THE NEW TENSION BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY IN CHRIST: “COMMUNITY” IN THE WORK OF HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

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The theology of community in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar envisages community as one of the four tensions in man’s understanding of himself. These are respectively: man-world; male-female; body-spirit and individual-community. With the coming of Christ the community dimension is transformed by the presence of the Church and a real theology of the individual develops. The individual becomes a unique “bearer of the Church,” irreplaceably part of the mission to the world. The ecclesial existence of the individual derives from the continuing roles of Peter, Mary, John, Paul and the “multitude,” in this person. The Church accompanies and converts the world through training strong Christian personalities who are at home in the Church community and who speak and suffer in society.

Introduction

The relationship between the individual and the community is a complex reality whose basic dynamics become even more intricate with the Incarnation of the divine Son. The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar offers a theory describing the relationship between the individual and the community which includes all of the features of the strictly anthropological context in a properly theological anthropology. Man’s anthropological context contains four tensions: man is rooted in the cosmos; man exists as spirit and body; man is individual and part of a community; and man exists as either man or woman. The focus of this paper is how von Balthasar understands the relationship between the individual and the community while at the same time demonstrating the continuing presence of the other tensions, even as they are transformed through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. His theology is a profound affirmation of the layperson.

A sidenote: this is such a vast topic in von Balthasar’s writings that a brief talk such as this one can only touch on what I believe to be the backbone of his thought.
Man is created to exist in Community

The divine Trinity differs greatly from the mythical gods. The mythical gods were assumed to be limited by each other or by the world, but the absolute God is never limited in this way. The persons and relations of the Trinity are “interior” to the notion of divinity itself. The Father, who is the origin of all, pours out his existence eternally in begetting the divine Son. The gift shared by the Father and Son is personified as the Holy Spirit. Now, man is created in the “image and likeness of God.” (Cf. Genesis I) so he comes to be through the Word, by the power of the Spirit and furthermore, the “idea” reserved for the finite ‘thou’ [is] within the infinite ‘Thou,’ within the eternal Word and Son.” In short, the essential nature of man as one who seeks out and makes community is rooted in the divine “community” within the divine Trinity. This natural structure is damaged by the Fall and restored in the life, death and resurrection of Christ; and it will be seen to exist in its redeemed and elevated form as a possibility in the Church.

To illustrate how the eternal unfolding of the “I-Thou” within the Godhead finds its unfolding in time in the one who is the image of God, one can turn to his treatment of the awakening of the child to self-consciousness in relation to his mother. To cite von Balthasar again:

In the beginning was the word with which a loving “thou” summons forth the “I”: in the act of hearing lies directly, antecedent to all reflection, that one has been given the gift of the reply; the little child does not “consider” whether it will reply with love or non-love to its mother’s inviting smile, for just as the sun entices forth green growth so does love awaken love; it is in the movement toward the “Thou” that the “I” becomes aware of itself. By giving itself, it experiences: I give myself. By crossing over from itself into what is other than itself, into the open world that offers it space, it experiences its freedom, its knowledge, its being as spirit.

This little reflection on the “mother’s smile” indicates the basic dynamics of human life and shows the four tensions that man discovers in his nature. The child is grounded in the world, it is present as a gendered being, and comes to consciousness of himself at least initially through the community with his mother.

Evidently, man develops as a human being through acting intentionally, through exercising his relational nature. It is crucial—here von Balthasar quotes Gehlen—that “man must ‘take upon himself the perilous nature of his own being.’” However, human freedom is such that this action “is possible and meaningful only within a given situation or constellation.” These two aspects indicate the role of community for von Balthasar. Community generates a
“space” in which the human being can act, and it furnishes counterparts suitable to the development of the humanity of the individual.

The human community forms a large part of the situation for human action and hence human becoming. This means that the operation of human freedom has a dramatic character, because it involves the freedom of the persons participating in any interaction. Such operations take place within the network of human decisions of the particular community, and “within the framework of humanity as a whole with its problems.” With the formulation of these basic concepts, von Balthasar can move to some general comments about the history of the human community and the changes caused by the coming of Christ.

The History of Human Community

The Pre-Christian Community

In von Balthasar's estimation the pre-Christian community related very easily to the larger context of the whole of humanity and hence to Being as such. Each individual is a zoon politikon, a being surrounded by and protected by the community. Moreover, the early primitive communities and higher civilizations saw themselves as central to the cosmos that gave their individual members a particular perception of themselves as well.

The primitive individual then lived two contrary movements; First, the individual “grows into” the community, is “inserted into the world of the community” and its connection to the gods. This is done at the cost of accepting the laws of the community and the demands of the common good. Second, the community itself learns from exceptional individuals such as the founder of the community, heroes and kings. Such figures mediate between divine and human law and are sources of meaning within the community.

The Coming of the Christian Community

Initially von Balthasar simply says that Christianity renders the relation between the individual and community much “more intense,” which is a considerable understatement. For him Christianity develops the notion of person and transforms both the individual and the community, “progressively and totally.” The Christian proclamation of the sovereign freedom of God puts man and the cosmos over against God. Thus the first human tension is transformed by God's revelation of himself, yet at the same time the very meaning of God's transcendence is that he is “close to and immanent in his created world.” But there is more in the Christian revelation. God communicates his own being to his creation so that his creatures can commune with him. What has happened is that the created relationship now becomes “an emphatically free and personal one.” The divine is no longer “found” in impersonal nature.
God's communication has the following consequences. (1) Some individuals have been addressed and given a mission by God, thus differentiating them from their fellows. (2) The Church community is called into being and is not simply a community of brothers. The individual in the Church no longer relates to the community as the mere “superiority of the continuous species over the transient individual.” The individual, for von Balthasar, is now a gift to the community through his or her embodiment of the Spirit of Christ. Hence, (3) the Christian community is community on the pneumatic level rooted in the “Lord’s Resurrection and his Eucharistic state” through the power of the Holy Spirit. So it is possible not only to do things for one another externally, but also things can be done internally as well.

So that at most the person who offers to share with Christ, in bearing the burden of his brothers, will know that his offer is meaningful and fruitful: he will not know where and how it has its effect.

So (4) through the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the human community has been given a new interior principle and a more complex structure. It now has the Church existing within it as a new and absolute source of meaning.

The Post-Christian Community

Turning to the post-Christian community, von Balthasar poses the question: “What ... if man, no longer accustomed to take his standard from the cosmos (now emptied of the divine), refuses to take it from Christ?” In von Balthasar’s judgment it is this refusal that gives rise to the many different forms of titanism found in the post-Christian world. Man claims the aspects of divinity for himself giving rise to the “Faustian, Promethean attitude” of the Enlightenment and the Age of Idealism. In the Post-Christian period, political structures compete with the Church. “They claim the right, theoretically and practically, to administer the totality of salvation and truth.”

Now I want to focus on the Church community, because in many ways it is the nascent transformed human community.

The Church Community

The Church community is constituted through spirit-filled relationships. It comes from the side of Christ, so it has a transcendent foundation which means that on the one hand it will never simply blend into the rest of humankind, and on the other hand it will not become the whole of mankind as a sort of restoration of Christendom. Von Balthasar accepts the tension of a Church “alongside” the rest of human society.
The “spirit-filled” relationships identified by von Balthasar are those of Christ to Peter, Paul, James, John, Mary and the “multitude.” These relationships are the ongoing principles of the Church. These are, to use his phrase, the “Christological constellation” lying at the core of the Church. These relationships reflect different aspects of the presence of Christ through his Body the Church. Here also is von Balthasar’s great recovery from the history of ecclesiology; and that is recovery of the figure of Mary, not as the object of a separate dogmatic treatise, but as one of the principles in the Church. She “embraces the ecclesial missions mentioned above.” She is “at the source of all universality in the Church,” to use his words. But the constellation does not stop here: “In the shadow of Mary’s mission are those other women’s missions that form part of the original ‘Christological constellation’: that of Mary Magdalene . . . [and] that of Mary of Bethany.” (Just a side comment—von Balthasar has taken the historical development of the community and its personalities seriously and he uses them as the template for his theological reflection.)

Returning to the consideration of Mary: Mary is a principle of the Church community. She is the locus of the transformation of two of the human tensions noted at the outset.

First, we have in her the one half of the polarity of man and woman. She is set over against the manhood of the Incarnate Son. Von Balthasar simply poses the question: “if he is the ‘Second Adam,’ surely he is incomplete until God has formed the woman from his side?” On the individual level, von Balthasar argues, Jesus’ counterpart is an individual, namely Mary. Second, since the divine Son is incarnate to reconcile the whole of creation with God, (Cf. II Corinthians 5:19) “there will necessarily be a social aspect to his ‘helpmate.’” Hence we have the individual woman in Mary and the “woman-in-community,” the Church. This is another way of stating the spousal nature of the Church that is found in Paul: “Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church.” (Ephesians 5:25) Here also is the new horizon within which to understand marriage between a man and a woman as a symbol of the marriage of Christ and his Church.

Hence the tension of human being as man or woman, reappears in the Church in a new and vital form. Von Balthasar’s perspective is that the Church is the bearer of the fullness of humanity, not simply as a message which would constitute a return to a pre-Christian notion of community, but as a real potentiality through communion with Christ in his Spirit. This view is perfectly tenable since the Church is the Body of Christ and, “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way,”(Ephesians 1:23) This is the probable reason for his preference of “community” over “society,” a term that hardly ever appears in his work. Community has its roots in the Latin communio with its connotations of “communion” and “communication.”
The third of the tensions mentioned in the introduction, that between the individual and the community, returns in a new form. Christ's relationship to Peter, Mary and the others demonstrates that faithful individuals can now embody the universal, and so becomes a gift for the community. This is evident in the relationships mentioned at the start of this section; and the same applies to every other member of the Church. For von Balthasar the difference between a person inside and outside the Church is that in the Church, "the 'person' only shines forth in the individual where the absolute Unique God bestows an equally unique name on him."\(^5\) According to the Apocalypse, it is a "new name which no one knows except him who receives it."\(^5\) He reserves "the concept of 'person' for the supernatural uniqueness of the man who has been called into a relationship of intimacy with God."\(^6\) He calls this "theological personhood" because the individual is now living a graced relation not just to anyone, but to the figures who are principles in the Church. The believer lives by the Petrine principle, the Johannine principle, the Pauline principle and the principle of the "multitude." The individual has become part of an ensemble, the continuation of the New Testament community, where the lead is Jesus Christ, who is the heart of the community. Then further, the individual has become an actor in God's drama of saving the whole world. The individual's reach extends beyond the apparent confines of the Church community to the rest of humanity.

This still leaves the matter of the second anthropological tension, that of the existence of man as body and spirit. The one who becomes a theological person is transformed by the Spirit of Christ and is a "charismatic person" in the theological sense. According to von Balthasar: "the charisms are not allotted to individuals through the Church's mediation but-for the Church's sake-given directly by God (Rom 12:3), directly by the risen Christ."\(^7\) These come from the unique God to the unique person without any possibility of calculating this gift ahead of time. This gifting of the individual as gift to the Church, and hence the world, means that the individual is, for him, "profoundly drawn into the community, expropriated for its sake and obligated to it."\(^8\)

As far as the individual is concerned, the reforming of human community in Christ means that the individual's dependence on the community moves from depending on the community to continue the species, to depending on a Eucharistic community that opens out into the communion of the saints. Nevertheless, the theological person, with all that entails within the Church, still remains a member of the "City of man," to borrow Augustine's term. There is a social dimension to the battle of the disciple in his own heart.\(^9\) For von Balthasar and the main proponents of the tradition, the social and Christian individual dimensions are intertwined. The relation of the individual and the social appears in the work of Ignatius of Loyola and his Meditation on the Two Standards and even in the work of Milton and in Dostoevsky's The Devils.
The peculiar social situation of the Church, in the world but not of the world, arises because the Church community is not a creation of the world-spirit but of the Holy Spirit, created “from the being of Christ himself.” Note the contrast with the extra-biblical religions which are inadequate mediations of the influence of the inner word, the Spirit that moves the hearts of men. Nevertheless, because they are “objectifications . . . of the essence of the human spirit; they are therefore willed by God.” God wills the salvation of all and so he is drawing the religions of the world into the drama of a history that is centered on Christ. Thus, von Balthasar reasons, the extra-biblical religions are, “christological, albeit anonymously,” which is a surprising admission given his resistance to the notion of the “anonymous Christian,” proposed by Rahner. I do believe that his real concern is the uniqueness of Christianity—hence the use of the term “anonymous” without linking it to the term ‘Christian’ as Rahner did. The existence of the Body of Christ brings the fulfillment of all religions. “The religions [in the plural] have come to an end,” to use his words. There is a radical difference between religions that merely “come near” to the fullness of religion and the “conversion” required by Christianity that leads to the God of Jesus Christ. Christianity involves the truth of the Word made flesh, and once one has entered into that truth then the partial fragments of the prior religions will be seen for what they are, namely, fragmentary and incomplete.

The fulfillment that the Church already in some way represents, means that it has to address the world. In Razing the Bastions, von Balthasar notes the “Church cannot avoid joining humanity in ascertaining [its] cosmic situation and task, and in accepting it.” In another place he is more dramatic still, the Gospel must inform the laity and it is they who must “shape the world.” The Church is the guardian of the deepest truths of humanity. So there is a positive symbiosis between the Church and the larger human community, and it is driven by the Holy Spirit.

The presence of the Christian community in human history means that even though Christ is the fullness of the meaning of human history, the light of his “Cross and resurrection reflects only indirectly back into world history.” The meaning of the Christian community is veiled and can only be uncovered by openness to the community. Thus Christianity is not a power on the level of the other powers in human history. One consequence of this unique presence is that, “Christianity could not come up with a program for mankind’s future that would be satisfying on an earthly level.” The meaning of Christ for humanity finds its completeness only in the Eschaton.

Von Balthasar envisages that this accompanying and pedagogy of the human community occurs in a number of ways. The Church itself has a certain presence in the world and is a forum for expression, but much of the impact of the Church comes from what von Balthasar calls “strong Christian personalities.” Such a notion is very much in the line of Paul’s exhortation to
the Corinthians: "You are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." (2 Corinthians 3:3) Notable Christian individuals are not separated from the Church when working in the world, but rather they are extensions of the Church. "Where there is a Christian, there is the Church; he bears the light with him and therefore (as long as he bears it truly) he never comes into an area outside the church." 38 This brings us to our final point...

Strong Christian Personalities

As one example of what he means by "strong Christian personality," allow me to present some of his comments on the writer Georges Bernanos (1888 - 1948). Von Balthasar has appreciated the lives of "strong Christian personalities" and used their experiences and insights in his own work.

Georges Bernanos was one figure who caught his eye, being a writer like himself, and more than that, a Catholic writer. Von Balthasar wrote about Bernanos:

Anyone who is familiar with what is at stake and has the eyes to see, knows that everything he [Bernanos] created is ecclesial existence that has been given form; existence derived not merely from an abstract individual faith, but from the specific faith that cannot be had elsewhere, that is, the faith of the Church, which is the communion of saints and whose wellsprings of grace—the sacraments—nourish the life of faith. 39

So in this person there is an extension of the Church. The Church in Bernanos' life was not theoretical but rather it was, in Balthasar's words, "a culture medium" for the creative writer's work. It gave him the family, the inner community, from which he could reach out into society at large and fulfill the mission of his baptism. The faithful individual now knows the universal truth of Jesus Christ and can serve the whole human community.

This is a layman in action:

The most wrenching description of this man's mission is the following: There are Christian truths that cry out with full throat from the events of the times, and they thus manifest that they are timely, that their time has come, but one must have the courage to hear them cry out. The courage, which is perfected by the trembling of his anguish, was one of the fundamental qualities of Bernanos the Christian. 40
The anguish and the courage came to the fore when Bernanos commented on society at large and on the Church, when in his view she had failed.

Bernanos' commentary on society can be examined in terms of the four anthropological tensions identified earlier.

**Man lives in tension with the Cosmos**

The first anthropological tension is man's tension with the cosmos. This tension is transformed with the coming of Christ, because through being redeemed each man can "direct" the cosmos to Jesus Christ who is now its lord. In the *Diary of a Country Priest*, Bernanos wrote:

> Paganism is not the enemy of nature, but only Christianity can enhance and exalt nature, only Christianity can raise nature to the true measure of man and man's dream.**42**

It is the shallowness of pure immanence which is the enemy for Bernanos. Christ gives nature its proper reference point.

There are two landscapes in Bernanos' work, the windswept coast of the North Sea, the landscape of his youth, and the untamed countryside of Brazil. His novels make use of the first, and his critical works make use of the second.

The new transcendence in Christ shows through the handling of the landscape in *Under Satan's Sun* where he writes of Donissan:

> He opened the window. He was still waiting he did not know for what. Through the shadowy chasm drenched in rain, the church glistened feebly as if it were the only living thing about.**43**

The redemption of Christ has brought with it the church, and his new life flows through it, making a new living thing present in the landscape and giving the landscape a center.

The landscape becomes so much more than a simple setting in works such as *Joy* and the *Diary of a Country Priest*. Bernanos writes as if the cosmos is drawn in to the struggle of his characters, as, of course, it is drawn in to the struggle for salvation. Almost like the incarnation, the world is linked to the hero. To quote from the *Diary*, the young priest says:

> I have just spent a whole hour at my window... The moonlight creates in the valley a kind of luminous velvet cover... What fantastic illusions! To tell the truth, we don't really know anything about this world of ours: we are not in the world.**44**
Man lives in a tension of Body and Spirit

The experience of faith embraces the whole man. It unites body and spirit in their openness to God and it is at this point that man discovers, in von Balthasar’s words, that the “vision of God is the truth of what man is.” It is in God that true freedom is found, and even preoccupation with oneself would be to deny this vision.

According to von Balthasar, Bernanos’ key words in this theme are freedom, love and simplicity. The first two are closely interrelated. To quote von Balthasar’s summation: “God himself is nothing but the abyss of an incomprehensible and free choice of love.”

Simplicity, or its synonym, in Bernanos’ lexicon, purity, is a total quality of body and soul. Impurity is “the total destruction of the light that shines in God.” Purity in fact becomes a precondition for knowledge of oneself in God. It is fundamental to faith itself.

Man lives in the tension between the Individual and the Community

The third tension is the one between the individual and the community, or man and society. In A Letter to the English, (1942) Bernanos wrote: “It is all very nice to put social projects on paper. But what we must know is what kind of men you intend to populate them with.” He realized that the shift in human society was changing man. Machines were extending man’s possibilities of doing evil. He was convinced that mankind was witnessing “the birth of an inhuman civilization that can take root only by virtue of a vast, immense and universal sterilization of the highest values of life.” This was the theme of the suitably entitled work, France against the Robots (1944). A spiritual crisis was at hand and it could not be masked by psychological explanations.

Only Christianity, in his view, has a vision of the world that could ground a response. The key lies in the contemplation of the Christian. Christianity is not programmatic in the sense of having ready formulae for the ills of the world. It is the individual saints who “get it right,” who are the archetypes. An archetype is “a figure who coaches and supports” the efforts of those who contemplate him or her. The individual nourishes the community.

This is where the figure of Bernanos himself comes to the fore. He held that “thinking is not for me a task or a pleasure, it is a risk.” Von Balthasar likens Bernanos’ sense to that of sacramental confession. Bernanos is not a braggart or someone who wishes to hear his own voice. It is rather the voice of someone who in his own words could say: “I am an ordinary person who has remained free, someone whom propaganda has not yet trained to jump through all the hoops held in front of him.” He has a keen sense of the different kinds of communication occurring in society and how much of it is manipulative or presented for some ends which are not immediately evident.
Man lives a gendered existence

Bernanos was aware of the supreme value of humanity itself. However in the modern period: "Man has made the machine, and the machine has made itself man, by a sort of demonic inversion of the mystery of the Incarnation."^54

Men and women populate Bernanos’ novels. They have to live this tension as they seek meaning in their lives, in the dialogue between Cenabre and Chantal in La Joie, (1928) as von Balthasar has done.55 On the one hand Cenabre offers a kind of loveless curiosity concerning Chantal’s nature. This is a very masculine act in von Balthasar’s view. She, on the other hand, reaches for the simplicity of the saint and has already arrived at the point: “what does it matter to me what I am what I am not? . . . the less I desire to know this.”56 Chantal is an example of the feminine embodiment of the saint. There is more that cannot be covered here.

For Bernanos the depth and vastness of the Christian Good News can and must confront the modern era, and it is the members of the Church who are going to bear the brunt of this confrontation.

To conclude: this too brief look at von Balthasar’s thoughts on the human community and the Church community steer us past some of the less developed theologies of community where the community is following a simply human dynamic, and yet passing on a divine message. Divine action has constituted the community. This is evident in the transformation of the four tensions in man’s understanding of himself. It is also clear that a real theology of the individual develops. The individual stands out in his or her transformed existence as a unique “bearer of the Church.” He or she is truly vir ecclesiasticus, and as such he or she is an irreplaceable part of the mission to the world. The parameters of the ecclesial existence of the individual derive from the continuing roles of Peter, Mary, John, Paul and the “multitude,” but they come to a unique synthesis in this unique person. The Church has a real role of accompanying and converting the world through developing strong Christian personalities who find their home in the Church community, but who can speak and suffer in society at large.

Notes

1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, Theodrama II. Dramatis Personae: Man in God, Graham Harrison trans., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 291. References to the volumes of Theodrama will contain the abbreviation TD followed by the volume number and the relevant page.
3. TD I, 340.
4. TD I, 353.
5. TD I, 354.
7. *TD II*, 383.
11. *TD II*, 396.
17. *TD II*, 421.
22. *TD III*, 279.
27. *TD II*, 415.
32. *TD III*, 413.
33. *TD III*, 420.
38. *Razing*, 89.
42. *Bernanos*, 220.
43. *Bernanos*, 235.
44. *Bernanos*, 241.
46. Bernanos, 222.
47. Bernanos, 222.
48. Bernanos, 228.
49. Bernanos, 30.
50. Bernanos, 30.
51. Bernanos, 33.
52. Bernanos, 40.
53. Bernanos, 41.
54. Bernanos, 545.