

BALTHASAR, ST. THÉRÈSE AND THE THEOLOGIAN
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I was introduced to Hans Urs von Balthasar by a lecturer in Milltown, Fr. John Hyde, S.J., a remarkable teacher, who formed a generation of theologians and philosophers there from 1962 until his death in 1983. Two things he said about Balthasar that are worth recording here. He said in his inimitable Cork accent, “Tackling Balthasar is like a fly examining an elephant; you can only see a bit at a time”. Speaking of the great difficulty of coping with sources in the light of Balthasar’s enormous erudition, Fr. Hyde remarked: “When he speaks about something that I know a bit about like Homer or Dionysius, I find him accurate. So...” I am far from the extensive learning of Balthasar, or the depth of understanding of Hyde, but in the case of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, I can confirm the extraordinary achievement of Balthasar, and I might include for good measure the remarkable Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity (1880-1906), whose centenary Carmelites are already preparing to celebrate. Balthasar wrote two groundbreaking studies on these, which he later combined in a book called, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*.¹ The first edition of the Thérèse book was in 1950, then entitled: *Thérèse von Lisieux: Geschichte einer Sendung*, soon translated into English as *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Story of a Mission* (1954). The volume on Elizabeth appeared in German as *Elizabeth von Dijon und ihre geistliche Sendung*.²

¹ Ignatius, San Francisco 1992, from *Schwestern im Geist*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1970.

² Hegner, Cologne - Olten 1952; in English, *Elizabeth of Dijon: An Interpretation of her Spiritual Mission*, Pantheon, New York 1956.

CONTEXTS: THÉRÈSE AND BALTHASAR

It is important to place the Thérèse book in the context of both Balthasarian and Theresian studies. We are fortunate in being able to do both. From the mid-1940s Balthasar was exploring in depth the centrality of Christ in theology. He was led to serious patristic and medieval figures. He was influenced and in dialogue with Karl Barth (1886-1968), E. Przywara (1888-1972), and others, including H. de Lubac, nine years his senior. His reflections on the Word of God and especially his patristic studies on Origen and Gregory of Nyssa led him almost inevitably to the question of spirituality and theology. Monographs on Augustine, Origen, Maximus quickly appeared.³ Balthasar had several questions urging him on at this time. He appreciated the rediscovery or re-emphasis on religious experience in Schliermacher. He also intuitively felt that the subjective dimension of faith and spirituality had been seriously neglected; at the same time, he was anxious that the objectivity of the Catholic spiritual tradition be not prejudiced. Along with Karl Rahner he was convinced that the separation of theology and spirituality after the 13th century was disastrous for both disciplines. It is at this time that Balthasar comes to St. Thérèse.

The position of the Lisieux saint was rather fraught at the time. She had died in 1897. Her autobiographic writings were published in a limited edition the year later and would be called *Histoire d'une âme*. It became enormously popular with innumerable editions and translations. The text, however, had been edited, polished and at times somewhat distorted by her sister Pauline, Mother Agnes. I would be of the view that such manipulation of the text was understandable, and even excusable, given the time and culture in which the text originally appeared.⁴ The restored original was published in facsimile in 1956 with a transcription a year later. Balthasar was therefore working with an inadequate text, one that was marked excessively the sugary culture and the *bondieuserie* of the previous century. He had some access to the letters of Thérèse, which had been published in 1948 by the Abbé Combes.

The Theresian context of Balthasar is significant. Though there had been enormous enthusiasm for the saint in the Church, the phrase of

³ Cf. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *My Work in Retrospect*, Ignatius, San Francisco 1993, from *Mein Werk: Durchblicke*, 1990, pp. 17-45.

⁴ Cf. C. O'DONNELL, *Love in the Heart of the Church: The Mission of Thérèse of Lisieux*, Veritas, Dublin 1997, pp. 9-16.

Pius XI being especially significant, “The greatest saint of modern times”. There were a few theological studies notable by two Dominicans, Frs. H. Petitot (1927) and M.M. Philipon (1946). More important and influential were those of the Abbé Combes, a professor at the Roman Lateran University, who gave a theological course on her for Paris faculties of theology in 1947, and whose books had begun to appear in French from the previous year. There had also been a reasonably successful biography in German by Ida Görres in 1944. She produced a new and enlarged edition in 1957, which was translated into English in 1959 as *The Hidden Face*.⁵ This study managed to pierce through the over-sentimentality of the Lisieux portraits, both visual and devotional, but it has been regarded as excessively psychological.⁶

THE STUDY OF BALTHASAR

We now have the stage set for Balthasar’s study of Thérèse. He was working with inadequate texts; he did not have very many serious secondary studies of the saint. We can note in passing that in a revised edition of his study in 1970 Balthasar had at his disposal critical texts. He did not change his conclusions very much, though his preface for the revised edition pointed to the new need to affirm the contemplative life in the Church. He had published in 1956 his book *Prayer* or, more accurately, *Contemplative Prayer (Das betrachtende Gebet)*, in which he stated his conviction that the gathering of the Church around the Word demands contemplative prayer.⁷ We can begin an exposition of some themes of Balthasar by quoting his own acknowledgement of his sources:

Thérèse von Lisieux: Geschichte einer Sendung [St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Story of a Mission] (1950) would never have come about without Adrienne’s theology of mission. She was deeply preoccupied with the saints, but she also gave a critical account of their spiritual journeying and shifted emphasis away from psychology toward theology. I built on all this in my study, which decked out the insights taken from Adrienne with a rich array of texts from St. Thérèse.⁸

⁵ Pantheon, New York 1959, from German, *Das Senfkorn von Lisieux*, Herder, Freiburg 1957.

⁶ Cf. BALTHASAR, *Two Sisters*, pp. 31-40, with important nn. 15, 16, 21.

⁷ Cf. *My Work*, p. 63.

⁸ *Our Task: A Report and a Plan*, Ignatius, San Francisco 1994, from *Unser Auftrag: Bericht und Entwurf* [1984], p. 98.

It is from Adrienne that Balthasar drew the view that Thérèse had been permanently stunted by being told by her confessor, the Abbé Pichard, that she had never sinned. Adrienne and Balthasar took this to mean that she then understood that she had no sin at all, and even when Conrad De Meester had informed him that texts in Thérèse herself contradicted this view of total sinlessness, he continued to propound his views in lectures and articles in the 1970s. It is clear that Thérèse understood her confessor to mean that she had no *mortal* sin. This error distorts one's appreciation of the saint's and some of her thought, but it is not significant for our interest, which is the role of theology and the Lisieux saint. Balthasar in fact knew of the positions of De Meester, but asserted that he had not adverted to them before the second edition of his work.⁹ The consequences of Balthasar's position are particularly inimical to his grasp of her mystical doctrine, indeed to her role in the Church vis-à-vis sinners.¹⁰ One can surmise that he retained his position at least partly because to modify them would mean a very substantial revision of his book, and, by the time of De Meester's writing, Balthasar had already become engrossed in the mammoth task of his trilogy.

HER MISSION

Balthasar's main thesis about Thérèse is about her mission. He lays some groundwork by speaking about two kinds of saints, where he finds customary and representative sanctity, depending on whether the sanctifying impulses flow from the body to the head or from the head to the body.¹¹ I do not find this distinction very helpful or convincing. He is on surer ground when he speaks of some saints having a special mission for, in and to the Church. These God "selects to serve for centuries as living interpretations of the gospel".¹² These saints are in some ways more popular with the faithful, even though

⁹ *Two Sisters*, p. 40, n. 21. The criticisms had appeared in C. DE MEESTER, *Dynamique de la confiance: Genèse et structure de la "voie d'enfance spirituelle" de sainte Thérèse de Lisieux*, Cerf, Paris 1969 (2nd ed. 1995), pp. 389-392; cf. *The Power of Confidence: Genesis and Structure of the "Way of Spiritual Childhood" of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, Alba, New York 1998, pp. 238-241 and Appendix IV, "Cardinal von Balthasar's Opinion on Saint Thérèse's Sense of Sin", pp. 367-371.

¹⁰ *Two Sisters*, pp. 343-354.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

they are less imitable than the saints who are marked mainly by their purity and fruitfulness.

For the faithful, they are, above all, a new type of conformity to Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore new illustrations of how the gospel is to be lived.¹³

Balthasar then touches into a dominant *leitmotif* of his thought, viz. the breakdown between theology and spirituality. He states that living in the world of the saints is necessary for true penetration of the world, and goes on to say:

All the Church's theology is rooted in the period that stretches from the apostles into the Middle Ages, when the great theologians were also saints. Then life and doctrine, orthopraxy and orthodoxy were wedded; the one fertilizing the other, and they brought forth much fruit. In modern times, theology and sanctity have become divorced, to the great harm of both. Except for a few cases, the saints have not been theologians, and theologians have tended to treat their opinions as a sort of by-product, classifying them as *spiritualité* or, at best, *théologie spirituelle*.¹⁴

Balthasar is convinced that Thérèse was directly entrusted by God with a mission to the Church.

Her mission was to live and teach her "little way":

"It is the way of spiritual childhood, the way of trust and total surrender. I will bring to them the little means that have served me so well..."

Balthasar then immediately observes:

It was not so much her writings as her life itself that is her doctrine, especially as her writings speak about her life more than anything else...Her life only contains exemplary value for the Church insofar as the Holy Spirit possessed her and used her in order to demonstrate something for the sake of the Church, opening up new vistas onto the Gospels. That, and that alone, should be the motive for the Church's interest in Thérèse.¹⁵

He notes that at the canonisation in 1925 Pius XI spoke of "a new message..., new mission..., new model of sanctity", so that she is a

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

“master in the matter of spiritual teaching”.¹⁶ When he comes to seek the essential of her mission and teaching, it is truth rather than love that he first stresses. Balthasar is somewhat clearer when he attempts two years later to differentiate the missions of Thérèse and Elizabeth of Dijon:

The centre of the doctrinal mission of Thérèse of Lisieux was to relate human sinners to divine mercy in a new way, based on the interpenetration of justice and mercy within the Godhead, indeed on the primacy of love over justice as a form of love. The relationship was established in the New Testament and Paul’s teaching on faith and works was intended to help people to appropriate it.¹⁷

THÉRÈSE’S EXISTENTIAL THEOLOGY

Balthasar raises the important question of Thérèse’s sources.

“Truth” refers to doctrine, as doctrine is taught within the Church, and therefore is related to the sources of the Church’s teaching: the revelation as it has been recoded in Scripture and tradition, then interpreted by the teaching authority and the consensus of theologians.¹⁸

Indeed, he remarks:

Thérèse, then was granted that inner experience, that “science of the saints”, who are taught directly by the Holy Spirit; but with her, since her preparatory formation had been slighter, one finds a marked stress upon experience at the expense of tradition.¹⁹

Thérèse, he notes later, lived before she wrote,²⁰ so that

For Thérèse, a thing was not true unless it can be realised in practice. She simply would not dare to recommend a doctrine that she had not already tried out on herself with all its painful consequences. But once she had tested it, then this part of her own being ceases to belong to herself... [She] has placed it at the disposal of the Church to serve as the common good of this Church.²¹

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

Hence he can affirm: “The term, ‘existential theology’ affords the best description of the truth that Thérèse is realising in her own life and being”.²²

Balthasar returns again to her lack of tradition, which, he says, she shares with Francis and Ignatius.

It was not her mission to continue interpreting and developing the tradition (as, say, Thomas Aquinas did) but to press back unflinchingly to its fresh sources in the Scriptures, from which tradition can derive fresh inspiration.²³

He gives a daring comparison of Thérèse and Luther:

Luther, brought face to face with Scripture, came to conclusions that might be considered remotely parallel to those of Thérèse: the personal certainty of salvation, the stress upon trusting *fiducia* as opposed to ascetic practices and other good works, the clear-cut preference for New Testament mercy as against Old Testament justice. And, in this sense, all due reserves having been made, the “little way” can be regarded as the catholic answer to the demands and questions raised by Luther.²⁴

This insight did not perhaps receive the attention it merited in the whole discussion leading up to her being declared a doctor of the Church.

In successive chapters Balthasar explores her childhood and his view, which we have noted above, that she was damaged by her confessor telling her that she had never serious sin. From her family he notes the profound sense of being loved, which she easily transferred to God’s love for her.²⁵ There follows a long and fascinating section on the Carmelite *Rule*,²⁶ which astonishingly he never mentions specifically, nor cites anything of this same *Rule*. It is an abstract account of living religious life, from an Ignatian or perhaps Jesuit perspective, buttressed by quotations from, and events in the life of, Thérèse. Moreover, he seems to confuse the fundamental Carmelite project of the *Rule* with house rules of customs of the Lisieux Carmel. Similarly, Balthasar’s interpretation of Thérèse’s fascination with Joan of Arc²⁷

²² *Ibid.*, p. 71; cf. further O’DONNELL, *Love in the Heart of the Church*, p. 218.

²³ *Two Sisters*, p. 81.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96, and developed more fully, pp. 283-284.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 117-144.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-170.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 201, 202 and 239-241 and 323: “the saint who inspires her most”.

demands rather that we be alert to the long quotation in the Carmelite *Rule* on the spiritual armour of God (see *Eph* 6:10-16).²⁸

My sense here, and it applies also to other parts of the work, is that he began intuitively, perhaps with insights from Adrienne. He sought the form (*Gestalt*), the key pattern of the saint's life and thought. Details did not worry him too much, and there are many aspects of Thérèse that he did not treat.²⁹ He was content with the essentials.

THE DOCTRINE OF THÉRÈSE

IN examining the doctrine of Thérèse, Balthasar sees it as both negative. He devotes a long section to her ruthless opposition to Pharisaism and the religion of merits.³⁰ He notes:

We have been led unawares into the very heart of Thérèse's mission. What Thérèse goes on to say, as she acknowledges, is the secret source of her doctrinal message. By demolishing the religion of works for the sake of pure love (which is itself more effective than all justification by works), she places herself at the very centre of the gospel, at the very point where the joyous message of redemption marks the decisive step from Old Testament to New. The mentality that confronts Thérèse so frequently in the Catholic asceticism of her day, and that she feels more and more obliged to reject, is the Old Testament mentality of justification by works expressed in its most extreme forms in Pharisaism.³¹

He goes on to state: "Thérèse sees it as her special mission to view all God's attributes in the light of his merciful love; his love is not simply connected with the attributes, it embraces them".³² He concludes his section on Therese's deconstructionism: "This whole process of demolishing the 'great way', the way of justification by works, has shown the little way of love to be the only way".³³

Towards the end, the profoundly Ignatian Balthasar can bring his own tradition of indifference to grasp Thérèse's remarkable journey

²⁸ *Rule* new enumeration 18-19.

²⁹ He has little to say on the Eucharist and on her prayer. A substantial literature on the latter is now available; see the footnotes to C. O'DONNELL, *Prayer: Insights from Thérèse*. Veritas, Dublin 2001.

³⁰ *Two Sisters*, pp. 243-270.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 257; cf. whole section, pp. 237-270.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 262.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

from desiring suffering as a child to complete openness to God's sovereign will in this regard.³⁴ In the end, Thérèse surrenders totally to merciful love and in so doing achieves the greatest fruit of her "little way".³⁵

THÉRÈSE AND THE THEOLOGIAN TODAY

Balthasar several times notes the saying of Pius XI that she had received the gift of wisdom to a rare degree.³⁶ He outlined her significant contribution to the theology of grace and to spirituality. There are other important themes that she develops and casts new light on various areas of theology.³⁷ This would be a major issue at the time when she was declared a doctor of the Church.³⁸ The question of her role vis-à-vis the theologian becomes more insistent. John Paul II stressed the divine inspiration of Thérèse's teaching:

First of all [among salient aspects], we find a special charism of wisdom. This young Carmelite, without any particular theological training, but illumined by the light of the Gospel, feels that she is being taught by the divine Teacher, who she says, is "the Doctor of Doctors" (Ms a, 83v), and from him she receives "divine teaching" (Ms B 1r).

And he added:

Her teaching not only conforms to Scripture and the Catholic faith, but excels (*eminet*) for the depth and wise synthesis it achieved.³⁹

The Pope also stated:

[The science of love] is the luminous expression of her knowledge of the mystery of the kingdom and of her special experience of grace.⁴⁰

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 301-321; on the issue of suffering in Thérèse, cf. O'DONNELL, *Love in the Heart of the Church*, ch. 5, pp. 71-98.

³⁵ Cf. pp. 327-332.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 233; cf. p. 32.

³⁷ Cf. C. O'DONNELL, *Thérèse among the Doctors of the Church*, in "Milltown Studies" 45(2000), pp. 43-69, at pp. 52-55.

³⁸ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Divini amoris scientia* (19 October 1997); infra DAS.

³⁹ DAS 7; cf. also nn. 1,4,5,6 and 8.

⁴⁰ DAS 1; cf. also nn. 7,8,9,

Like Balthasar, John Paul II speaks of the mission of Thérèse, articulating it thus:

She has made the Gospel shine appealingly in our time; she had the mission of making the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, known and loved; she helped to heal souls of the rigours and fears of Jansenism, which tended to stress God's justice rather than his divine mercy.⁴¹

Just as did Balthasar, John Paul II dwells very much on her experience of grace and of the divine mysteries.⁴²

The question for us is what the meaning of the doctorate might be for theologians. We should first note the ambiguity of the word "theologian". Some years ago in an article on Thérèse as a doctor of the Church I noted:

The word "theologian" has various meanings. In the Western Church it most commonly means a person who has obtained some higher degrees in theology and who is engaged professionally in explaining and exploring the sacred mysteries. But we have to remember that theology (*theos-logos*) is a word or discourse about God, especially an attempt to penetrate the meaning of the sacred mysteries. It is sometimes said that every believer is consequently a theologian, as all the followers of Christ must ask what these mysteries mean in their lives. Though there is some validity in doing so, the extension of the word "theologian" to everybody can run the risk of emptying the word of real meaning. One has to ask if Thérèse is a theologian in any but this most general sense?

A more helpful answer comes from considering the Eastern Churches. In them theology is above all knowledge of the Blessed Trinity,⁴³ and theologians are those who communicate what they have themselves experienced of the divine mysteries. The East, therefore, considers three people to be theologians par excellence: John the Evangelist, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Simeon the New Theologian. Eastern theology is existential and even experiential to a degree, which is not common in the West.⁴⁴

I concluded that St. John of the Cross is alluding to this kind of theology in his Prologue to his *Spiritual Canticle* (nn. 1-3). With John of the Cross and the Eastern tradition we are able to grasp the sense in which Thérèse can truly be called a theologian. It is not through

⁴¹ DAS 8.

⁴² DAS 10 and *passim*.

⁴³ Cf T. ŠPIDLÍK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI 1986, pp. 22, 338-339.

⁴⁴ Cf. C. O'DONNELL, *Thérèse among the Doctors of the Church*, p. 61.

academic research, but through being directly taught by God in and through love. Thérèse teaches what it is to experience the divine mysteries.

Denis Turner has observed some ten years ago:

[P]erhaps from the fourteenth century, the canon of those now called “mystics” ceases to include theologians of repute and, *e converso*, from that time to our own the canon of theologians contains no mystics. This generalisation is surprisingly exceptionless.⁴⁵

If the two functions are not any longer united in single persons, it is surely urgent that theologians study the mystics.

Thérèse could have been named a doctor of the Church not for the breadth of her learning, but because she shows new possibilities of integrating doctrine into the life of faith. She drew out the implications of the merciful love of God and showed how people can respond by the way of littleness. Thérèse certainly developed powerfully and at great depth some intuitions about the spiritual life, especially love. But her greatness as theologian lies not so much in the number of doctrines she enlightened with her wisdom as the methodology she offered to theology, a communication of the lived experience of the sacred mysteries.⁴⁶ After Thérèse theology should not ever again be an arid discipline pursued apart from the life of the Church; rather as Vatican II demanded, it should nourish the spiritual life.⁴⁷ Theology cannot be fruitfully pursued detached either from spirituality or more significantly liturgy. Prayer and love have an indispensable contribution to theology, and, along with the rest of the Church, its clergy and other leaders included, the theologian in turn is invited to embrace the way of littleness. Since the Middle Ages or earlier, theologians have recognised the value of philosophy. In recent years the contribution of other disciplines such as the human sciences and art is being belatedly recognised. The proclamation of Thérèse as a doctor of the Church would be a decisive assertion that, for the highest and purest theology, holiness too must be cultivated. It would be my contention that in this sense at least the doctorate of St. Thérèse would sit very well with Balthasar.

⁴⁵ D. TURNER, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Cf. K. RAHNER, *Experience of the Spirit and Existential Commitment*, in “Theological Investigations”, 16 (Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1979), pp. 24-34; *Experience of the Spirit*, *ibid.* 18 (1983), pp. 189-210; cf. BALTHASAR, *Word and Redemption*, pp. 87-108.

⁴⁷ Cf. Decree on the Training of Priests, *Optatam totius*, 16.

CONCLUSION

The nomination of Thérèse of Lisieux as a doctor of the Church can be seen as a kind of endorsement of the vision some fifty years earlier of Balthasar. He had bravely stated that the little nun of Lisieux, better known in popular piety than in theological textbooks, had nevertheless a mission in the Church that was profoundly theological. Balthasar stated the mission; the doctorate was a confirmation. Indeed one should look at the Apostolic Letter to see how often the pope refers to the ecclesial reception of Thérèse by the simple people, and by many documents of the ordinary magisterium.⁴⁸

One might be so bold as to say that his study of Thérèse was to mark Balthasar very profoundly. He continued to pursue ever more eagerly the issue of spirituality and theology, the role of the saints in the life of the Church. But in Thérèse he found an absolutely clear vision of the primacy of love, one which he would develop later with great depth and which provides the title of our Conference, "Love alone", indeed the credibility of faith and of the Church itself depends on love, *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*.⁴⁹

CHRISTOPHER O'DONNELL, O. CARM.

*Milltown Institute,
Dublin 6*

*Institutum Carmelitanum,
Rome*

⁴⁸ DAS 10; cf. also 10 and 7, which notes the special resonance, which her teachings have had in the Church.

⁴⁹ The title is perhaps inadequately translated as *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation*, Sheed and Ward, London 1968; German 1963 and 1985⁵.