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The Unselfing Activity of the Holy Spirit in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar

IN THE EXTENSIVE SECONDARY literature on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, comparatively little attention has been given to his understanding of the activity of the Holy Spirit. This is to be expected, as it is the incarnate Word who forms the basis of his aesthetics, his trinitarian speculation, and his ethics, and the acts and episodes of Christ's life on which he counsels the Christian to meditate. Christ, he says, is not only the "means" of salvation, but also its "content," so that all theology, if it is to be Christian, must ultimately be speech about him.

In contrast, von Balthasar says that the Holy Spirit desires not so much to be seen as to enable seeing, to illuminate the Son. He is among those Western theologians to emphasize the Spirit's role in rendering believers attentive, a theme more commonly encountered in the East. As he puts it,

This Spirit is breath, not a full outline, and therefore he wishes only to breathe through us, not to present himself to us as an object; he does not wish to be seen but to be the seeing eye of grace in us, and he is little concerned about whether we pray *to* him, provided that we pray *with* him, 'Abba, Father,' provided that we consent to his unutterable groaning in the

depths of our soul. He is the light that cannot be seen except upon the object that is lit up: and he is the love between Father and Son that has appeared in Jesus.¹

The Spirit is the discloser of the mysteries of faith, according to von Balthasar, “which are hidden from the purely human gaze but already offered in the sensible incarnation. He is such all the more since he is simultaneously present in the objective mystery on which we meditate and in the subjective depths of our own selves as the bridge that leads us over into the mystery.”² It is through the light of the Spirit, himself “beyond all objectification,” that “everything that is at all capable of being illuminated becomes clear and transparent.”³ In describing the spirit this way, von Balthasar is conscious of following in the footsteps of the Eastern Fathers of the Church, especially St. Basil.

Even though von Balthasar maintains that Christ is the proper object of our vision, he does not leave the doctrine of the Holy Spirit to tend to itself. The charge often leveled against Karl Barth—another Christocentric thinker—namely, that his theology is effectively “binitarian,” does not apply in the case of von Balthasar. He is perfectly at ease speculating about the role of the Holy Spirit in the triune life, the conception of Christ, and the *triduum mortis*. The final volume of his *Theo-Logic*, the concluding work of his three-part magnum opus, is devoted entirely to the Third divine Person, as are numerous shorter pieces throughout his vast corpus. In short, though von Balthasar holds that the Spirit is “beyond all objectification,” that the Spirit is, in a sense, hidden in the very act of manifesting Christ to us, his pneumatology is a topic worthy of consideration in its own right.

Since this topic is too extensive to be the subject of any one article, I have limited myself in the current piece to a consideration of a single aspect of von Balthasar’s pneumatology: his claim that the Holy Spirit is the interpreter of God’s revelation in Christ.⁴ I will argue that the Spirit interprets Christ to us by bringing us into participation in his

way of being in the world. To put this another way, we are able to “see” the truth of Christ only from within, only through an appropriation of his openness and obedience to the Father. This identity between the Spirit’s activity of interpreting Christ to us and establishing us in Christ means that, for von Balthasar, there can be no separation between theory and practice. He lamented the disappearance of the idea of the “identity of knowledge and life” in modern theology, which he ultimately traced back to the influence of Scholasticism.⁵ For him, to understand God’s revelation in Christ is to participate in it.

Because human beings are closed in on themselves through sin, the Spirit brings them into the Son only through a process that von Balthasar calls “expropriation” (*Enteignung*) or “unselfing” (*Entselbstung*). It is only by breaking them out of their self-enclosure that the Spirit is able to draw them into the selfless love of the Father and Son; indeed, I will argue that these two activities are actually but one, that, just as Christ’s humiliation on the cross is also his glorification, so too does the believer’s mortification take place simultaneously with his or her deification. In being “unselfed,” human beings are not estranged from their nature as finite creatures but opened up from a falsely circumscribed existence to participate in true life. Finally, I will conclude with a brief reflection on the relationship between the Spirit’s unselfing activity and ecclesiology, noting that the former is the very basis for the latter.

My hope is that the following article will contribute in some small fashion to redressing one of the gaps in the literature on von Balthasar’s theology. Though his aesthetic and dramatic theories have recently gained the most attention from scholars, his understanding of the Spirit’s activity in the lives of the faithful merits greater discussion than it has so far received.

The Spirit as Interpreter

According to von Balthasar, the incarnate Word is the “presentation and the exposition of God,” God’s “final interpretation,” even

the “Father’s assumption of form.”⁶ Few modern theologians have risked such a thoroughgoing identification between God and Christ. It is through Christ’s obedience in life and death, according to von Balthasar, that God’s love is revealed to the world—and this love, he says, is finally identical with the divine life itself. Given this insistence on the exhaustive nature of Christ’s exposition of God to us, it is somewhat surprising to find von Balthasar going on to describe the Holy Spirit’s “central comprehensive role as that of Interpreter of God’s self-proclamation in Jesus Christ.”⁷ Is this not a case of taking away with the left hand what was given with the right? If the Son interprets the Father to the world, is indeed his final interpretation, what need is there of an additional interpreter in the person of the Holy Spirit? Does not this multiplication of interpreters render fluid what is otherwise so definitive in von Balthasar’s account of God’s revelation in Christ?

Yes and no. On the one hand, the Spirit’s interpretation consists in nothing more than making Christ present to us, or perhaps better, making us present to Christ. In good Johannine fashion, von Balthasar understands the Spirit as the one who declares only what he has heard, leading the disciples into “all the truth” concerning Christ. The Spirit’s role in the economy of salvation is not to impart new information—for there is nothing further to be spoken—but to manifest the Word of the Father in all its fullness to the world. As von Balthasar understands John, the Spirit is able to carry out this mission only after Christ has died, “after this Word has been uttered to his very end.”⁸ Until Christ’s life has reached its conclusion in the Cross and Resurrection, the love of God revealed therein is inevitably only partially understood; for the “total exposition of this love in the world that is not divine and is opposed to God demanded that Jesus take the path into the uttermost darkness, because there would always have been some matter that would not let itself be used for the exposition of God.”⁹ If so, the disciples can be excused for their failure to understand who Christ is and what he has come to do. Their repeated mistakes are due less to obstinacy and plain

thickness than to the incomplete nature of Christ's revelation prior to his death: "At all events it is only the fulfillment of the mission of the Incarnation that can provide an overview and an interpretation of it. Only now has 'all the truth' in the Johannine sense been realized; only now is it ready to be interpreted."¹⁰

As I have said, the interpretive activity of the Spirit does not involve the accumulation of an ever greater number of facts about Christ, but the opening up of the whole to us, of the God revealed in his life, death, and Resurrection. As von Balthasar writes, "Thus 'all the truth' does not mean a synthesis of a given number of individual truths but the one truth of the Son's interpretation of God in the inexhaustible fullness of its concrete universality."¹¹ However, precisely because Christ is *God's* final interpretation—that is, the revelation of divine life in the human sphere—this "one truth" is infinitely rich and manifold. Though the Spirit takes only what he has heard and declares it, never departing from it or going beyond it, his interpretation of Christ to the world is, quite literally, endless. The Spirit never lets "his divine freedom blow elsewhere than in the sphere of the love between Father and Son,"¹² but, as this love is bottomless, there are always new directions in which he is able to go. At one and the same time, his interpretation is pure repetition and continually surprising, bound to the revelation in Christ and as free as the love Christ reveals. Though the Spirit imparts no new truths, his interpretation never approaches closure, because the object he interprets—the divine life—is itself always new, essentially creative, always more than can be grasped.

The Spirit's interpretation is an ontological event more than an epistemological one. It is, as Nicholas Healy says, an "interpretation by means of inclusion."¹³ He writes, "Now, the crux of the matter is that the way the Spirit universalizes or 'interprets' Christ is by including others within the temporal and bodily mission of Christ, which ultimately means that, in becoming the (ecclesial) body of Christ, creation itself is able to express and mediate the mystery of the reciprocal love between Father and Son."¹⁴ The Spirit incorpo-

rates those whom he indwells into the relationship of mutual love of the Father and the Son, giving them a participation in it. More specifically, the Spirit gives them the form of the Son in this relationship. According to von Balthasar, this is the reason why human beings were created in the first place, namely, to “be in the Son before the Father,” to have a share in his sonship.¹⁵ The Son is both the means and content of the relationship with the Father intended for all of humankind, which the Spirit interprets to us not merely by setting the example of Christ before our eyes—as if we were spectators of a past event—but by drawing us “into the redemption that has been objectively accomplished, so that we may participate in it from within, understanding it and living it.”¹⁶

Von Balthasar does not leave us guessing about what our inclusion in Christ’s redemption consists in. It is not an indeterminate process of being caught up into the life of God. There is a definite form to it, the form of the Son. By the power of the Holy Spirit, believers are given an “inner participation in the attitude of divine selflessness,” which has been given perfect expression in the life of the incarnate Word.¹⁷ Christ enacts the divine selflessness humanly in his unswerving obedience to the Father’s will throughout his life, wherein it finds its final confirmation in his death on the cross. Even prior to his conception by the Holy Spirit, however, the Son demonstrates this self-surrender in his willingness to be sent by the Father, in what von Balthasar calls his “a priori obedience.”¹⁸ The disposition of openness toward the Father that the Son maintains throughout the economy is but the “translation into temporal terms of his eternal attitude of devotion to the Father.”¹⁹ When the Spirit draws believers into Christ, then, it is into this attitude that he brings them. Indeed, von Balthasar says that “participation in the Spirit and the mind of Christ are one and the same thing.”²⁰ Just as the Son poured himself out for the world in becoming man, as it says in the great hymn in Philippians 2, so are believers poured out or unselfed by the Spirit of Christ given to them. For von Balthasar, this is no idle claim. In the same way that Christ gives incarnate

expression to divine self-surrender, so too must participation in Christ result in concrete acts of selfless giving. Though the Church always lives from the redemption accomplished by Christ, it can be more or less itself, depending on its conformity to his way of being. As von Balthasar says, the Church is “most fully present where faith, hope, and love, selflessness, and tolerance of others are found in the highest degree.”²¹ To the extent that the Church exhibits Christ’s attitude of selflessness, his openness and disposability, it becomes part of the Spirit’s interpretation of “all the truth” to the world.

The Expropriation (Enteignung) of the Self

We have seen that the mission of the Holy Spirit in von Balthasar’s theology is to establish in those whom he indwells Christ’s attitude of selflessness, and that it is in this way that he is called “interpreter.” He does not set the event of Christ before others so much as insert them into it; his activity consists in multiplying the instances of Christ’s selflessness in the world. The Spirit, it might be said, is not a literalist, not a strict guardian of the sacrosanctity of Christ’s status as Son of God, but one who extends this sonship to others and enables them to become a part of the Son’s exegesis of the Father. His is a nonhoarding kind of interpretation, a diffusive interpretation.

While the attitude of selflessness is always forthcoming in Christ—for it is an expression of his eternal relationship with the Father—it is participated in by sinful human beings only by a kind of crucifixion. For the tendency of sin is away from openness and toward closure, away from the receptivity that Christ manifests throughout his life. Indeed, von Balthasar follows Augustine in describing sin as a drive toward privacy, a desire not to be exposed to the claim of others or the vicissitudes of time. This view has been expressed well by his theological colleague and lifelong friend Adrienne von Speyr:

The world of the flesh is the ego-world, the world of limitation, of selfish choice, of drawing all things to oneself, of the

satisfaction and kindling of desires that are only functions of self. It is the glorification of one's own opportunities; play with a world that the man of the flesh thinks he is constantly creating without noticing that the center of this world remains static. He seeks variety and finds ever again only himself. In all the ecstasies he believes he is experiencing in what is new, he sees the old face of the ego reappear. It is therefore the world of everlasting constriction, of a confinement that narrows down into himself like a spiral movement.²²

Similarly, Gabriel Marcel, whose intersubjective ontology influenced von Balthasar's own, understands sin to be, at root, the "act of shutting oneself in on oneself or taking one's own self as the center."²³ Sin is a movement of withdrawal rather than going forth, retrenchment rather than expenditure. As such, it puts one fundamentally at odds with God, whose life, according to von Balthasar, consists in a relation of self-surrender between the divine persons. And not only with God: As creatures intended for incorporation in the divine life, human beings are estranged from their own calling through this self-enclosure.

It is only in the light of Christ that this covetousness is shown to be contrary to human well-being. Von Balthasar writes,

This ability to be poor is the human person's deepest wealth; this is revealed by the Christ-event, in which the essence of being became visible for the very first time: as glory. In giving up his Son, God the Father has opened up this possibility for all. But the Spirit of God is sent to change this possibility in us into a reality. He shows the world that the poverty of the Son, who sought only the glory of the Father and let himself be robbed of everything in utter obedience, was the most exact expression of the absolute fullness, which does not consist of "having," but of "being = giving." It is in giving that one is and has.²⁴

The heart of Christ's revelation, according to von Balthasar, is that God's life consists in selfless giving and that human beings have

been created for participation in God's life. While the self-centeredness of the flesh seems a sound strategy to preserve oneself against dissolution, it is actually one's surest withering, an "everlasting constriction," for it closes one off from the divine life. It is the prodigal son, von Balthasar notes, who "took away his share as a separate private possession for himself, who ends up hungry."²⁵

The Spirit's activity consists in counteracting the constricting motion of sin and dismantling the falsely circumscribed existence of the flesh. This he does by "establishing himself within the sinful enclosure and dull finitude of our spirit, in order to open the doors from within."²⁶ An essentially outgoing force, the Spirit's indwelling breaks us out of ourselves or, to use less violent imagery, renders us receptive to the world. Indeed, it is better to speak of our being possessed by the Spirit than of our possessing him. Individuals may have a personal experience of the Spirit—they can share in the salvation accomplished by Christ in no other way—but they cannot have a private one. As von Balthasar writes, "It is therefore not possible to take God to oneself through an act of appropriating him, because God is personified handing-over, and one 'knows' him and 'possesses' him only when one is oneself expropriated and handed over."²⁷

The appropriation (*Aneignung*) of God's life in the Spirit and the expropriation (*Enteignung*) of the self by the Spirit take place simultaneously. In fact, it is better to see them as two sides of a single act. In the same way that Christ's humiliation on the cross is also his exaltation, so are his followers mortified and glorified by a single motion of the Holy Spirit. To the degree that the Spirit carries us out of our "sealed-up egoism," the Spirit also establishes in us the attitude of selflessness characteristic of the life of God.²⁸ In being thus opened up by the Spirit, the believer is rendered more capacious, more open to others, in a process that, though it has a beginning in faith, has no end even in eternal life. Von Speyr speaks of the Spirit's "infinite enlargement" of those whom he indwells, a perpetual growth into the selfless life of God.²⁹

Von Balthasar refers to the expropriating activity of the Holy Spirit as our unselfing (*Entselbstung*).³⁰ Those who receive the Spirit in faith are unselfed by him, carried out of their enclosure in the direction of others. As though aware that this is not an immediately felicitous notion, von Balthasar stresses the complete naturalness of this selflessness. It is only the sinful tendency to store, hoard, and protect one's own self that makes it seem unnatural. Again, he bases this view on the revelation of Jesus Christ:

Since God does not alienate himself from himself by becoming incarnate (since the obedient Son of Man is only the illustration of the eternal relatedness and selflessness of the divine Persons), Christ does not alienate man from himself when he raises him from the apparently closed substantiality of his personal being (in which he thinks that he definitively stands over against God) into the open relatedness of the life within the Godhead. Rather, Christ brings him into the genuine truth of his origin; he is a distant image of this (*imago trinitatis*) in the love between human persons.³¹

As beings created for relationship with a selfless, other-directed God, we are truly persons only in openness to one another. The association of "closed substantiality" with fullness is, according to von Balthasar, the result of our being out of tune with the world through sin. Fullness actually consists in the relationship of giving and receiving. Thus, in being unselfed by the Spirit, human beings are brought back from false existence to true, from separateness to communion.

Von Balthasar notes that the equation of sin with separateness sits ill with the modern notion of the subject, in which the sine qua non of personhood is autonomy. It awaited Feuerbach to rediscover that "there simply cannot be a single person, existing within himself, but that existence as a person comes about only in the relationship between the I and Thou."³² Though he does not reason from revelation, Feuerbach's insistence on the interrelatedness of persons recalls a

prior, theological understanding of personhood, derived from the relations within the Godhead. In considering Father, Son, and Spirit, one sees that there is no Person independent of relationship with another: “If one takes the Christian doctrine of the Trinity seriously, then the divine persons—Father, Son and Spirit—appear, if one wants to hold on to the unity of God, to be constituted in nothing other than pure love or selflessness.”³³ The Father is the Father in giving everything of himself to the Son, and the Son is constituted by his openness to the Father. In being begotten, the Son does not cling to his separation from the Father in order to be himself; rather, he *is* through the act of remaining receptive of the Father and not cutting himself off. This mutual openness between the Father and the Son, which results spontaneously in the Third, the Holy Spirit, whom von Balthasar calls the “divine We,” is the very definition of divine personhood—and, therefore, of all personhood. The man or woman opened up by the Spirit, so far from being a depleted being, becomes a person. Just as Father, Son, and Spirit are Persons only in handing themselves over to one another, so, too, does von Balthasar ascribe to one who is in Christ a “mysterious power to regenerate oneself anew at every instant in the act of giving, or conversely the power to produce incessantly such a fullness in oneself that it can retain its identity only giving away the overflow.”³⁴

For von Balthasar, the seeming wisdom of the flesh is a consequence of our fallenness, our misapprehension of what it means to be. One way of looking at sanctification is as the undoing of this false way of being. This is not something that can be argued *a priori*, but derives entirely from faith in the revelation of Christ.³⁵ In the process of interpreting the divine life humanly, Christ also reveals what genuinely human life is; indeed, while the Chalcedonian language of two *natures* has always posed a difficulty for Christian theology, it is not difficult to say how Christ has revealed divine and human *personhood* simultaneously—for they consist in the same thing (the latter on account of the former), namely, the giving of oneself for others: “But ‘persons,’ in the Christian sense, are just such as, in imitation

of the divine-human person Jesus, 'no longer live for themselves,' and also no longer die for themselves."³⁶ It is for this reason that one finds von Balthasar so often insisting that the glory made visible in Christ's Resurrection is already contained in his death on the cross. For it is in his obedience unto death, his obedience even at the point where, as man, he would most naturally recoil, that he reveals true God and true humanity to us. His glory consists in giving himself over, without reserve, to the will of the Father. The Resurrection is not a "happy ending" to Christ's sacrifice or the undoing of his death, but the "final shaft of light illuminating the total interpretation of God given by the Son's life."³⁷

As Christ is the one true instance of personhood, of creation disposed aright, all other human beings are persons to the degree that they are "in Christ." This is always a distant approximation, as our growth into the attitude of divine selflessness is a lifelong process. Cardinal Marc Ouellet notes this well:

Between Christ and the Christian, as between God and a creature, there is no univocity but an analogy, i.e., a certain similarity but only within the greatest dissimilarity. There is an analogy of being, but also an analogy of acting and of attitudes. In Christ, the person-mission identity is given *a priori* by the grace of the hypostatic union which is expressed humanly in his absolute and immemorial consciousness of *being sent* into the world by the Father in the Spirit. In us, this identification is worked out temporally, in an *a posteriori* synthesis between our natural subjectivity and the "I of the mission" that is a participation in the identity of Christ. "I live now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Briefly, we *become* persons in Christ, by a gift of freedom to the mission which likens us to, and associates us with, the gift of God.³⁸

It is not only that the Son's personhood is identical with his mission, whereas our mission is something into which we must grow, but also that Christ did not need to be unselfed as we do. His obedience

and openness to the Father is a constant fact of his being; indeed, it is the very source of his human existence. In contrast, sinful human beings require the Holy Spirit to open them from their self-enclosure, to press against the wall of the flesh until it cracks and, eventually, drops. As the Spirit does not coerce human beings into abandoning their constricted position, but moves them to do so freely, mortification remains a constant element of human salvation throughout this life.

Though von Balthasar insists on the relationality of personhood and, therefore, the sinfulness of egoism, his use of unselfing should not be interpreted to mean the annihilation of the self. It is not the personal existence of the individual that the Spirit undoes, but the sinful creature's tendency to draw the world to himself, to grasp, objectify, and consume. Life in the Spirit, in contrast to life according to the flesh, is governed by centrifugal motion, a going out in the direction of others. And this expropriation constitutes the human being's participation in Christ:

It [the self] is not annihilated in a Buddhist sense but *unselfed* [*von sich entselbstet ist*] by being drawn into the death and life of Christ. It is forced out of its central position so that the essence of Christ may take up residence there: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." The same abandonment of self [*Entselbstung*] is required of all who believe in Christ . . . Faith's effect of "unselfing" us creates a "vacant space" that is occupied by Christ and his "Spirit," who "confirms" to us that we, like the Son, are children of the Father, sharing a relation to the Son through the Spirit, so that the *imago trinitatis* is fulfilled in us.³⁹

Human beings become children of God as they are conformed to Christ. And the Spirit conforms them to Christ by drawing them out of their self-enclosure, that is, by unselfing them. Through

their expropriation by the Spirit, human beings are prepared for participation in the divine life, which, as I have already said, is constituted by the self-gift of the divine persons to one another. Ultimately, unselfing is simply another way of talking about love, that most characteristic activity of the Holy Spirit. For von Balthasar, personhood is finally identical with the act of loving others, being with giving.

The identity between personhood and love is revealed above all, according to von Balthasar, in the triune life. It is the source of our knowledge of personhood and the “original image of sacrifice,” love being what unites Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴⁰ Von Balthasar writes, “What remains then for the nature common to the persons except for pure love? It is not as if one would thereby understand the divine selflessness of the person as negation of the person, for there is indeed the order of processions that constitutes the nature of God as absolute love.”⁴¹ This “mystery of the divine rich poverty,” as von Balthasar elsewhere calls it, is not some remote thing for human beings to gawk at but the mystery of their own being as well.⁴² Whoever meditates on it is “catapulted out of his would-be closed personal being, not into a destruction of his personhood but into its fulfillment: the creature’s attainable approximation to the unalloyed being-for-others within the divine, Trinitarian mystery.”⁴³ The Holy Spirit interprets this mystery to human beings by including them in it. Through the Spirit, they are “drawn into the event of the eternal generation of the Son,” which, as I have already remarked, is God’s purpose for them.⁴⁴ The Spirit’s interpretation of Christ’s revelation of the Father is, at the same time, the human being’s deification.

The Spirit’s Unselfing Activity and Ecclesiology

The foregoing account of the Holy Spirit’s activity explains the unique association between pneumatology and ecclesiology. The Church, it could be said, is simply the community of people who

are being expropriated by the Holy Spirit, whose very coming together is a function of that expropriation. Indeed, von Balthasar reminds us that “*ecclesia* means she who is ‘called out.’”⁴⁵ This means not only that each of the Church’s individual members is being unselfed by the Holy Spirit, but that the Church as a whole continues to be itself only in pouring itself out for the world. It is the being-in-relation of the members of the Church and, above all, their overflow in mission to the world that constitutes them as the body of Christ. Von Balthasar writes, “At the more-than-organic—that is, the personal—level of the Church, our membership in the ‘one body’ means that we are given a personal awareness of being a ‘we’; implementing it in terms of life is the Christian’s ethical task. So the Church is open to the world, just as Christ is to the Father and his all-embracing kingdom.”⁴⁶

As von Balthasar makes clear, this is a normative description as much as it is a bit of theology. The recalcitrance of sin prevents the body of Christ from ever attaining perfect unity in this life and from serving the world as it should. The Church as a whole, as well as each of its members, is never through with being expropriated by the Holy Spirit, as the tendency of the flesh toward self-enclosure always remains. Just as God’s life is not the sinking into one another of the Father and Son, but is always opening up in the Third, the Holy Spirit, so must the Church never be content to rest in its separateness from the world.⁴⁷ To be so content would be an “offense against the giver,” according to von Balthasar, since what the Spirit gives is precisely a participation in Christ’s attitude of selflessness.⁴⁸ It would be a misinterpretation.

Nevertheless, inasmuch as the Church lives according to its vocation to be a “called-out” body, it is a representation of eschatological life. For the divine life into which the Spirit leads the world *just* is the act of selfless giving and receiving. John Zizioulas has stated this well: “‘Life-giver’ and ‘communion’ are in fact identical in meaning, since the life of God which the Spirit gives is a life of communion of persons, and it is as such that he creates power and dynamic

existence as well as sanctification, miracles, prophecies and leads to Truth.”⁴⁹ Von Balthasar envisages eternal life as the “pure opposite of the boredom of an exitless being-for-oneself.” Rather, it is a “being-above-and-beyond-oneself, with all the surprises and adventures that such an excursion promises.”⁵⁰ If the unselfing activity of the Holy Spirit is experienced now as a kind of crucifixion—since sacrifice and blessedness are disjoined on earth—it is there the very act of living.

Conclusion

In this article, I have been exploring von Balthasar’s claim that the Spirit is the interpreter of Christ’s revelation of God. I argued that the Spirit’s interpretive activity consists in expropriating or unselfing believers, that is, opening them up from their self-enclosure and bringing them into the way of being of the incarnate Son. It is, to quote Healy again, an “interpretation by means of inclusion.” Whereas sin is the disposition to grasp and shut out, life in the Spirit consists in conformity to Christ’s filial openness to the Father. To be unselfed is, at one end the same time mortification and deification. The existence to which one clings in sin is undone at the same time that one is prepared for participation in the divine life. Finally, I noted that the Church is a community of people in the process of being expropriated by the Spirit. While expropriation describes how the Church has come to be, von Balthasar also presents it as the Church’s mandate: the community of believers is true to its nature only when it lives as a called-out body, when it opens up and goes out to the world.

Notes

1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Unknown Lying Beyond The Word," *Explorations in Theology III: Spiritus Creator* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 111.
2. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Christian Meditation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 31.
3. Von Balthasar, "The Unknown Lying Beyond the Word," 112.
4. Though published before the appearance of the third volume of the *Theo-Logic*, the most comprehensive work on von Balthasar's theology of the Holy Spirit remains Kossi K. Joseph Tossou, *Streben nach Vollendung: Zur Pneumatologie im Werk Hans Urs von Balthasars* (Freiburg: Herder, 1983).
5. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Theology and Sanctity," *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989); 184ff. Von Balthasar does not here deny the usefulness of Aristotelian categories for the clarification of revelation, but argues that their introduction into theology made it increasingly difficult to hold theory and practice together. St. Ignatius, he says, recovered the unity in his *Exercises*, a work in which nothing is dependent, "even by implication," on Scholasticism, though he could not prevent the "growing estrangement between theology and sanctity" (188–89). For more discussion on this concern in von Balthasar, see Mark A. McIntosh, *Christology from Within: Spirituality and the Incarnation in Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), esp. chap. 2.
6. Respectively Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Holy Spirit As Love," *Explorations in Theology III: Spiritus Creator*; 122; *Does Jesus Know Us? Do We Know Him?* trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 73; *The Glory of the Lord* vol. 1, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 606 (hereafter cited as *GL*); later on in this text, von Balthasar clarifies that the Father is the "content" of revelation and the Son the "form" (611). Thus, the current phrase should not be misunderstood to mean that the Father is in any way the subject of the incarnation. Nevertheless, as the Son is the exact image of the Father, receiving all that he is from the Father, and all that the Father has to give, it is not improper to say that the Father, too, receives form in the incarnation of the Son.
7. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, vol. 3, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 107 (hereafter cited as *TL*).
8. *Ibid.*, 72–73.
9. Von Balthasar, "The Holy Spirit as Love," 122.
10. *TL*, vol. 3, 73.
11. *Ibid.*, 74.
12. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Improvisation on Spirit and Future," *Explorations in Theology III: Spiritus Creator*, 156.
13. Nicholas Healy, *The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: Being as Communion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 139.
14. *Ibid.*, 138

15. Von Balthasar, *Does Jesus Know Us? Do We Know Him?* 50.
16. *GL*, vol. 7, 426.
17. *Ibid.*, 429.
18. The phrase occurs in *TL*, vol. 3, 51; however, von Balthasar's more extended reflection on Christ's "a priori obedience" can be found in *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 183ff (hereafter cited as *TD*).
19. *TDV*, 252.
20. Von Balthasar, "The Holy Spirit as Love," 133.
21. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Who is the Church?" *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 172.
22. Adrienne von Speyr, *The Victory of Love: A Meditation on Romans 8* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 25–26.
23. Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Vol. II: Faith and Reality*, trans. René Hague (South Bend, IN: Regnery/Gateway, Inc., 1951), 181.
24. *GL*, vol. 7, 391.
25. *Ibid.*, 425.
26. Von Balthasar, "The Unknown Lying Beyond the Word," 114.
27. *GL*, vol. 7, 400.
28. *Ibid.*, 407.
29. Von Speyr, *The Victory of Love*, 26.
30. *TD*, vol. 5, 334.
31. *GL*, vol. 7, 408–9; see also, 397.
32. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "On the Concept of Person," *Communio* 13, no. 1 (1986): 18–26; 24.
33. *Ibid.*, 26.
34. *GL*, vol. 7, 424.
35. On this, see W. Löser, "Being interpreted as love: Reflections on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Communio* 16 (Fall, 1989): 475–90; 476, 487–88.
36. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Credo: Meditations on the Apostle's Creed*, trans. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 86.
37. Von Balthasar, *Does Jesus Know Us? Do We Know Him?* 79.
38. Marc Ouellet, "The Foundations of Christian Ethics according to Hans Urs von Balthasar," trans. Mary F. Rousseau, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991); 237–38.
39. *TD*, vol. 5, 334.
40. *Ibid.*, 251.
41. Von Balthasar, "On the Concept of Person," 26.
42. Cf. *GL*, vol. 7, 429.
43. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Christian Meditation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 84.
44. *GL*, vol. 7, 405.
45. Von Balthasar, *Credo*, 83.

46. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics," in Ratzinger, Schürmann, and von Balthasar, *Principles of Christian Morality* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 84.
47. Von Balthasar, "Improvisation on Spirit and Future," 145.
48. *GL*, vol. 7, 415.
49. John Zizioulas, "The pneumatological dimension of the Church," *Communio* 1, no. 2 (1974): 142–58; 145.
50. Von Balthasar, *Credo*, 101–2.