

DIVINE HOLINESS AS ABSOLUTE LOVE:
HANS URS VON BALTHASAR ON THE HOLINESS
OF THE TRINITARIAN LIFE

CAMERON CRICKENBERGER*

ABSTRACT: This essay will consider the holiness of God through the lens of divine love, as is appropriate when following the contours of the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. For him, divine love is fundamentally selfless, a self-giving in which the divine persons ‘consider others more important than themselves.’ Holiness, therefore, is not found in a purity or otherness that stands above or apart from creation, but rather in a purity of love that gives of itself entirely for the sake of creation. That is, holiness as divine love is a holiness that purifies for the sake of union, rather than a preceding framework purity that must be attained by creation in order to be united with God. It is a perfectly pure active and seeking desire for the Other. The union that is sought by the holy love of God, however, maintains the distinction between God and creation ultimately because of the emergence of the Spirit from the self-giving love of the Father and Son, a point that has not been appreciated fully in Anglophone Balthasarian scholarship. This essay will develop the connection between divine holiness and love further by looking at the role of the Spirit in von Balthasar’s thinking in the final years before his death.

KEY WORDS: Holiness, Balthasar, Pneumatology, Creator-Creature Distinction, Trinity

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Introduction

In the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the leading Roman Catholic theologians of the 20th century, all theological concepts must be understood in light of his particular understanding of divine love; divine holiness is no exception. While holiness as a general concept that can be explored in various contexts, such as the substantial and accidental holiness of Christ in the incarnation or the holiness that is a human person’s obedience to her particular and God-given mission, when con-

* CAMERON CRICKENBERGER (PhD 2024, University of St. Andrews). He is currently the Vicar of Church of the Ascension, Myrtle Beach, SC. Email: cameron@christchurch-mi.com.

sidering the holiness that is the mark of Absolute Being, von Balthasar would insist that we cannot treat it as an 'essential quality' that can be described in isolation from the life of the divine persons, which is, as we will see, most helpfully expressed as a life of self-giving love.

This means that holiness cannot become the ultimate or even central descriptor of God or of an abstracted divinity, and neither can it be pitted against divine love (or any other aspect of the divine life) in a way that begins from contradictory definitions and seeks to reconcile them with one another. Thus, holiness cannot correspond to transcendence while love evokes God's immanence, the former explaining his wrath or separateness and the latter justifying the history of salvation. Instead, as all theologians should recognize, holiness and love describe the one and singular reality of the divine life, in which there is no tension or contradiction, and both concepts describe the God who in fact is present to and active within creation. Theology does not do well to bracket out divine activity in creation when considering aspects of the divine life as if there is a way to consider God apart from who he is, which is the One who redeems his creation by entering into it himself. As von Balthasar says, drawing on the work of Markus Barth, 'God's holiness [cannot be] spoken of abstractly on the basis of his „otherness, his sovereignty over the world, his fearsomeness, etc.,“ but in the context of his relationship with his creatures and, indeed, of his communicating what is unique about his holiness' (von Balthasar 2009: 303).

God's communication means principally, for von Balthasar, the self-revelation of God in the economic missions of the Son and Holy Spirit. In a rare explanation of divine holiness (as opposed to the holiness of the created order in relation to it), von Balthasar links holiness to two concepts that play a central role in his trinitarian theology, truth and love, saying that the 'holiness of the triune God is the depth dimension of the truth that God's expositor is; the truth is, not a proposition or an impersonal fact, but the revelation of 'absolute love' (von Balthasar 2004b: 318). Holiness is the 'depth dimension' of the 'truth' of God's 'absolute love' that is only revealed in the person of the expositor, the Son of God incarnate in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is, revealed in the missions of the Son and Spirit, divine holiness describes the absoluteness of the love of the divine life, which is given expression in the kenotic death of the Son, his resurrection to the new life of the Spirit, and the sanctifying and deifying of the Church by the Spirit of God.

To understand von Balthasar's concept of divine holiness, then, we must understand the triune life of love of which it is predicated. I will first turn to von Balthasar's basic concept of divine love as eternally expressed between the Father and the Son. Then, I will explore the role of the Spirit in his trinitarian thought, suggesting that we can only fully appreciate the link between love and holiness by attending to a late

development in his trinitarian pneumatology. Finally, I will close the essay by suggesting ways in which this affects our language of holiness regarding both God and his creatures.

Divine Love as the Self-Giving of Father and Son

Von Balthasar leaves no question for his reader that divine love is the most fundamental concept to his understanding of the triune life and, indeed, of all of Christian truth and thought, as the preface of one of his most enduring works, *Love Alone is Credible*, makes clear:

Christian self-understanding (and therefore theology) can be interpreted neither in terms of a wisdom that surpasses the knowledge of the world's religions through a divine utterance (ad maiorem gnoscim rerum divinarum) nor in terms of man's definitive achievement of personal and social fulfillment through revelation and redemption (ad maiorem hominis perfectionem et progressum generis humani), but solely in terms of the self-glorification of divine love: ad maiorem Divini Amoris Gloriam (von Balthasar 2004a: 10).

The reason for this lies partly in the fact that love is an inherently relational concept, a fact that is not as obvious (though no less true for von Balthasar) for the concepts of truth and holiness. The importance of making relation a basic category of speech about God lies in von Balthasar's refusal to separate speech of what is common in the divine life (*esse/essentia*) from what is distinctive, that is, speech of the divine persons. The divine *esse* is 'concomitantly determined by the unrepeatably unique participation of Father, Son, and Spirit in this event [that only exists] except as fatherly, sonly, and spirit-ually' (von Balthasar 2004b: 136–137). Said differently, to talk of God is to talk of the three persons of the Godhead rather than an abstracted concept of divinity, and therefore the images and ideas we use to express the life of God must be sufficiently relational enough to bear the weight of the inter-relationality of the three divine persons.

Thus, the concept of love that von Balthasar understands God to be must be robust enough not only to describe the relations of the divine persons but also to account for those relations themselves. Divine love must be described as the event of the procession of the Son and Spirit from the Father. This kind of love, for von Balthasar, cannot be simply the acknowledgement of the good, common to the divine essence or expressed particularly as a divine person. But neither can it be the kind of love that Richard of St Victor described, a love between distinct subjects that gives rise to a third as a result of their *condilectio*. While the first kind of love, which von Balthasar associated with the Augustinian-Thomist image of love for the absolute good of the

divine essence shared by the three divine persons, fails to account for the ‘real and abiding face-to-face encounters of the hypostases,’ Richard’s interpersonal concept of love skirts too close to dividing the subjectivity of God, failing in the end to ‘attain the substantial unity of God’ (von Balthasar 2004b: 38–42).

Von Balthasar finds an appropriately balanced concept of love—relational while not undermining divine unity—in the trinitarian theology expressed in the second canon of the Fourth Lateran Council, which reads:

For the Father, in begetting the Son from eternity, gave him his substance ... It cannot be said that the Father gave him part of his substance and kept part for himself, since the Father’s substance is indivisible, inasmuch as it is altogether simple. Nor can it be said that the Father transferred his substance to the Son in the act of begetting, as if he gave it to the Son in such a way that he did not retain it for himself; for otherwise he would have ceased to be substance (Schroeder 1937: 239–41).

Von Balthasar paraphrases the canon:

The eternal Father gives his entire Godhead, without holding anything back, to his Son (that is, the Father does not merely give the Son some divine essence distinct from, and excluding, the Father’s Person), yet without losing his Godhead in this act of self-surrender (von Balthasar 2005: 225).

The original canon identifies the act of giving from the Father to the Son and specifies that the gift included the whole substance but in a way that the Father retained his substance even in the act of giving it to the Son, but it does not explain how the substance can be given and yet retained. It is because of this tension that von Balthasar the concept of divine persons and the act of self-surrender introduces into his paraphrase. For von Balthasar, person and act go together, and in this case must mutually define one another. Both Father and Son subsist in the divine essence, but the divine essence is not ‘merely „something”’ but is itself act. To be a divine person, then, is to subsist in the one divine act, a philosophical concept which traces back to Thomas Aquinas’s famous claim that in God, *esse* and *essentia* are identical. But for von Balthasar, the divine act that is the *esse*, or *actus essendi*, is specifically an act of love in which the Father surrenders his very self, that is, his person that subsists in the very act by which it is being surrendered, to give all that he is to the Son in generation. Von Balthasar identifies this act of self-donation, this ‘giving over of self,’ as that which is ‘essentially divine’ (von Balthasar 2004b: 137). Elsewhere, this self-giving is described as a self-emptying, a ‘first, intratrinitarian *kenosis*’ that grounds the later self-emptying of the Son’s incarnation and Passion

described in Philippians 2:6–7 (von Balthasar 2004b: 177; von Balthasar 1998: 85–85). So, because the person of the Father is his enactment of the divine self-surrender of love for the sake of the Son, the Father cannot lose himself—his substance or his person, to use the language of the original canon and von Balthasar’s paraphrase—in his enactment of what he is. The Father is ‘nothing other than the pure surrender of himself’ (von Balthasar 2005: 441).

In fact, for von Balthasar, the Father is only Father ‘by eternally giving his all ... [and though] the relation seems to coincide with the substance, yet it does not do so completely, because the Son, too, receives the whole substance of „God”, apart from the paternal giving’ (von Balthasar 2005: 158). For the Father to generate the Son is for him to give his very self over in loving surrender for the sake of the Son, and it is this ‘primal act of love’ that the Son receives. Thus, the Son subsists in the very same act of self-giving love as the Father and enacts his personal act of subsistence ‘not „passively” as the Beloved, but ... actively as Love, returning love, as one who responds to the totality of the Father’s love and is ready to do everything in love’ (von Balthasar 2005: 158). Both Father and Son ‘renounce being a mere „I” without a „thou”, existing together ‘in their reciprocal loving surrender’ (von Balthasar 2005: 226). That which is common to the divine persons, the divine essence, is thereby reimagined as a single act of self-giving love in which Father and Son exist together by the love of the other, partly resolving the issue of unity in the Richardian image of interpersonal love. It is because the ‘surrender of what is one’s own’ is undertaken absolutely in divine love for the sake of the other that ‘absolute love guarantee[s] the unity of essence’ (von Balthasar 1998: 85).

The Holy Spirit in the Triune Life of Love

When we turn to von Balthasar’s understanding of the Spirit, the unique and promising contours of his trinitarian theology come to the fore. His pneumatology can be summarized in a sequence of four terms that name the Holy Spirit: Bond, Gift, Fruit, and Bonicity. While the first three are more expansively used throughout von Balthasar’s writing and as such have been more widely recognized in the secondary literature about his theology, the fourth is a concept that comes in only at the end of his life, though it serves to integrate the first three within an even more sophisticated frame than was previously present.

The first term, Bond, is what von Balthasar terms the ‘subjective’ role of the Spirit (von Balthasar 2005: 17–18). As Bond, the Spirit’s hypostatically specific expression of the divine act of love is the ‘relatedness of the Father and Son’ identified by their mutual acts of self-giving love (von Balthasar 2005: 157). Von Balthasar builds upon this Augustinian-Thomist construal of the Spirit, going as far as to describe the Spirit as the very ‘act of reciprocal love between Father and Son’ (von

Balthasar 2005: 242), hinting at a 'mysterious affinity of divine nature and Holy Spirit' in the trinitarian life (von Balthasar 2005: 141) that later emerges more fully in his full trinitarian pneumatology.

The Spirit does not only function as the bond of the *relationis oppositio* between Father and Son but goes beyond that as the very Gift that is given in the act of giving by which the Father and Son give their very selves to one another. While in the act of self-giving, the Father and Son each give their very selves to one another, in light of the mutuality of their self-giving, von Balthasar argues that what they receive is more than just the self of the Other (and therefore their own selves), but the resulting event of their oneness. The Gift that is received is the oneness that is in the Spirit, who is the guarantor of their mutuality and therefore the Gift of oneness that is received by both in excess of what they each gave. As von Balthasar says, 'For both, the event of this oneness is a gift: the *bonum* of a mutual love is a *donum* for the lovers. Thus both, the loving Father and the loving Son, receive this mutuality as a gift.' (von Balthasar 2005: 226). The Spirit is the act of their giving, and the bond of union established in that mutual act is the true Gift that is received, but because it is received by them in excess of what they each gave, it must also be recognized as an 'unfathomable *more*, a fruit ... an „overflowing“' (von Balthasar 2005: 227). As the Gift that exceeds what either gave, the Spirit is also the Fruit of their mutually absolute and selfless self-Gift which establishes the Bond of love between them. It is the 'miracle of fruitfulness, of „gift“ above and beyond,' whereby the Spirit becomes finally objective rather than remaining only subjectively defined as the Bond and Gift given and received between the Father and Son.

The concept of Bonicity, however, helps to establish the connection between the love that is the triune life of Father, Son, and Spirit, and the holiness of that life of love. Taken from the speculative Thomist Ferdinand Ulrich's book *Homo Abyssus*, Bonicity expresses the fact that the Spirit does not enact the divine love kenotically in the same way as the Father and the Son. If the Spirit only continued the kenotic pattern of divine love, the Fruit that is the excess of the mutual kenosis of Father and Son would then in turn only go on to empty itself, resulting in what Emmanuel Tourpe has called the 'abyssilization of the gift' (Tourpe 2008: 92, my translation).

Bonicity is framed within a larger system by Ulrich as one of three 'ontological moments' of created being that he develops from Thomas's real distinction between *esse* and *essentia*. The other two moments, Reality and Ideality, portray the mutual kenotic tension between *esse* and *essentia*. *Essentia*, on the one hand, denotes a finite reality that without the addition of *esse* does not come into existence. *Esse*, on the other hand, is infinite in the sense of *esse commune*, but it cannot come to subsistence without yielding itself to the limiting factor of an *essentia*. Without both *esse* and

essentia giving themselves over to the other, neither can truly subsist as an *ens*. While Reality and Ideality identify the ways in which created being would cease to function in its nature as divine gift if the two were not both present, Bonicity expresses the Good that exists in the two functioning together, *essentia* and *esse* as concrete *entia*. The Good that Bonicity expresses is the ‘pure positivity of the Good’ which results from the mutual self-donation of *esse* and *essentia*, a real creature that exists and acts, exceeding either *esse* or *essentia* alone, a true Third that is nevertheless the true expression of the whole.

This expression of the whole takes the form of a *ratio finis*, the final cause towards which all causation moves, and as the final end, it does not enact itself in kenosis. Put in trinitarian terms, ‘There is no self-emptying (*exinanitio*) in the case of the Holy Spirit’ (von Balthasar 2005: 227; quoting Ulrich 2018: 464). Rather than emptying himself like the Father and Son, the Spirit is the hypostatic fullness of the divine life of love that ‘accompanies’ the self-emptying of Father and Son while guaranteeing their mutuality and, therefore, their fruitfulness (von Balthasar 2005: 228). In this way, the Spirit as Bonicity is present at both beginning and the end, accompanying the movement of love throughout, as a final cause is first among causes as the moving intention of all act. The Spirit is distinct as the ‘pure fruit’ of the mutually selfless divine love that in the end contains and expresses the whole (see von Balthasar 2005: 228, 235).

The Holy Spirit and Divine Holiness

If we remember that for von Balthasar divine holiness is the depth dimension of the truth of God’s absolute love, it becomes clear why it is the Spirit who, as the trinitarian person who ‘accompanies’ and ‘contains’ the kenotic gift-giving that binds Father and Son as the bonitic Fruit, expresses the holiness of this divine love (von Balthasar 2005: 228, 235). As the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity consecrates the Father and Son in their mutual self-giving by guaranteeing the mutual giving and return between them and thereby ensuring that they are and remain fully who they are in their absolute enactment of divine love. Divine holiness is the absoluteness of the love between Father and Son that is carried out and expressed fully in the procession of the Spirit, and as the Spirit is the person who accompanies their self-giving and guarantees its fulfillment in his own Person, it is appropriate that it is he who is named Holy.

This comports with a larger scheme within von Balthasar’s trinitarian theology, where it is appropriate to associate the trinitarian names Father, Son, and Spirit, with the theological concepts Love, Truth, and Holiness. In agreement with the ancient principle of the monarchy of the Father, von Balthasar grounds the love that is the divine life principally in the Father, saying, for example, that ‘the Father’s always already

giving himself away, which thought can neither go behind or exhaust, is the ultimate ground for God's being incomprehensibly more than any finite concept can comprehend: love, posited in its absoluteness, is absolutely groundless' (von Balthasar 2004b: 137). The Father's primal act of love is the groundless ground of the Son's generation, to whom von Balthasar attributes primarily the concept of Truth: '[T]ruth belongs primarily to the Son [but] theologically it rests upon the wonder of the Father's generative act, which, considered from the standpoint of the hypostasis of the Logos, is groundless love' (von Balthasar 2004b: 155). The Son's procession from the Father is the *expressio* of the Father's love, the Truth of Love perfectly and fully expressed in the one who is the image of the Father, the returns his whole self to the Father. This process of giving and receiving of self, and the oneness that arises from it, happens in the Holy Spirit, and it is the entirety of this trinitarian life *in the Holy Spirit* that 'causes the absolute preciousness—[that we call] *holiness*—of Absolute Being to shine forth' (von Balthasar 1990: 286–287).

To define divine holiness as the 'absolute preciousness ... of Absolute Being' makes plain the link between Goodness (or Bonicity), the Absolute, and the concept of holiness. It is only the absolute and whole expression of Divine Love that constitutes the Goodness towards which all of creation is ordered as its final end, and von Balthasar locates this theologically in the Bonicity of the Spirit. Though the Spirit is not kenotic in the same way as the Father and the Son, the Spirit's consecration of the love of the Father and the Son elevates the mutually kenotic pattern of that love to the place of a *ratio finis* for all of creation to enact.

Love in the Holiness of the Created Order

If we accept von Balthasar's understanding of divine holiness as the full and robust expression—the 'depth dimension'—of the triune life of fruitful kenotic love, then this changes how we talk about holiness as the quality and goal of the Christian life. Christian holiness is ordered towards the holiness of the Church as the body of Christ, which is itself ordered towards the holiness of Christ's incarnation, where the 'substantial' holiness that Christ possessed by virtue of his divinity was enacted and fulfilled in the 'accidental' holiness of the life that Christ lived as a human person (see von Balthasar 2005: 36, 180–181). It is essential to see what von Balthasar has done here: holiness is now not „purity” understood in a ritualistic or moral sense, a „non-sinfulness”, or a „set-apartness” from profane things. These concepts must be reinterpreted. Rather, holiness, both divine and created, is now understood fully in the terms of the new commandment: 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another' (John 13:34). To be holy is to enact the commandment of love in the way that Jesus Christ did with his disciples, which is the revelatory encounter with humanity that called us to recognize the kenotic,

self-giving, sacrificial nature of the love that is God's life. Holiness cannot, in this frame, be understood apart from the relational aspect of life. It cannot be divorced from how we treat our neighbor or reduced to practices and rituals. Holiness must be our participation in the triune life of God, loving him with our whole heart and mind and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. In this way, holiness and love coincide, in God's own life and in ours.

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