ... and must be taken up and plunged into the trinitarian life if it is to live.⁷

St. Anselm, at the beginning of the Scholastic period, had already determined that God should be spoken of not in the superlative, but in the comparative degree; not as the "greatest" but as the "ever-greater." But of course, Anselm was referring to man's knowledge of God; von Balthasar extends this remarkable notion to the super-abundance of the Godhead itself. Obviously, we have traveled a long way from a static formulation of God into a super-abundant one. It is within this super-abundance that von Balthasar that will locate the links between God and creation, being and becoming, time and eternity even the infinite separation of godlessness and sin. But before we can examine these links, it is necessary to examine in further detail the outlines of this eternal event, an event that is given form in kenosis, receptivity, and infinite freedom.

Kenosis (Super-death)

In begetting the Son, the Father surrenders all that he is, but the Father must not be thought to exist prior to this self-surrender; he *is* the self-surrender that is total. In emptying himself into the Son, the Father gives, not all that he has, but all that he *is*, for in God there is no "having", only "being."⁸

... he *is* this movement of self-giving that holds nothing back. This divine act that brings forth the Son, that is, the second way of participating in

(and of *being*) the identical Godhead, involves the positing of an absolute, infinite "distance" that can contain and embrace all the other distances that are possible with the world of finitude, including the distance of sin. Inherent in the Father's love is an absolute renunciation; he will not be God for himself alone. He lets go of his divinity and, in this sense, manifests a (divine) God-lessness (of love, of course). The latter must not be confused with the godlessness that is found within the world, although it undergirds it, renders it possible and goes beyond it.⁹

Here we are shown some remarkable ideas, not the least of which is finding a place with the Godhead for the infinite distance of sin and godlessness, a distance that lays the groundwork for von Balthasar's soteriology.

It should also be pointed out that this infinite distance, large enough to contain even man's sins, is also a requirement of love, because the most intimate interpenetration between the persons requires the maximum separation;¹⁰ there could be no love if there were not also distinction between the persons, and infinite love will require infinite distance. Nor does this self-emptying exist on the part of the Father alone.

The Son's answer to the gift of Godhead (of equal substance with the Father) can only be eternal thanksgiving (*eucharista*) to the

⁷ TD V 78.

⁸ TD V 84.

⁹ TD IV 323-24.

¹⁰ TD II 258.

Father, the Source---a thanksgiving as selfless and unreserved as the Father's original self-surrender. Proceeding from them both, as their subsistent "We", there breathe the "Spirit" who is common to both: as the essence of love, he maintains the infinite difference between them, seals it and, since he is the one Spirit of them both, bridges it.¹¹

Here we see the core of von Balthasar's view of the Trinity: not a static relationship but a constant movement, *circumincessio*, of total giving and eternal eucharist; central to this vision is *kenosis*, "the good death", the death not at the end of life, but at its very core:

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."¹²

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:

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

¹¹ TD IV 324.

¹² TD V 84.

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.¹³

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. This original kenosis, this super-death, is the "primal drama" against which the drama of the world is played out.

It is irrelevant to suggest that the Father's generation of the Son involves no risk and is therefore "undramatic"; a world that is full of risks can only be created within the Son's *processio* (prolonged as *missio*); this shows that every "risk" on God's part is undergirded by, and enabled by, the power-less power of the divine self-giving.¹⁴

For von Balthasar this kenosis is the key to the divine being; God cannot be God in any other way save in this kenosis within the Godhead.¹⁵ At the same time, the "Son, for his part, cannot *be* and *possess* the absolute nature of God except in the mode of receptivity."¹⁶

Receptivity

Positing receptivity within the Godhead represents, to a certain degree, a radical departure from the Medieval tradition, which was reluctant to assign

¹³ TD V 84.

¹⁴ TD IV 327.

¹⁵ TD IV 325.

¹⁶ TD IV 326.

receptivity (always identified with the feminine) a place within the Godhead, a reluctance which centered around the supposed imperfection implied by 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."¹⁷ Since potency lacks the perfection of act, the (receptive) 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."¹⁸ 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."¹⁹ This may strike one as somewhat confusing, since it seems to posit a quality of the Son "before" he is begotten, but since there is neither "before" nor "after" in God, it is quite proper to put it this way. Von Balthasar quotes St. Bonaventure to say

that "there is a passive generative potentiality in the Son predisposing him to be begotten."²⁰ From this, it is clear that there are both active and passive *actio* within the Trinity; a "letting be" which is a precondition for the "letting go."²¹ Without this passive *actio*, the active *actio* is impossible.²²

This letting himself be is the Son's perfect *fiat* to the Father, which anticipates the *fiat* of Mary which is the model for the *fiat* of the Church and of each Christian; our own "yes", our own obedience and receptivity therefore has a trinitarian prototype. Without this receptivity, the "I/Thou" necessary for love would be impossible. As G. F. O'Hanlon puts it:

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.²³

The divine receptivity is not confined to the Son (and the Spirit), but there is a sense in which the Father is also receptive, as Margaret Turek notes:

Precisely in engendering filial activity (see Jn 14:9-11), divine paternal activity entails a receptivity that is

¹⁷ Schindler, David L., "Catholic Theology and Gender, and the Future of Western Civilization", *Communio* 20, (Summer, 1993) 203.

¹⁸ TD V 86.

¹⁹ TD V 87.

²⁰ TD V 85.

²¹ TD V 86.

²² TD V 86.

²³ O'Hanlon, 122.

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.²⁴

Thus, there is a reciprocal receptivity in the divine Persons which is primary in the Son but not absent in the Father; the Father in "letting the Son go" receives Himself back from the Son in the form of the Son's eternal Eucharist to the Father. In this way, the Father is "determined" by the Son's response in Love.

Once we have admitted the receptive principle in the Godhead, we can establish the within the Trinity the basis for the duality of the sexes and the fruitfulness of human love. Of course, we cannot project any secular sexuality onto the Godhead, however we may "regard the ever-new reciprocity of acting and consenting ... as the transcendent origin of what we see realized in the world of creation: the form and actualization of love and its fruitfulness in sexuality."²⁵ Von Balthasar identifies this origin with the "super-genders" within the Trinity:

In Trinitarian terms, of course, the Father, who begets him who 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...²⁶

At this point, we can see a differentiation based not only on the relations of origin but on the relations of (super-) gender which arise from them. As an aside, it should be noted that such a "gendered" view of the Godhead is in accord with the Biblical data that man and woman image God, and forms the basis for a possible "feminist" theology, one that affirms, rather than denies, the value of the feminine while remaining completely orthodox. This could be an extremely valuable contribution in the light of the modern world's emphasis on masculine modes of thought and being.²⁷

Infinite Freedom

The kenotic *circumincessio* of generativity and receptivity is an absolutely free event which excludes every notion of necessity or chance (contingency).

God does not first have to transform the "need" of having-to-be by seizing possession of himself, for the latter is

²⁴ Turek, Margaret, *Toward a Theology of God the Father: Hans Urs Von Balthasar's Theodramatic Approach*, unpublished doctoral thesis, 197.

²⁵ TD V 91.

²⁶ TD V 91.

²⁷ For more on this topic, see von Balthasar's "Women Priests?" in *New Elucidations*, (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986), and David L. Schindler in the work already cited.

his from the very first. Also, however, it is total and thus excludes chance (that is, the notion that God could primarily affirm something other than himself or could affirm himself otherwise or only partially). Thus his freedom is not some separate act resulting from his nature: it coincides with the act-quality of his nature.²⁸

This excludes any Hegelian notion of God; the "necessary" creation of the world in order to actualize himself is eliminated.

We might term von Balthasar's notion of absolute freedom "kenotic freedom"; God is free to do with his nature as he wills, but what he wills is to give himself completely in accord with his nature of self-giving. In the Godhead there is the identity of "having" and "giving", of wealth and poverty.²⁹ Of course, if the "Godhead" is absolutely free, then this absolute freedom must apply to each of the persons. How is this to happen? "If there is to be absolute freedom, it follows that...there must be *areas of infinite freedom* that are *already there* and do not allow everything to be compressed into an airless unity and identity."³⁰

However intimate the relationship, it implies that the distinction between the persons is maintained. Something like infinite "duration" and infinite "space" must be attributed to the acts of reciprocal love so that the life of the *communio*, of fellowship, can develop.³¹

We have already noted how the "kenotic" processions imply an infinite distance, a "thou" into which the "I" can be totally emptied, without remainder. This means that the persons of the Trinity are absolutely free to dispose of themselves, in their totality. Although this freedom consists in self-giving, the manner of this freedom is also itself free.

Each of the divine Persons is just a sovereignly free as the others, although, in this freedom, each is codetermined by the *ordo processionis* and the trinitarian unity. Now one can predict, for instance, how the Son will "use" the one and only divine freedom in order to invent ideas and acts of love; since the Son and the Spirit are consubstantial with the Father, it is equally their privilege, on the basis of the one divine freedom, to do surprising and astounding things...³²

For this reason, we can say that "God himself is always greater than himself on the basis of his triune freedom."³³

The God of Love

God is love on the basis of his infinite freedom of self-surrender. In order for this self-surrender to have any meaning, there must be separate and distinct Persons in the Godhead; there must be, as it were, the "absolutely other", an "otherness" which can contain, as we have seen, the totality of the world and the infinite separation of sin and godlessness. Yet now we must ask, if there is this "absolutely other", on what basis can we

²⁸ TD II 256

²⁹ TD II 256-7.

³⁰ TD II 257.

³¹ TD II 257.

³² TD II 258.

³³ TD II 259.

posit unity? Are we not left with three separate and distinct "gods"?

For von Balthasar this unity is located in the divine nature of love. The same love which requires distinctness of "the Other" also unites the other; Love requires the giver, the receiver, and the gift given, and love also requires that they be one; Love requires tri-unity.

...there is no multiplication of substances or being in God; the mystery resides the fact that each person is identical with the one divine essence of nature (which is not itself reified as some kind of 'fourth' in God) and yet different from each other due to the opposition of relations within that nature.³⁴

In human love, of course, there is no substantial unity between the lovers; nonetheless, there can be a com-union that has its source in the absolute unity of the divine lovers.

The analogue of human inter-personal love, with its social and psychological integration of difference and unity, is used, then, to point to an ontological unity-in-difference within God which, due to the omnipotence of divine love, can embrace the kind of extreme differences which appear to us as separation and division without in fact undergoing the dissolution of unity.³⁵

The power of this love "is shown by the way in which the other in God is allowed to be infinitely other without detriment to unity."³⁶ This "infinitely

other" implies, as we have seen, the freedom of the other. The Mystery of infinite freedom is comprised by two things: God's incomprehensible sovereignty; *and* the trinitarian communication of inner-divine love.³⁷ This love, a love constituted in freedom, is at the root of the world's creation. The world is not only created "from nothing", but it is also created "for nothing" out of God's love that is free and has no other reason behind it.³⁸ The divine will alone is the "nothing" out of which the world is made, or as Scotus Erigena would have it, the "supernothingness (or superbeing)" of God.³⁹ "Recognizing this or failing to recognize this relationship will constitute the core of the action of the theo-drama."⁴⁰ That is, man, endowed with divine freedom must respond, one way or the other, to the gift of being, and his decision has consequences not only for himself, but for the world and even for the Trinity. For the world is the "gift of the Father...to the Son."⁴¹ The Son, in turn, takes this gift "as an opportunity to thank and glorify the Father" and will lay it at the Father's feet, after bringing it to fulfillment, so that God may be all in all.⁴²

Identity of *Processio* and *Missio*

Thus far we have seen von Balthasar's view of the immanent Trinity,

³⁷ TD II 260.

³⁸ TD II 260.

³⁹ TD II 265

⁴⁰ TD II 260.

⁴¹ TD II 262.

⁴² TD II 262.

³⁴ O'Hanlon 116.

³⁵ O'Hanlon 117.

³⁶ O'Hanlon 119.

a view that does not need to go into the created world to acquire its vitality and drama. Rather, within itself the Trinity is dynamic and vital. Instead of seeking the life of God in the created world, the causes of the dynamism of the world is sought in the immanent Trinity. Further, we have already hinted at the place of this world within the Godhead: that its otherness and separation is already contained within that separation between the divine Persons; the Persons are not each other; man is not God. This "not" of the world is not identical with the "not" of the Persons, nonetheless "The infinite distance between the world and God is grounded in the prototypical distance between God and God."⁴³ Thus in von Balthasar, we have a God who is not merely "absolutely other", but also intimately connected to his creation. "What is created is not foreign to what is begotten."⁴⁴ The Son himself provides not only the instrumental cause of the world, but also its pattern and goal.⁴⁵

It remains, then, to examine this economic order, this gift of the Father to the Son, and explore it more fully and note how it reflects the divine order. The Trinity is the precondition of creation; the procession of persons is the cause of the generation of creatures. The birth of the Son is the foundation of every other birth.⁴⁶

For von Balthasar, the nexus between the immanent and economic orders is contained within the identity of

processio and *missio*; the coming forth from the Father is one with the sending forth into the world.

"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..."⁴⁷

The identify of these movements is made clear by a quote from Von Speyer: "Love and eternal life are ... immanent movement. Mission by contrast, is transcendental movement. And yet ultimately both movements are one."⁴⁸ I think it no accident that those horizontal and vertical movements, taken together, form a cross.

The World is From the Trinity

Since there is no necessity in God, we must also eliminate any notion of necessity in the creation of the world; if we imagine, on the basis of the accomplished "redemption through his blood" (Eph 1:7), that this world is necessary to show forth God's love, then we make sin a precondition of creation and limit the freedom of God.⁴⁹ But we must also avoid the other extreme, namely

⁴³ TD II 266.

⁴⁴ TD V 80.

⁴⁵ TD II 261.

⁴⁶ TD V 61.

⁴⁷ TD V 63.

⁴⁸ TD V 81.

⁴⁹ TD II 269.

that the world is arbitrary "with the idea that God would have to choose some world or other--for good or ill, so to speak--out of an infinite number of possible worlds."⁵⁰

Once we have avoided these two extremes, there is nothing hindering us from extolling the world God actually chose as the best, *because* it has been chosen by God, in his absolute freedom, as the adequately clear embodiment of the "idea" of the freely obedient Son.⁵¹

Since the world is the "clear embodiment" of the Son, the Son is the concrete *analogia entis*. As God he already possesses one pole of the analogy, the "form of God," and thus he may empty himself to receive the other pole.⁵² Given that he is this concrete analogy, the prototype as it were, "the more the person, in response to the Son's call, walks toward his prototype in the Son, the more unique he becomes."⁵³ This kenotic movement of the Son is part of the prototypical trinitarian kenosis as well as the new kenosis which is part and parcel of the creation of the world.

The New Kenosis

"In creation, God fashions a genuine creaturely freedom and sets it over against his own, thus in some sense binding himself."⁵⁴ This is the "new kenosis" that binds God in two ways:

First, he has endowed man with a freedom that, in responding to the divine freedom, depends on nothing but itself. Like the ultimate ground that cannot have some further rationale, beyond it and is hence ground-less---that is, the Father's self-surrender to the Son and their relationship in the Spirit (which grounds everything)---human freedom participates in the divine autonomy, both when it says Yes and when it says No.⁵⁵

The "primal kenosis" of God makes possible all other kenotic movements in the economic order. The first occurs in the "self-limitation" of God in creating creatures endowed with freedom. The second when God makes a covenant which, on God's part, is indissoluble. The third arises through the Incarnation but involves the whole Trinity.⁵⁶

Man can refuse to acknowledge that he owes his freedom to God, "because freedom has no other origin but itself; it is not "caused" by anything but itself."⁵⁷ This ability to say "no" to God is "possible because of the trinitarian 'recklessness' of divine love, which, in its self-giving, observed no limits and had no regard for itself."⁵⁸ This recklessness implies an ability in God to "suffer". Von Balthasar is careful not to talk of the "pain of God," nonetheless he says,

⁵⁰ TD II 268.

⁵¹ TD II 269.

⁵² TD II 268.

⁵³ TD II 270.

⁵⁴ TD IV 328.

⁵⁵ TD IV 328.

⁵⁶ TD IV 331.

⁵⁷ TD IV 328.

⁵⁸ TD IV 329.

...there is something in God that can develop into suffering. This suffering occurs when the recklessness with which the Father gives away himself (and *all* that is his) encounters a freedom that, instead of responding in kind to this magnanimity, changes into a calculating, cautious self-preservation. This contrasts with the essentially divine recklessness of the Son, who allows himself to be squandered...⁵⁹

Here we see the essence of the theo-drama: God empties himself in love, but the beloved responds in unreasonable hatred.

The greater the revelation of divine (ground-less) love, the more it elicits a groundless (Jn 15:25) hatred from man. No end to this escalation can be envisaged, so the Cross must be deferred to an endless end (since Jesus has atoned for all sin). The Cross is raised up at the end of evil, at the end of hell. The Cross, like the Son of God himself, is unique, peerless.⁶⁰

Here we also see a hint of von Balthasar's soteriology, which can only be outlined here. We have previously mentioned that the distance between the divine Persons was sufficient to contain the "distance" of sin and Godlessness (page 6). Thus the kenosis also contains within it the possibility of "substitution" of Christ and the Redemption.

Since the world cannot have any other *locus* but within the distinction between the Hypostasis (there is nothing outside God), the problems

associated with it--its sinful alienation from God--can only be solved at this level. The creature's No resounds at the "place" of distinction within the Godhead.⁶¹

Thus the separation between God and God, already existing in the immanent Trinity, allows for the substitution of sinners by the Son. The "change of places" is therefore not arbitrary, but is prepared by the nature of the Trinity itself. The event of the Cross reveals an already pre-existent "seriousness" in God; the fulfillment in the economic order a reality already present in the immanent order.

The Son, the "light" and "life" of the world, ... does not need to change his own "place" when, shining in the darkness, he undertakes to "represent" the world. He can do this on the basis of his *topos*, that is, of his absolute distinction, within the Trinity, from the Father who bestows Godhead.⁶²

In the kenosis of the Cross, history reaches its dramatic climax. Darkness covers the earth as the separation of God from God, the absolute difference between the Father and the Son, substitutes for the absolute separation of man from God via sin.

the God-man drama reaches its acme: perverse finite freedom casts all its guilt onto God, making him the sole accused, the scapegoat, while God allows himself to be thoroughly affected by this, not only in the humanity of Christ but also in Christ's Trinitarian mission. The omnipotent powerlessness of God's love shines

⁵⁹ TD IV 328.

⁶⁰ TD IV 338.

⁶¹ TD IV 333-4.

⁶² TD IV 324.

forth in the mystery of darkness and alienation between God and the sin-bearing Son; this is where Christ "represents" us, takes our place: what is "experienced" is the opposite of what the facts indicate.⁶³

Time and Eternity

We began by discussing the dynamism of the eternal event as something with neither before or after. Now we must see this event in relation to, and as the source of, what is experienced in the created order as time, that is, by events connected by "before" and "after". We need to affirm, at the very beginning that the temporal order is not some sort of gnostic "emanation" or degeneration which needs to be "dissolved".

On the contrary, in its finitude and distinctness from God, it was originally affirmed as "very good"; the final goal for which it "groans" is not to be dissolved back into God but to be fulfilled by him in its finitude and distinctness.⁶⁴

This essential affirmation of "goodness" of the created order must guide all of our thinking on the relation between the divine and created orders. It is, incidentally, an affirmation that does not exist outside the bounds of Christianity.⁶⁵ Here we must fall back on the "richness" of the eternal event and refuse to see it as static.

Unless we see eternal *being* in terms of eternal *event*, we are condemned to see the form of its duration as a mere

nunc stans, which deprives it of everything that makes world-time (in all its transience) exciting and delightful.⁶⁶

Stripped both of any "static" interpretations, or any notions of "before" and "after", the eternal event can be seen as the "always the coming about of something that has always been."⁶⁷ Thus, the Son receives from the Father a "*presence* that includes both his always-having-been and also his eternal future (his eternal "coming").⁶⁸ In this eternal "past" and "future" we can see the "eternal" foundations of what in the created order is experienced as time. "Time 'makes room' for existent being, indeed, it creates an acting area in which it can realize itself as event."⁶⁹

Space

In the same way that time has its ground in the trinitarian "event", space has its primal origin in the way the Persons make room for each other, granting each other freedom of being and action.⁷⁰ Here we must not see distance as something "in opposition" to the closeness of the Trinity, rather trinitarian distance is necessary for two reasons:

First, in order to hold fast to the personal distinctness of each Person both in being and acting; and second, in order to establish the basis within the Trinity for what, in the economic Trinity, will be the possibility of a

⁶³ TD IV 335-6.

⁶⁴ TD II 254.

⁶⁵ TD II 254.

⁶⁶ TD V 91.

⁶⁷ TD V 92.

⁶⁸ TD V 92.

⁶⁹ TD V 92.

⁷⁰ TD V 93.

distance that goes as far as the Son's abandonment on the cross.⁷¹

Of course, in God no spatial separation is necessary or possible; rather it is in the hierarchical distance of the processions in which we find the Father "alone" even though he is never without the Son, for "ultimately it is he, unique and alone who begets the Son."⁷²

Being and Becoming

It is somewhat difficult to construct a theology that connects being and becoming without denigrating becoming, since becoming necessarily indicates a "not yet," a lack of something, a striving. Being can exhibit none of these things, without falling into a Hegelian "process." Nonetheless,

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 the creature and Creator, between being and becoming.⁷³

This brings us back to where we began: to seeing the eternal event as vital and dynamic in itself without attributing this dynamism to the striving of the economic order. Rather it is the economic order that owes its dynamism to what is inherent in the immanent order. And just as we noted that the Trinity is a giving (in the Father), a receiving (in the Son) and a gift (in the Spirit), so too we see that the creature owes its participation in non-finite being to the Father, its particularity to the Son, and its vocation of self-surrender to

the Spirit.⁷⁴ We can further elucidate this link by connecting the "ever-greater of God" to the striving of man. Of course, in the Divine life, there is no striving, because it is the "fullness of life," and therefore perfect peace. Nonetheless,

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".⁷⁵

This superabundant vitality of eternal life means that man will always be seeking God, even after he has found him. This is not only because of the "weakness of man's cognitive powers but also because of this "ever-greater" aspect of divine life and genuine love itself.⁷⁶ Thus, in neither this world nor the next can we exhaust the reality of God, a reality that is ever-greater, even to itself. This ever-greater, while not a "becoming" in God, does provide an analogy to creaturely becoming. The link between the two is thus provided by the nature of love. As O'Hanlon puts it, "The whole story about God is not that he is the fullness of being, but that he is the fullness of love."⁷⁷

⁷¹ TD V 94.

⁷² TD V 94.

⁷³ TD V 77.

⁷⁴ TD V 76.

⁷⁵ TD V 77-8.

⁷⁶ TD V 79.

⁷⁷ O'Hanlon, 127.

Athens and Jerusalem

The great thrust of von Balthasar's theo-drama is to ground the dynamism of the world process in the immanent order of being. This formulation retains the "process" of Hegel, but locates it not, as Hegel did, in the "historical process" but in the eternal processions; he has, as it were, stood Hegel on his head, always an amusing pose for a German philosopher. Thus the ontology of being becomes the ground of becoming, rather than the other way round. But in order to accomplish this, von Balthasar must use a language not often associated with theology, a language of the poet. Further this language is often maddeningly imprecise (for a philosopher or scientist); he rarely affirms anything univocally, and just as rarely denies anything, univocally. For example, he will deny the mutability of God, while talking about how God is affected by his creation. Is this a legitimate mode of discourse? Can the stage accommodate God without losing intelligibility? And most importantly, should not the precise language of philosophy be the apex also of theological language?

This question is not new; in the early Church, the Fathers asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem", the god of the philosophers with the God of the Hebrews? Quite a lot, as it turns out, since man's reason is itself an intrinsic part of the *imago deus*, and we must love God with our "whole mind" as well as with our whole heart, strength, and will; to dismiss the philosophical as irrelevant is to miss the revelation itself. Nonetheless, that revelation itself, whether one speaks of the "natural" revelation or the supernatural, reveals a world of paradox. Try as we might to avoid it, we seem to be trapped in a world of dualities: freedom and necessity, being and becoming, time and

eternity, god and man, bread and wine as flesh and blood, etc. Such paradoxical terms are, by their very nature, irreconcilable; one can only respond in one of two ways: by denying, in some fashion, the paradox, or by treating it as transcendent. But if it is transcendent, then there is no reason to assume that it can be captured, precisely, in human language. For as O'Hanlon notes, "The exact revelation of God in Jesus Christ does not imply that theology, or any system of human logic or discourse, may verbalize this revelation exactly."⁷⁸

The answer, perhaps, lies in the separation of the roles of theology and philosophy, while at the same time acknowledging their mutual dependence. It is the task of philosophy to render the world of paradox, the world that we actually experience, intelligible in terms of its conformity with the principle of non-contradiction.

The philosophical task may seem, at first glance, to be purely negative: to show that the world is *not* self-contradictory, all appearances to the contrary. Yet, since it is, as it were, a negation of a negation (that is, the world is *not* in violation of *non*-contradiction) it turns out as something both positive and powerful. But for the very same reason, it is not, in itself, sufficient, for while it is necessary to know that the world is not self-contradictory, that knowledge is not itself the world.

As for the task of the theologian, it cannot be a mere specialization within philosophy, some sort of highly precise "god-talk." And it certainly cannot be a method of "resolving" a paradox, since

⁷⁸ O'Hanlon, 141.

paradoxes transcend what we can know. Rather, it is the task of Theology to grasp the transcendent *as* transcendent; and because transcendence itself is its subject, it can never be precisely rendered; at some point, we must rely on the language of metaphor and analogy, the language of images, because we are ourselves mere images of the divine. This is not license for theology to ignore the language of philosophy, but at the same time, it may not rest there. Not only must theology begin, as revelation does, with the language of the poet, priest and prophet, and it must also end there. But in between its beginning and its end, it must pass through the language of reason and logic; unless it does so it cannot enlighten us, cannot deepen our understanding. If, on the other hand, it merely rests in philosophic language, it will also fail; it will reduce the divine to a merely human system of logic or dialectic; it will, as it were, domesticate the mystery and break the paradox. As G. Sohngen notes: "Metaphysics without metaphor is empty; metaphor without metaphysics is blind."⁷⁹

To take a concrete example, when dealing with, say, the eucharist, science may document for us the history and linguistic changes, as well as the pre-Christian antecedents. Philosophy may render this confusing doctrine consistent with the law of non-contradiction in the form of "transubstantiation". But theology, while acknowledging the contribution of science and philosophy, must grasp it as transcendent, as the Son's communion with man of his own eternal thanksgiving to the Father. Such language may be insufficient for the philosopher, but it does

increase the intelligibility of the event while leaving it open to further statements. This statement is dramatic in form, and although that is not the only form such an explanation could take, it is a possible form.

And finally, to put it another way, to Heidegger's great philosophic question, "why should things be rather than not be?", von Balthasar, the theologian responds with the "why-lessness" of love. And there, I think, the matter must rest.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Quoted in O'Hanlon, 142.

⁸⁰ O'Hanlon, 127.