

# **“Saved through the death of Christ on the cross” ‘In the light of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theology’**

John A. Berry

*Hans Urs von Balthasar’s reflections on the death of Christ are at the centre of this study-paper. It seeks first to present the “drama in three acts” of the paschal mystery and secondly to explore the Swiss theologian’s Soteriology. Good Friday representing Christ’s self-surrender, Holy Saturday as the day of silence and Easter Sunday as the day of triumph provide the indispensable hermeneutic for an understanding of the Trinity. Jesus’ death on the cross is presented in terms of “surrender”, “obedience” and “mission”. “Solidarity” and “reality” are other keywords with which Christ’s descent into Sheol is explained. Lastly, in the event of the resurrection, not only do the cross and descent of Jesus reveal their inner meaning, but the Father’s power over sin and death by raising the Son to eternal life is likewise manifested. For Balthasar, the death of Christ was different from every other human death in that Christ bore the full weight of sin in humanity’s place. It turns around the whole course of human history. Ultimately, the cross as an event has a unique efficacy that can never be replaced by anything or anyone.<sup>1</sup>*

1. This paper is written in homage to my esteemed friend and mentor John O’Donnell SJ (1944-2005), the fifth anniversary of whose passing happened on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 2005. He joined the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus in 1962 and was ordained a priest twelve years later. He obtained his doctorate in Theology from Oxford University and has taught at the Heythrop College, University of London, Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge, MA and the Pontifical Gregorian University where he also served as a Dean. As a professor of Dogmatics he delivered courses on Christology and Trinity. At the time of his death, Fr O’Donnell was giving a seminar on the “paschal mystery” for the second cycle students. This paper was originally presented as two short essays for one of his last courses entitled “The Theologies of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar”. For a deeper exploration of the theme here discussed, see JOHN ANTHONY BERRY, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery in Hans Urs von Balthasar*, University of Malta, 2004 (an unpublished dissertation).

## 1. THE “DRAMA” OF JESUS’ PASCHAL MYSTERY

Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988), the most distinguished Catholic exponent of a *theologia gloriae crucis*<sup>2</sup> and whose birth centenary was celebrated recently,<sup>3</sup> has spoken of the Easter mysteries as comprising a drama in three acts: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. Balthasar speaks of the “great reversal” that took place between God and the dead man Jesus<sup>4</sup> and makes use of the *Triduum mortis* as the dramatic backcloth for his thought.<sup>5</sup> Good Friday represents Christ’s active self-surrender (with the cry from the cross sounding at its heart); Holy Saturday is the day of the “descent,” (also referred to as the day of Sheol, the day on which Christ lies lifeless in the tomb);<sup>6</sup> and Easter is the day of triumph, the Father’s day, the day when the Father shows his power over sin and death by raising the Son to eternal life.<sup>7</sup>

The poet-theologian has deliberately embarked on writing a theology of glory, yet his rich *analogical* theology contains within it a *dialectic* of the cross.<sup>8</sup> He

2. ANNE MURPHY, “Theological Trends: Contemporary theologies of the Cross”, in *The Way* 28 (1988) 149-163.
3. For a study on theologians from the generations of 1904 and 1905 such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan and Yves Congar, undoubtedly dear to historians of the intellectual currents in contemporary theology, see HECTOR SCERRI, *Living Theology*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2007. For another equally stimulating presentation of these and other theologians in the last century, see FERGUS KERR, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, Blackwell, Oxford 2007. Especially on von Balthasar’s theology, one can see the commemorative volume gathering the proceedings of the von Balthasar Conference organised by the Lateran University in 2005. See RINO FISICHELLA (ed.), *Solo l’Amore è Credibile*, Lateran University Press, Vatican City 2007.
4. Balthasar, in treating the paschal mystery, dramatically “compacts” the many themes involved by the descent of the dead Jesus into the realm of the dead and at the same time “reverses” them by the victory of his resurrection. See EDWARD T. OAKES, *Pattern of Redemption*, 230. For recent reflections on the paschal mystery as the definitive event of God’s self-communication in history, see the Spring issue of *Communio* 37 (2010).
5. Starting with the christological reflections of *Heart of the World*, and running via his reflections on the *triduum mortis* in *Mysterium Paschale*, Balthasar presses on toward his sustained meditation in *Theo-Drama* on the central mystery of the Christian faith. Balthasar proposes a dramatic soteriology in which the cross, descent into hell and resurrection constitute a paschal mystery which affects not just the human struggle with evil, but also the very inner life of God.
6. For a comprehensive study of Balthasar’s teaching on Christ’s descent into Hell, see ALAN E. LEWIS, *Between Cross and Resurrection. A Theology of Holy Saturday*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2001 as well as ALYSSA LYRA PITSTICK, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2007.
7. See JOHN O’DONNELL, *A Faith You can live with*, Sheed & Ward, Franklin, Wisconsin 1999, 42-43.
8. God’s glory was to be revealed in Jesus Christ’s absolute obedience right to the point of the Cross and Hell. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*, VII, Ignatius, San Francisco 1989, 243.

writes: "God's splendour ... reveals and authenticates itself precisely in its own apparent antithesis."<sup>9</sup> The going-out of the Godhead into the world in weakness (in the incarnation, in the cross of Christ, and the descent into Hell) is itself the manifestation of the divine glory and at the same time indicates how the believer comes to be grasped by that glory.<sup>10</sup> It is this abyss of God's love, revealed most dramatically in Jesus' descent into hell, which lies at the heart of Balthasar's theology.

However, the central insight of Balthasar's entire thought can be summed up in the proposition that *Being is love*.<sup>11</sup> He writes: "For it is precisely in the Kenosis of Christ (and nowhere else) that the *inner* majesty of God's love appears, of God who 'is love' (1 John 4, 8) and therefore a Trinity."<sup>12</sup> Thus, Jesus in his paschal mystery is the "form" (*Gestalt*) of God's love.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the Swiss theologian insists that the paschal mystery provides the indispensable hermeneutic for an understanding of the Trinity.<sup>14</sup> He continues that in the Lord's actions there is not only a sublime *metaphor* of eternal love, but Eternal Love itself.<sup>15</sup> Hence, the paschal mystery and the mystery of the Trinity are inextricably interconnected.<sup>16</sup>

9. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, "In retrospect", in *The analogy of beauty: the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, edited by John Riches, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1986, 214. As has been remarked: "The powerfulness in God's glory shines forth in complete powerlessness". See BRENDAN LEAHY, "Theological Aesthetics", 38.
10. See AIDAN NICHOLS, Review on *Elucidations and Engagement with God*, in *New Blackfriars* 57 (1976) 44-45.
11. See JOHN O'DONNELL, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 9, n. 7; HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Love Alone*, 7-8. Pointing out what is probably the densest summary of Balthasar's thought, Peter Henrici explains that in the mystery of the Son's death, descent into hell, and resurrection, "Love alone is credible." Henrici explains that only love makes sense of it. PETER HENRICI, "The Philosophy of Hans Urs von Balthasar", in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, edited by David L. Schindler, Ignatius, San Francisco 1991, 153. See JOHN O'DONNELL, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 9, n. 7.
12. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation: A Theological Perspective*, Sheed and Ward, London 1970, 71.
13. See AIDAN NICHOLS, "Balthasar and his Christology", in *New Blackfriars* 66 (1985) 320.
14. In fact, Balthasar recognizes the "central place of the *triduum mortis* for all theology." See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1990, 12.
15. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Prayer*, Ignatius, San Francisco 1986, 184.
16. Balthasar himself says: "No other way of access to the trinitarian Mystery exists than its Revelation in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, and no proposition concerning the immanent Trinity can distance itself even by a hairbreadth from the New Testament basis if it does not want to fall into the void of abstract affirmations having no relevance for the history of salvation." HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Theologik*, II, 117. For a more detailed study of Balthasar's trinitarian theology and

Deeply informed by the drama of Jesus' paschal mystery, Balthasar explains the fullness of revelation,<sup>17</sup> in the glory of God's self-surrendering love on the cross, a love "greater than which cannot be conceived."<sup>18</sup> The heart of the matter of the divine love incarnate is the cross. For Balthasar, "The incarnation has no other goal." Moreover, "it is the way to it and as work of obedience (*kenosis*) already participates in it."<sup>19</sup> Balthasar marshals a whole host of patristic witnesses to sustain his position<sup>20</sup> that the purpose of the incarnation<sup>21</sup> was Jesus' death on the cross.<sup>22</sup> In deciding to become a man, Jesus already accepted to bear in himself the *hiatus* between God and humanity and so to overcome it.<sup>23</sup> The

its connection with the paschal mystery, see ANNE HUNT, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville/MN 1997; ANGELO SCOLA, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: a theological style*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1995, 53.

17. One must keep in mind that in the period following World War II, Roman Catholic theology in Western Europe consciously strove to overcome the narrowness of the official scholasticism. Balthasar, among others, enriched the theology of revelation with insights derived from the Greek Fathers. Influenced by Karl Barth (1886-1968), Balthasar held that revelation is an eschatological event in which the eternal is paradoxically present in the historical, the infinite in the finite, the word of God in human words. See AVERY DULLES, *Models of Revelation*, Doubleday, Garden City, New York 1983, 23.
18. GIOVANNI MARCHESI, "La figura di Gesù Cristo nell'Estetica teologica di Hans Urs von Balthasar", 121; JOHN R. SACHS, "Deus semper Major", 632.
19. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Pneuma und Institution, Skizzen zur Theologiae IV*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1974, 139, as quoted in Raymond Gawronski, *Word and Silence*, 97.
20. Taking up a position which rejects the notions both of theopaschism and that of divine immutability as traditionally defined, Balthasar explains that the Christological hymn in Philippians 2, 5-11 draws a clear parallel between the 'emptying' involved in the pre-existent Christ, the divine Logos, becoming incarnate, and the subsequent humiliation on the cross.
21. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Glory of the Lord*, I, Ignatius, San Francisco 1982, 196-200 on Phil 2, 5-11, especially p. 196 which states Balthasar's case for affirming that the subject of Phil 2, 5-11 is the divine person, the pre-existent, and not the incarnate Logos.
22. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, 22. In the Greek tradition, Gregory of Nyssa wrote: "If one examines this mystery, one will prefer to say, not that his death was a consequence of his birth, but that the birth was undertaken so that he could die," GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Oratio Catechetica* 32 (PG 45, 80A), as quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 20-1. In a similar vein, in the Latin theology, Pope Leo the Great expressed the purpose of the incarnation in these words: "There was no other motive for the Son of God to be born except to be nailed to the cross," LEO THE GREAT, *Sermo* 48, I (PL 54, 298), as quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 21.
23. See JOHN O'DONNELL, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 79. Balthasar starts by explaining the Son's mission as consisting in both the incarnation and the cross. Based on the Johannine theology of the Word become flesh, Balthasar insists that the threshold of the mystery of the incarnation is Jesus' self-abandonment to the Father. He explains that only in such a manner can Jesus' life become the perfect expression of the Father's love for the world. Out of the variegated panorama of the Old and New Testaments, Balthasar turns above all to the prologue of John's Gospel: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (Jn 1, 14).

mission of Jesus is carried out in a freely willed, kenotic-obedience to the Father, the One who sends him. Christ's existence-in-kenosis is then directed to the coming "hour"<sup>24</sup> of which he is aware, but does not anticipate: "His existence is ordered, functionally and kenotically, to the cross."<sup>25</sup> Two specific moments when Jesus makes a spontaneous self-gift in view of his coming Passion, the 'hour', are the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, on the evening of Holy Thursday as well as the action of the foot-washing.<sup>26</sup>

In the events of the cross and the descent into death, Balthasar sees the full impact of Christ's action *pro nobis* totally exposed.<sup>27</sup> Christ suffers through the *hiatus* between God and mankind created by the misuse of human freedom in sin. Thus, his action on our behalf involves his experience of the terrible loss of God which is the result of sin. And so Christ's mission "is a mission unto death, since death has come about through sin."<sup>28</sup>

Jesus' death on the cross can be summarised in *four key elements*:

1. *Death as turning point* – Jesus' death on the cross is the accomplishment of divine judgment on sin because, as Balthasar explains, a God who is love must hate sin; this is why God does not remit sin without expiation.<sup>29</sup>
2. *The cross as event of trinitarian surrender* - The cross, and indeed the whole paschal mystery is an event of triune surrender, of mutual self-giving and self-yielding love.<sup>30</sup>
24. The handing over of which Jesus speaks finds its concrete realization through the actions of those such as Judas, Pilate and the Jewish people who cry for his death. The scriptures use words such as the 'power of darkness' (Lk 22, 53) and 'night' (Jn 13, 30) to express Jesus' arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is delivered into the yawning chasm of sin in which the blackness of loneliness prevails. In this night all vision is taken away.
25. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, 90.
26. *Ibid.*, 96.
27. Balthasar explains that the New Testament *pro nobis* doctrine does not mean that Jesus does something in humanity's behalf from the outside, but rather, it occurs from "within" the very personal and social situation of the sinner. The *pro nobis* of Jesus is at the core, the dramatic interaction of God and mankind in the redemption.
28. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Theodramatik*, IV, 250; see also *Herrlichkeit*, III/2/2, 202ff, as quoted in Robert A. Pesarchick, *The Trinitarian Foundation*, 107.
29. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, 119. 138. "... in the crucified, divine love and justice coincide: God's wrath which will not come to terms with sin but can only reject it and burn it out, and God's love which begins to disclose itself precisely at the point of this inexorability," MEDARD KEHL – LÖSER WERNER, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, 149.
30. The Father separates himself from himself, so that the Son can be. On the other hand, the Son has

3. *The obedience of Jesus* – The surrender on the cross is a sublime expression of Jesus' kenotic obedience.<sup>31</sup> The cross reveals that it is of the Son's very being to keep nothing for himself but to yield everything to the Father.
4. *The identity of Jesus' mission and his person*<sup>32</sup> – Jesus' obedience vis-à-vis his heavenly Father is the major key which unlocks the mystery of Jesus' identity. His obedience, therefore, is constitutive of his identity as the Son, expressive of his divine sonship and freedom.<sup>33</sup>

For Balthasar, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, there is the incommensurability of the yawning gap (“*hiatus*”) between the living God and the dead sinner. Profoundly inspired by the mystical experiences and visionary theology of Adrienne van Speyr (1902-1967),<sup>34</sup> whose mystical experience of Christ's descent<sup>35</sup> into hell was a central insight, Balthasar makes the extraordinary claim that Holy Saturday stands in “the mysterious middle between cross and resurrection, and consequently properly in the centre of all revelation and theology.”<sup>36</sup>

been a ‘yes’ (a surrender of obedience) to the Father, from eternity. This separation is bridged over in eternity by the Holy Spirit, the communion of the love of the Father and the Son. Hence, according to Balthasar, there is both a separation and a union within the divine life which makes possible the separation and the union of the cross-event. See JOHN O'DONNELL, *The Mystery of the Triune God*, 65.

31. “His obedience presents the kenotic translation of the eternal love of the Son for the ‘ever greater’ Father.” See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, 91.
32. Balthasar's exploration of Christ's mission and person is extensive. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Theodramatik*, III, 149-259.
33. Balthasar's understanding of the person is rooted in the concept of mission. Moreover, in this way Balthasar maintains that in Jesus, there is perfect identity between his person as Son and his redemptive mission. Hence, Balthasar concludes that Jesus' mission is *identical* to his person: “The point of identity is his mission from God (*missio*), which is identical with the Person *in* God and *as* God (*processio*).” HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Theodramatik*, III, 533. Indeed, Balthasar adds: “this is the main conclusion of the present volume.” O'Donnell discusses this aspect of Balthasar's work in “The Form of His Theology”, in *Communio* 16 (1989) 460-462.
34. A central influence on Balthasar's thinking was the experience of his friend and fellow-theologian, Adrienne von Speyr, a doctor who from 1941 until 1965 seemingly reduplicated the experience of Jesus every Easter, falling into a trance on the afternoon of Good Friday, in which she experienced the descent into Hades and utter desolation. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *First Glance at Adrienne van Speyr*, Ignatius, San Francisco 1981.
35. The descent, for Medard Kehl (1942-) and Löser Werner (1940-), is both a trinitarian and a soteriological event. It “forms the necessary conclusion to the cross as well as the necessary presupposition of the resurrection.” See MEDARD KEHL – LÖSER WERNER, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, 404.
36. *Ibid*, 404; and standing, Balthasar adds, “like an unexplored, inexplicable blank spot on the map!”

With regards to this, John O'Donnell (1944-2005) remarks that Jesus' active-surrender represented in Good Friday contrasts sharply with his identification with humanity even to the depths of the absolute helplessness of the sinner symbolised in Holy Saturday.<sup>37</sup> Here, Jesus is no longer able to do anything. O'Donnell explains that Jesus can merely be with humanity in the solidarity of the powerlessness of the sinner. It is in the descent into hell on Holy Saturday that Jesus' *kenosis*<sup>38</sup> reaches its utmost limit and his mission reaches its fullness.

Moreover, five key elements emerge in Balthasar's treatment of the descent:

1. *Jesus' solidarity with humanity in death* – Far from being active,<sup>39</sup> the descent is instead an utterly passive “sinking down” into the abyss of death.<sup>40</sup> It reveals Jesus' solidarity with humanity in the experience of death.<sup>41</sup> There, Jesus experienced the full reality of hell (reinterpreted as the entirely passive accompaniment by Jesus Christ of those who have thought to say a definitive ‘no’ to God).<sup>42</sup>
2. *Jesus' solidarity with the sinner* - The descent represents Jesus' solidarity with humanity in its sinfulness; those who have definitively isolated themselves from the love of God.<sup>43</sup> Jesus felt the full weight of abandonment and rejection by the Father. Jesus, in the utter defencelessness of love, enters into the loneliness

37. See JOHN O'DONNELL, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 85.

38. In Balthasar's theology, all forms of *kenosis ad extra* are contained within this primal *kenosis ad intra*, whereby the Father begets the Son. The Father's generation of the Son represents the first *kenosis* and underpins all other forms of *kenosis*. It manifests the utter self-giving of the Father to the Son, a self-yielding surrender of divine being. The Son's self-giving to the Father in his death on a cross is already contained within this eternal procession. In fact, it is a modality of the Son's procession.

39. Balthasar himself explains that this extreme passivity that characterizes the Son's descent stands in stark contrast with the active self-surrender of Jesus on Good Friday. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, 172. See also JOHN O'DONNELL, *The Mystery of the Triune God*, 66-69. Moreover, O'Donnell claims that the principal difference between Balthasar's interpretation of Jesus' descent among the dead and the more classical approach is that for Balthasar, Jesus' descent is no triumphal journey into the underworld. See JOHN O'DONNELL, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 87.

40. It is an utterly passive “being removed,” as in the burial of a corpse. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*, VII, 230.

41. See ANNE HUNT, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery*, 69.

42. See GERARD F. O'HANLON, “Theological Dramatics”, 97-98.

43. Balthasar clarifies that Jesus is in solidarity with humanity in its sinfulness without, however, implying any cooperation by him (Jesus) in sin itself, for he himself is not bound by any of the bonds of sin. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, 176.

and desolation of the sinner.<sup>44</sup> He was reduced to the utter lifelessness of the corpse. Jesus became “a cadaver-obedience.”<sup>45</sup>

3. *The reality of human freedom* – Balthasar explains that by accompanying the sinner in hell, God freely and lovingly shares in the exercise of human freedom. In love, therefore, God enters into this solidarity with those who reject all solidarity.<sup>46</sup> He continues that the reality of human freedom, including the dramatic possibility of rejecting God, is radically affirmed and respected.
4. *The reality of sin* – In the descent, Jesus experiences or rather suffers what Balthasar refers to as a “vision of death,” a *visio mortis*, or a “second death”<sup>47</sup> in which Jesus sees “sin in itself.”<sup>48</sup> Jesus’ solidarity with the sinner is so great that Jesus experienced hell itself.<sup>49</sup> This reification of sin enables Balthasar to express both God’s abhorrence of sin and the depths of the divine compassion and love for the sinner. Moreover, this permits him to clearly distinguish between the sinner and the sin. In this way, while sin is judged, the sinner is loved beyond imagining.<sup>50</sup>
5. *Trinitarian character of the descent*<sup>51</sup> – In the descent to hell, Balthasar sees revealed the mystery of the Trinity. The Swiss theologian insists that such descent is in fact only possible because God is triune. It is the final consequence of the unanimous trinitarian will to salvation and therefore of the Son’s redemptive mission. Hence, the Father sends the Son into hell. The Son, *while remaining God*, descends into God-forsakenness, assumes the condition of sinful humanity, and embraces all that is opposed to God. The Australian theologian Anne Hunt (1952-) explains that as Jesus, the God-forsaken Son of God and in this sense as one who is even more lonely,<sup>52</sup> accompanies the

44. Sherry explains that according to Balthasar, Jesus’ sense of desolation in his death must have been far worse than that of any other human being, for as Son of God he had enjoyed, in his ‘Abba’ experience, close intimacy with God. See PATRICK SHERRY, “And on the Second Day”, 152.

45. JOHN O’DONNELL, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 87. See also ANNE HUNT, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery*, 70.

46. See MEDARD KEHL – LÖSER WERNER, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, 153.

47. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, 168-174. See also *The Glory of the Lord*, VII, 232-233.

48. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, 173.

49. Following Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64), Balthasar explains that in seeing sin as a reality, Jesus identifies himself with all that is opposed to God, that is brought about by humanity in the exercise of its freedom. He argues that Jesus sees ‘sheer sin’ as it appears.

50. This “reification” of sin also allows Balthasar to contrast the *infinity* of God’s love, the unimaginable excess of this love, to the *finitude* of sin.

51. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, 174-176.

52. See MEDARD KEHL – LÖSER WERNER, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, 422.



sinner in the sinner's choice to damn himself or herself and to reject God.<sup>53</sup> Throughout it all he remains God. The Spirit accompanies him and is the bond between Father and Son, uniting them in their separation. Indeed the abandonment of the Son by the Father is possible only because at this point of extreme separation they are united in love by the Holy Spirit.

The descent to hell, for Balthasar, is the only possible answer to the ultimate riddle of how a loving, sovereign God could allow the misery and suffering and evil which afflicts our world.<sup>54</sup> The cross remains mounted above human history, it is God's final word to the world. Nailed upon it is the Word of God who, at the end, no longer utters audible words. From this burning centre radiates the infinite trinitarian love, a love that will never find a more fitting expression for speaking to the heart of its creature. With this in mind, Balthasar traces Jesus' journey through the *hiatus* of sin to the triumph of Easter.

Only in the light of the event of the resurrection,<sup>55</sup> do the cross and descent of Jesus reveal their inner meaning. Whereas Jesus' main concern, to do always the will of the Father, carried him to the depths of his descent into hell where he took upon himself the sins of the world, now, in giving back his human life, the Father restores him to the glory he had before the foundation of the world.<sup>56</sup> Hence the resurrection is the Father's response to the Son's obedience. This event represents the turning point of human history. Balthasar calls the resurrection a 'meta-historical event' which 'opens up toward history.'<sup>57</sup>

I conclude this section by highlighting several exegetical points in order to understand Balthasar's theology of the Triduum.<sup>58</sup> These include: (1) Jesus is entirely the passive object of actions which *God* does through him, very much including the resurrection and exaltation ("God raised this Jesus to life"); (2) Jesus entered the realm of the dead at his own death and had, while there, *to be freed* (and while there he seems to have suffered the torments of Hades, because that is

53. Hunt points out that Balthasar speaks of sinners as "those damning themselves." See ANNE HUNT, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery*, 74.

54. See JOHN RICHES, "The Biblical Basis of Glory", 67.

55. Using a Johannine phrase (Jn 16, 28), Balthasar places the event of resurrection under the title "Going to the Father."

56. See JOHN O'DONNELL, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 90.

57. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, 194.

58. See EDWARD T. OAKES, *Pattern of Redemption*, 233.

what God freed him from); (3) but he was set free from this realm of the dead not out of some arbitrary largesse on the part of God but because “it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him”; (4) upon being exalted to God’s right hand, he *received* the Holy Spirit, though he is also the Spirit’s disburser (“Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear”); and (5) *therefore* God *made* Jesus “Lord” and “Christ.”

In this light, the paschal mystery means that God, in love, has entered into the *hiatus* of death – physical and spiritual – and has taken the full measure of humanity’s situation not from the outside, as it were, but from the inside, sharing our desolation, bearing our sin, as Son experiencing God-forsakenness.<sup>59</sup>

## II. THE DEATH ON THE CROSS

The cross reveals God’s majesty as a majesty of gratuitous, self-abandoning love, expressed in the mission of Jesus, in the completeness, even recklessness, with which God gives himself for the salvation of the world. The cross of Christ on which God takes upon himself the burden of the whole suffering of the world is the authentication of the living God.<sup>60</sup>

Jesus’ death on the cross is the turning point where divine love and justice coincide.<sup>61</sup> Jesus’ cross is “an entirely unique bearing of the total guilt of the world by the entirely unique Son of the Father.”<sup>62</sup> The Swiss thinker argues that it is not simply an act of complete self-surrender to God in death,<sup>63</sup> without any doubt, the cross must stand in the centre of every attempt to understand God’s dealings with humanity.<sup>64</sup>

59. See ANNE HUNT, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery*, 77.

60. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Elucidations*, Ignatius, San Francisco 1998, 51.

61. For Balthasar, christology and soteriology (and indeed the doctrine of the Trinity) have their centre and origin in the events of the three days of the *Sacrum Triduum*. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1990.

62. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, 137-8.

63. Balthasar’ theology contrasts with Rahner’s, who proposes that Jesus’ act of complete self-surrender to God in death might serve as the indispensable ‘productive pattern’ which frees humanity to repeat this act in their own death. See KARL RAHNER, “Following the Crucified”, in *Theological Investigations*, XVIII, Crossroad, New York 1961, 167.

64. In this, Balthasar agrees with Martin Luther (1483-1546). John O’Donnell comments that Balthasar is fascinated by Luther, for in some ways Luther comes to the Swiss theologian’s own project of developing a dramatic soteriology. Luther, more than any other theologian, gives adequate weight

Far from being a vindictive venting of divine wrath on an innocent victim, the cross of Jesus should be seen in every respect as the appearing of the glory of God's love in this world.<sup>65</sup> More explicitly, it means Jesus' complete embrace of man's flesh in love for the Father and for humanity.<sup>66</sup> Cardinal Christoph Schönborn (1945-) clarifies that what Balthasar opposed to Karl Rahner (1904-84) was the *drama of salvation*: it has cost the life of God's Son.<sup>67</sup> The death of Christ was different from every other human death in that Christ bore the full weight of sin in our place. Thus, the cross is the event which turns around the whole course of human history.

### New Testament Affirmations

Balthasar argues that the foundation of any Christian theology of redemption should include five indispensable New Testament affirmations.<sup>68</sup> Developing his theology<sup>69</sup> of the redemption in dialogue and confrontation with the major figures of the Christian tradition, Balthasar insists that one should seek to balance all dimensions of redemption. These include:

1. The reality of the *double surrender* of the Father and the Son<sup>70</sup>
2. The idea of the *great reversal*<sup>71</sup> or the *admirabile commercium*.<sup>72</sup>

to the exchange of places between Christ and the sinner. O'Donnell clarifies that while Luther is one of the most important dialogue partners for Balthasar, however, the latter can be severe in his criticism. See JOHN O'DONNELL, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 103.

65. See MICHAEL WALDSTEIN, "An Introduction to von Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord*", in *Communio* 14 (1987) 31.
66. Jesus is the *Stellvertreter* (at once the "representative," and "advocate"), not only in death but in obedience.
67. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn insists that the two approaches are complementary. He explains that whereas, the Rahnerians start with the human longing for God, allowing the natural desire for Christ to emerge naturally, the Balthasarians prefer to start with the offer of Revelation, to offer people a clear choice. See AUSTEN IVEREIGH, "Cardinal for a new Europe", in *The Tablet* 17 April 2004, 16.
68. See TD III 318. JOHN O'DONNELL, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 100.
69. Making reference to the themes of covenant and that of the bridal union between heaven and earth
70. The Father does not spare his only-begotten Son (Rom 8, 32) and in turn the Son is willing to lay down his life for humanity's sake (Gal 2, 20; Jn 10, 17).
71. Edward Oakes (1948-) uses this possible translation of *admirabile commercium* rather than "wonderful exchange". See EDWARD T. OAKES, *Pattern of Redemption*, Continuum, New York 1994, 230.
72. The exchange of places is between the Son and the sinner. Jesus, the Son, takes humanity's place, is made sin in its place in order that human beings might assume his place and become sons in the Son (2 Cor 5, 21).

3. The restoration of a lost freedom has taken place through a “ransom” or “redemption”. The theme of the liberation of humankind.<sup>73</sup>
4. Positively considered, humans are given a share in the sonship of Christ.<sup>74</sup>
5. The entire process of reconciliation and redemption because of the merciful love of God.

### **Balthasar’s Soteriology:**

#### *1. The whole drama of redemption grounded in the inner divine life<sup>75</sup>*

Balthasar’s approach is to view the divine life itself as the primordial drama in which the action of the cross is situated. God’s life is dramatic and this drama consists of the eternal self-emptying of the three persons. Since the Trinity is in its being divine kenosis, we can understand how the drama of salvation is kenotic. Balthasar sees the unfolding of this story of salvation as progressive levels of self-emptying: from creation, to incarnation and finally to the cross.<sup>76</sup>

Both Gerard O’Hanlon (1947-) and Hunt recognise the cross as a trinitarian event through which the justice and love of God are seen to be one, in the course of a drama between Father and Son which is directed by the Holy Spirit in a way which allows for the unity-in-diversity of the Trinity to embrace a unity-in-difference or opposition.<sup>77</sup>

73. In the New Testament different images are used to express liberation: freedom from the law (Rom 7, 4); as deliverance from the power of darkness (Col 1, 13); as liberation from the devil (Jn 8, 44) and from the elemental spirits of the universe (Col 2, 20); as ransom from slavery (Mk 10, 45).

74. In contrast to *freedom from*, redemption or “freedom”, in the positive sense, is mankind’s incorporation into the divine life.

75. Balthasar wants to avoid two pitfalls: the temptation to identify God and the suffering of the world (Georg W. F. Hegel and Jürgen Moltmann) and the opposite danger of exaggerating God’s immutability in a way which would remove him from participating in the tragic human situation. See JOHN O’DONNELL, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Continuum, London 2000, 108.

76. Balthasar connects these three moments. With regard to this, one of his beautiful expressions is the following: “As when the huge red curtain parts in the middle and the announcer appears by the footlights (invisible behind him the mystery of the stage, he himself in some sense the embodiment of the drama that is about to unfold): thus did the Lord appear in the world.” See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms*, Ignatius, San Francisco 1995, 53.

77. See GERARD F. O’HANLON, “Theological Dramatics”, in *The Beauty of Christ*, edited by Bede McGregor - Thomas Norris, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1994, 97-98. See ANNE HUNT, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery*, 64.

The separation of the Incarnate Son from the Father that occurs in the event of the cross is, therefore, a ‘translation’ of the eternal distinction of their Persons. The ‘distance’ from the Father caused by sin that the Son experiences is drawn into the eternal difference between their Persons, a distance bridged by their mutual love in the Holy Spirit. Thus, Balthasar sees the separation of the cross as a ‘mode’ of expressing the infinite love of the Father and Son in the Spirit.<sup>78</sup>

### 2. *Representation in Balthasar’s soteriology*

According to Balthasar’s interpretation of the paschal mystery, Christ bears the “sin of the world” in the sense of a “vicarious representation”<sup>79</sup> (*Stellvertretung*) on behalf of all the sinful descendants of the “first Adam”. The drama of the passion is the drama between the Father and the Son but also the drama between God and man insofar as Jesus is truly one of us. Two freedoms are involved, divine and human.

It is the great principle of Balthasar’s entire Theodramatics that “the creation of finite freedom by infinite freedom is the starting point of all theo-drama”<sup>80</sup> but the antinomies that inevitably result from their juxtaposition can only be resolved by the “wondrous exchange” that took place when Jesus Christ was “made sin” for humanity’s sake – the central moment in that theo-drama. It is then this *pro nobis* action of Jesus that is at the core the dramatic interaction of God and mankind in the redemption. There Christ, in his kenotic state, becomes a “free space” where the “collision of the sin of the world” with the judgement of the Father occurs.<sup>81</sup>

### 3. *Humanity’s relationship to the trinitarian life*

In his soteriology, Balthasar emphasises man’s reception of the trinitarian life through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The paschal mystery does not only mean the taking away of sins, but also the giving of the Holy Spirit. “Out of his

78. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Theodramatik*, IV, 256-265 as quoted in ROBERT A. PESARCHICK, *The Trinitarian Foundation*, 110 f. 41.

79. Here *Stellvertretung* is being translated as vicarious representation and not vicarious substitution so as to differentiate the soteriological position of Balthasar from that of Luther. Luther sees Jesus as damned in place of sinners.

80. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Theo-Drama*, II, Ignatius, San Francisco 1992, 271.

81. See HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Herrlichkeit*, III/2/2, 223 as quoted in ROBERT A. PESARCHICK, *The Trinitarian Foundation*, 64.

love God the Father gives that which is most precious to him, his Son, for us. Out of his love the Son goes into the darkest places of the world, of death and hell, in order to bear the guilt of all his human brothers. And this love is given to us as the fruit poured into our hearts: God's Holy Spirit of love."<sup>82</sup> Balthasar continues that the Holy Spirit renders man capable not only of receiving and returning a gift to God, but also of having deeper meaning.

#### 4. *Humanity's incorporation into the Church*

The death of Jesus is both exclusive and inclusive. While no one is saved only for oneself, all are called to share in Christ's fecundity and be bearers of grace for the others. Thus, through Christ's death and the gift of the Spirit, man receives the new life of the Trinity and is incorporated into the body of Christ. Everyone, therefore, being incorporated in Christ, can truly offer the Eucharist with him.

#### 5. *The death of Jesus is the key which unlocks the enigma of the mystery of death*<sup>83</sup>

In his theology of redemption, Balthasar presents Christ as the only answer to what philosophically speaking is a "riddle without solution". The Son has become incarnate in order to die for humanity. From the beginning, Jesus lives under the sentence of death. Making use of the "hour", continuously repeated in the gospel of John, Balthasar presents Jesus as receiving it from the Father's hand. Balthasar explains that Christ uses his obedience to remove "the sting" of death and that Jesus lives his mission as obedience freely given. Hence, on the cross, Jesus becomes the deed of love *par excellence*.

### Conclusion

The death of Jesus, therefore, represents the culmination of the drama of divine and human freedom. In other words, the cross is that love poured out to the end upon sinful humanity which rejects love. The drama of the cross can only be understood within the eternal drama of love which admits of no contradiction. The drama which unfolds on calvary is thoroughly consistent with this eternal

82. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Elucidations*, Ignatius, San Francisco, 1998, 54

83. In addition to this, John Riches (1939-) holds that the descent to hell, for Balthasar, is the only possible answer to the ultimate riddle of how a loving, sovereign God could allow the misery and suffering and evil which inflicts our world. See JOHN RICHES, "The Biblical Basis of Glory", 67.

drama of love. The cross is the supreme instance of God’s glory, even if this glory is a hidden glory, concealed under the suffering and disfigurement of the divine beauty.

## Summary

*Le riflessioni di Hans Urs von Balthasar sulla morte di Cristo sono al centro di questo articolo. Il testo intende in primo luogo presentare il “dramma in tre atti” del mistero pasquale e poi esplorare la soteriologia del teologo Svizzero. Il Venerdì Santo come l’auto-donazione di Cristo, il Sabato Santo come giorno di silenzio e la Domenica di Pasqua come giorno del trionfo offrono l’ermeneutica indispensabile per una giusta comprensione della Trinità. La morte di Gesù sulla croce è presentata in termini di “consegna”, “obbedienza” e “missione”. “Solidarietà” e “realtà” sono invece altre parole-chiave con cui la discesa di Cristo nella Sheol viene descritta. Infine, nella risurrezione come evento non solamente la croce e la discesa agli inferi (l’abbassamento) di Gesù, rivelano un significato intrinseco, ma anche il potere del Padre sul peccato e sulla morte nell’innalzare il Figlio per la vita eterna è altrettanto manifestato. Per Balthasar, la morte di Cristo era diversa da ogni altra morte umana in quanto che Cristo portava il peso del peccato al posto dell’umanità. La sua morte fa sì che il corso dell’intera storia umana si inverta. Alla fine, la croce come un evento ha una efficacia unica che non può mai essere sostituita da nessun’altra cosa e da nessun altro uomo.*

*Les réflexions de Hans Urs Von Balthasar sur la mort du Christ sont au cœur de cet article. Le texte s’emploie, dans un premier temps, à présenter le “drame en trois actes” du mystère pascal et à explorer la soteriologie du théologien suisse. Le Vendredi saint, comme l’auto-donation du Christ, le Samedi saint, comme le jour du silence et le Dimanche de Pâques, comme le jour du triomphe, offrent l’herméneutique indispensable pour une juste compréhension de la Trinité. La mort de Jésus en croix est présentée en termes “d’abandon”, “d’obéissance” et “de mission”. “Solidarité” et “réalité” sont d’autres mots-clés pour décrire la descente du Christ au Shéol. Enfin, dans la résurrection, comme événement, non seulement la croix et la descente aux Enfers -l’abaissement- de Jésus, révèlent-elles une signification intrinsèque, mais c’est aussi le pouvoir du Père sur le péché et sur la mort, dans le relèvement du Fils pour la vie éternelle, qui est entre autres manifesté. Pour Balthasar, la mort du Christ est différente des morts humaines parce que le Christ y portait le poids du péché pour l’humanité entière. Sa mort*

*fait que le cours de toute l'histoire humaine est inversé. En somme, la croix, comme événement, a une efficacité unique qui ne pourra jamais être substituée par quoique ce soit ou par qui que ce soit.*

\*Rev. John A. Berry, born in 1976, priest in 2003, has recently been appointed a Visiting Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Fundamental and Dogmatic Theology. He has studied at the University of Malta, the Pontifical Gregorian University and was a visiting researcher at the Catholic University of Louvain and at the Institut Catholique de Paris in 2007.

170, "Shalom",  
Birzebbuga Str.,  
Birzebbuga. BBG 1507  
frjohnberry@gmail.com