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Kenosis at the Foot of the Cross: Phil. 2:5FF. As the Hermeneutic Key to Hans Urs von Balthasar's Mariology

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KENOSIS AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

PHIL. 2:5FF. AS THE HERMENEUTIC KEY TO HANS URS VON BALTHASAR'S MARIOLOGY

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I. Introduction

Hans Urs von Balthasar insists: "The whole Church, insofar as she is in all seriousness (through the Eucharist) the body of Christ, must be co-crucified with her Head, and that, in the first place, without retrospect onto the subjective suffering of Christians but rather through the sheer fact of her existence and the logic of her faith."[1] This means, for Balthasar, that the Church's participation in redemption must be more than a retroactive affirmation of what has already been accomplished; rather, it must be *a real abiding activity within the fullness of Christ's once-for-all act.* For a Catholic like Balthasar, searching for the theological means of the Church's abiding participation involves examining how this participation occurs in the Virgin Mary, since she is the Church's scriptural archetype. That is, Mary functions in Scripture as an image of the Church, displaying its qualities in what she says and does. I will explore the scriptural-theological principles behind Balthasar's understanding of Mary's participation, and implicitly the Church's participation, searching for the "Scriptural-Christological control" that both *allows* for Mary to share in the redemption and

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[1] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 134.

limits it. This progressive questioning will first proceed with Balthasar's Christological exegesis, involving the Church; then into Mary's participation properly speaking, understood Christologically; finally, into a summary and critique. In this paper, I will argue that Balthasar's concept of Mary's relationship to the redemption is, at its heart, rather different in kind from other theories. His premise rests not in an emphasis on the *union* between mother and Son, but rather on their *separation* from one another at the foot of the cross, as envisioned through the Gospel of John and Paul's epistles—and it is only in this separation that he can find the proper space to speak of Mary's participating consent.

II. Preliminary Note

My primary sources in this essay are from the first two series of Balthasar's so-called "Trilogy": *Glory of the Lord* and *Theo-Drama*. I am aware that Balthasar has several works focused on Mary, those in English translation being *Mary for Today* and the collection *Mary: The Church at the Source*. The Trilogy is employed in this essay in order to better grasp Balthasar's Mariology in the larger context of his major systematic work, and thus to answer the question of Mary and the Church's participation in salvation. Balthasar is an author of great consistency, and so privileging the Trilogy is no distortion of his Mariology.

Balthasar is, in the first place, a systematic theologian with a great love for the Church Fathers. These interests and concerns govern his exegesis. That is, the creeds of the Catholic tradition and the works of the Fathers help to form and facilitate his interpretation of Scripture. Balthasar's systematic concerns also have great anthropological bearing, such as in *Theo-Drama*, where he strives to discern the place of the human person in the world and in redemption. In these ways, Balthasar is not a "pure" exegete, and he does not desire to be one. All the same, he is deeply concerned with Scripture and its appropriation in systematic theological reflection. In this paper, I am examining how this scriptural appropriation functions in his Christology and Mariology, aware that in the end his scriptural understanding cannot really be considered apart from the rest of his

thought. Focusing on his use of Scripture will help to illuminate his theology and its unique characteristics.

III. The Word's Descent

Because Balthasar's thought is profoundly Christocentric, any proper understanding of his Marian theology must begin with Christ and the Incarnation. For Balthasar, the Incarnation is defined by *kenosis*, the self-emptying obedience of the Son, who in adopting human nature increasingly expresses his obedience through this "flesh," to its ultimate articulation on the cross. "Not as I will, but as you will" (Mt 26:39; Mk 14:36; Lk 22:42). This obedience as it is described in Scripture is not foreign to the Son as he is in eternity, but is in fact the economic expression of an immanent Trinitarian reality: the Son is always surrendering himself to the Father. Balthasar here reads Scripture through the Nicene Creed, which defends the Son's eternity: thus, the Son's surrender on the cross in the economy must express something true about the eternal, immanent Trinity. What the Son's economic "obedience" describes about the eternal Trinity is not the use of force against will, nor is it the subordination of the Son to the Father. It is the full expression of the eternal freedom of the Trinitarian persons. Balthasar understands true obedience to be *free self-surrender*. God's absolutely free self-possession is, in the revelation of Trinitarian life, at the same time absolute self-gift. To quote Balthasar, the Father is "*always* [*immer schon*, lit., "always already"] himself by giving himself. The Son, too, is always [already] himself by allowing himself to be generated . . . the Spirit is always [already] himself by understanding his 'I' as the 'We' of Father and Son . . . ."[2] An "infinite space" of freedom emerges in the realms of the three Persons, "areas of freedom" that preserve the eternal distinction between the Persons.[3] Balthasar here

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume II: The Dramatis Personae: Man in God* [=*TD II*], trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 256. German notes mine, made to emphasize certain subtleties. Taken from *Theodramatik, Bd. II/I: Die Personen des Spiels* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1976), 232.

[3] Balthasar, *TD II*, 257.

envisions a difference in their eternal relationships *positively* construed, a "space" of divine "*letting-be*" that in total freedom allows for true distinction.[4]

Key to Balthasar's navigation of this concept of free self-gift is the kenotic passage in Philippians 2:5ff, where Jesus, "though he was in the form of God" (v. 6), "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (v. 7) and "became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (v. 8). "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name" (v. 9). *Kenosis* is the cause of Christ's glorification, but not in such a way that he receives glory that he did not possess in eternity. Balthasar links his exegesis of Philippians with the Gospel of John's Prologue. Now the Word who is "in the beginning," who is "with God," who "is God" (v. 1), is the Word who becomes flesh (v. 14) precisely by emptying himself in obedience. The Son's kenotic return to the Father is *always* his glory, in eternity and on earth; not in subordination to the Father, but in exaltation.

Thus, in Balthasar, the Pauline glorification of Christ in the resurrection is placed in dialogue with the Son who is "lifted up" and glorified on the cross in John's Gospel.[5] In each, the cross *is* the moment of Christ's glory attested to and sealed in the resurrection. As Balthasar argues, "in John the raising up upon the Cross and the raising up into glory are one single event, just as for Paul no one is raised up apart from the

[4] Balthasar, *TD II*, 258. "The divine hypostases proceed from one another and thus (including the Father, the Primal Source) are perfectly open to one another—but, for all eternity, they are not interchangeable. As a result, this divine exchange or dialogue always contains two things: the partners are perfectly transparent one to another, and they possess a kind of impenetrable 'personal' mystery."

[5] This is my essential outworking of Balthasar's scriptural arguments, somewhat distinct from discerning his exegetical "method." There are several articles on that topic: Jason Bourgeois, "Balthasar's Theodramatic Hermeneutics," in *Theology and Sacred Scripture*, ed. Carol J. Dempsey and William P. Loewe (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 125-134; K. Duffy, "Exegetes and Theologians," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 63 (1998): 219-231; Bevil Bramwell, "Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of Scripture," *New Blackfriars* 86 (2005): 308-322. Finally, Balthasar himself wrote "God Is His Own Exegete," *Communio* 13 (1986): 280-87.

one who was crucified."[6] Balthasar's exegetical link between John and Paul forms his Christology, and it is his Christology that guides his understanding of the relationship between creaturely ("finite") freedom and divine ("infinite") freedom. This relationship as it functions Christologically is the key to understanding how Balthasar describes Mary's role in the redemption.

In a profound manner, Balthasar's proposed relationship between divine and human freedom functions as a prolonged meditation on Acts 17:28: "For in him we live and move and have our being" (17:28). There is no danger of finite freedom somehow being "swallowed" up in infinite freedom, even in the Incarnation. It is not as if the Son's human will was bound to the divine as a slave; rather, the human will is united to the divine in obedience. We are again reminded of the Gethsemane passage from the Synoptic Gospels (Lk 22:42; Mk 14: 36; Mt 26:39), or of Jesus' common claim in John that he does nothing apart from the will of the Father (Jn 5:30; 6:38; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10). The Son's human will participates fully in the redemption while remaining contingent—it is not as if Christ's human will becomes divine—precisely through obedience. Balthasar discusses what he calls the "ladder of obedience," which Israel must first climb, reaching its greatest heights in the descriptions of the Suffering Servant (Isa 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-9; 53). Christ, as Suffering Servant, incorporates Israel's proper obedience into the breadth of the Incarnation and surpasses it, since in his Person his divine and human wills are united to one another.[7] The Church then imitates this profound obedience, which is the mode of the Church's participation in redemption: she offers herself in unqualified readiness, in conformity with the Son's unreserved self-gift, and Balthasar will call this "an

[6] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume VII: The New Covenant* [= *GL VII*], trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 277-8.

[7] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume VI: The Old Covenant,* trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V., Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 215ff.; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume IV: The Action* [= *TD IV*], trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 345.

unqualified Yes" or "absolute obedience," which is really "a product of Christ's obedience."[8] The Church now appears as that which participates in the cross and resurrection, and for Balthasar this participation is to be considered in both Pauline and Johannine language.

In Paul, this ecclesial participation is described in both baptismal and imitative terms: the Christian is "buried with Christ" while at the same time becoming more and more Christ-like not only in deed, but also in attitude. Christ is the archetype of the Christian, but in such a way that imitation of him is accomplished not only through *acting like him*, but also through *being acted upon* by Christ. So, Balthasar will say, "it is possible finally to speak without any prefix of a 'shaping of Christ' in the Christians (with the help of the labor pains of the apostle: Gal 4:19), and this means nothing else than the self-realization of the innermost disposition of Christ (Phil 1:8; Phil 2:5) and thus of his life in them (Gal 2:20; 2 Cor 13:3,5; Col 1:27; 3:11)."[9] This "innermost disposition" is the obedience described in Philippians, the fundamental attitude of surrender that the Son possesses in eternity and in the economy. Its realization in the believing Christian means the realization of the cruciform shape of Christian faith, accomplished through the increase of virtue, presupposing the faith given in baptism. As Balthasar argues, "Faith and baptism incorporate into [the event of the cross] (Rom 6:3ff; 1 Cor 11:26), and it is in this event that the Christian plays his role in the eschatological struggle for the righteousness of God in the world."[10]

In John, the image of the vine and its branches and the language of "abiding" (Jn 3:36; Jn 6:56; Jn 15:4; *et passim*) serve to relate Christ's actions with the Christian. "Abide in me, and I in

[8] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume III: The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ* [= *TD III*], trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 360.

[9] Balthasar, *GL VII*, 293.

[10] Balthasar, *GL VII*, 301-2. ". . . and yet, since he is only *in via*, one who has *been* seized but has not *himself* yet seized (Phil 3.12, 9), he works out his salvation in fear and trembling (Phil 2.12), refrains from judging himself and leaves to the Lord alone the judgment about his fidelity in being with Christ the Lord and being configured to him (1 Cor 4.2-4)."

you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (15:4). Balthasar will describe this dynamic in a mix of Johannine and Pauline terminology: "obedience to God and waiting upon his will belong to the fundamental structure of the creature. Yet this is possible only through Jesus—'without me, you can do nothing' (Jn 15:5)—because Christian fruitfulness comes only from the kenotic readiness of the Son as he looks to the Father who is for him 'the vinedresser' (15:1)."[11]

For Balthasar, abiding in Christ—being buried with him, rising with him, being 'shaped' in his image—is accomplished through the Christian's imitative obedience. To "have in mind Christ Jesus" and so to be obedient as he was is precisely the manner in which the Christian is united to Christ. All of Christian faith is thus understood to be an unqualified "Yes" to the will of the Father, in imitation of Christ's unqualified "Yes" on the cross. Or, even more concisely, *Christian faith is an imitation of and participation in Christ's faith*.[12]

Christ is the archetype of our faith, but there are other archetypes—namely those archetypical lives described in Scripture, lives whose experiences have become part of the Church. Balthasar indicates three distinct "archetypes" of the Church: Mary, John, and Peter.[13] Other archetypes sometimes accompany the previous three, as in *Glory of the Lord I*, which adds Paul and considers all of the Apostles as an archetype.

[11] Balthasar, *GL VII*, 217.

[12] Balthasar attributes a kind of "faith" to Jesus, though it could not be said to be identical to our own (ours is analogous to it). He does so in "*Fides Christi*: An Essay on the Consciousness of Christ," in *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word*, trans. A.V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991): 43-80, and in *TD III*, 170-72. Jesus' faith is his complete trust and abandonment to the Father's will, with which he totally identifies himself, whereas "we only receive our mission on the basis of our coming to faith" (171).

[13] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions: On the Church in This Age*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 40-41. Cf. Balthasar's "Life and Institution in the Church," *Communio* 12 (Spring, 1985): 28; "The Mass, a Sacrifice of the Church?" in *Explorations in Theology III: Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 185-243; "The Church's Inner Dramatic Tension: Bride and Institution," in *Theo-Drama V: The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, c1998), 353-360.

Each archetype ultimately finds its root in Christ, who is the true archetype for humanity's relationship with God.[14] Christ's experience provides the form for the other archetypes' experiences and for our own. That is, the Word reveals the glory of God to us: in beholding him, we behold God's glory. Mary, John, and Peter have experienced and are witnesses to this glory and we, in word and in sacrament, also experience and witness to his glory.

Ecclesial faith participates in archetypical faith of the Apostles—as well as the other archetypes—and these archetypical experiences of faith conversely find their purpose in the Church.[15] It is an experience of *faith*—a faith always rooted in Christ—and faith serves as the link between the archetypes and the rest of the Church. Thus, Balthasar says: "Tradition emerges here as the reality through which the archetypal experience is connected to the imitative experience—the reception of the substance of faith 'by the followers and servants of the Logos . . .'"[16]

The biblical witnesses to Christ stand in a special place, Mary's most of all. Their experiences are appropriated into the entire Church to guide each member and to be recapitulated at least in part by them. On the one hand stands the lived faith of these archetypical figures and on the other the living faith of the Church's individual members. That Peter's faith is archetypical does not make it any less *his* personal experience; rather, in Christ, that personal experience becomes available to other persons in the Church. The rest of the Church's members, whose experience of faith is not exhausted by or identical to that of the archetypical models, participate in these archetypical faiths. The archetypes are both imitable and inimitable. For example, John's mystical love for Christ can be

[14] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I: A Theological Aesthetics* [= *GL I*], trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 305.

[15] Balthasar, *GL I*, 306.

[16] Balthasar, *GL I*, 309. In this section, Balthasar considers the "sensoriness" of faith's perception, which has a sacramental dimension.

imitated, yet never exactly, since we do not see Christ in the flesh nor stand at the foot of the cross as he did. Our experiences of faith are also unique in the circumstances exclusive to us. *None* of these experiences, it must be repeated, exist without reference to Christ. This dependence in fact imitates Christ, who is the ultimate model and who draws the whole of his existence from the Father in the Spirit.[17] Already, the Church for Balthasar is deeply communal, Christological, and (ultimately) Trinitarian. This allows a proper understanding of the role of Mary, for, as Balthasar says, "If it is true that all Mariology must be embedded in the doctrine of the Church and of the person of Christ, then it is also true that all Christology must be rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity."[18]

It is vital to note that the Christian's participation in redemption possesses a strongly passive quality: it is only by virtue of Christ acting first and acting in the believer that the believer can be said to "accomplish" his or her imitation. This is why obedience is the key phrase: obedience requires someone to whom to be obedient; that is, obedience must always presuppose Christ. At the same time, our obedience really is a free action on our part. Our obedience is not something foreign to Christ's obedience, as if his obedience were one version and ours an entirely foreign form; ours is to be a free imitation of *his obedience* exactly, and nothing else. This is what Balthasar will call God's "exorbitant demand . . . made upon what lies within human proportions," a demand made upon our freedom and stretching it to its limit, which is "a fundamental trait of the life of Christ and—at a distance—of the life of a Christian."[19] Christ remains peerless even as we are called to conform to his peerless obedience.

[17] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V: The Last Act* [= *TD V*], trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, c1998), 121; cf. *Theo-Drama IV: The Action* [= *TD IV*], trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 403; cf. *Explorations in Theology III: Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 238, 242-43.

[18] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Marian Principle," *Communio* 15 (1988): 125.

[19] Balthasar, *GL VII*, 140.

IV. Marian Participation

The stage now is set to discuss Mary's participation in the redemption in detail. For the following discussion, it must be made clear that Mary is not the "human consent," with Jesus providing the "divine." He provides both in himself.[20] Indeed, Balthasar insists that God is not "obliged" by Mary or her consent, nor does she possess any "morally determining influence" over Christ.[21] At the same time, this does not make Mary an impassive instrument in the divine plan. She truly responds, and embodies this response so completely as to bear the divine Word. As Balthasar argues, "God does not overpower his creature, least of all the woman who represents his covenant, but respects her dignity as a person. She epitomizes that human nature that will receive God's Word and Son, and to that extent she shares responsibility for him."[22] There is, thus, a basic—and positive—tension in the narrative: Christ is all and provides all, yet Mary is also at the same time truly *responsible* for him. Or again, in Balthasar's words:

> If "cooperation" is required from the woman who is to become Mother of the Word of God, what is the relationship between this cooperation and God's operation in his incarnate Word? Who can find words and concepts to express both the intimacy (such as exists between Mother and Child) and the infinite distance (between God and the creature)? How can a single word, for example, *mediatrix* or *coredemptrix*, express this all-pervading analogy in such a way that all redeeming grace comes from God (and his incarnate Word) and yet man's consent, which is essential to the Incarnation and all its consequences, is not overridden?[23]

At its heart, the answer to this question rests in a full consideration of Mary's motherhood. Her motherhood involves three essential elements. (1) She, as true mother, truly brings about the Incarnation with her consent. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). To deny this fact would be to deny Mary's motherhood,

[20] Balthasar, *TD IV*, 353.
[21] Balthasar, *TD IV*, 354.
[22] Balthasar, *TD IV*, 354.
[23] Balthasar, *TD III*, 297.

to render it a virtual inconsequence. (2) Mary's "Yes," her *fiat*, intrinsic to her motherhood and spanning its every dimension, is an unqualified agreement—it sets no limits, consenting fully to God's plan not just for that moment but for the entire breadth motherhood implies: the whole life of her Son. Her "Yes" is breathed with her whole being, her entire life.[24] (3) Mary's *fiat* also rests in a fundamental manner on the Son she conceives with it. Indeed, if her *fiat* somehow found its effectiveness without grace, then she would have no need for salvation.[25] For Balthasar, understanding these three facets of Mary's motherhood is impossible without the grace of the Immaculate Conception: her total purity in the Immaculate Conception not only enables her "Yes" to hold nothing back, it also allows her true involvement in the Incarnation, even as the Immaculate Conception suffuses her assent with the superabundant gift of grace. Balthasar will describe the Immaculate Conception as enabling her to offer herself in total purity to the Incarnation of the Word as well as enabling her to share in her Son's sufferings, "which means that she is profoundly exposed and vulnerable."[26] Mary's uniqueness as one immaculately conceived rests in her particular vocation as *Theotokos*, a historical, bodily relationship with Christ that remains her own.[27]

[24] As Aidan Nichols, O.P., summarizes, "In Balthasarian Mariology, the theme of consent is like the thread of Ariadne which enabled the Attic hero Theseus to find his way out of the Labyrinth—in our case out of the tortuous ways of speculation onto the broad sunlit uplands not of Crete, as in the Greek legend, but of divine truth." See his "Von Balthasar and the Co-redemption," a paper originally given at the "International Symposium on Marian Coredemption" on Thursday, February 24, 2000, at Ratcliffe College, Nr. Leicester, England (available on the *Christendon Awake* website [February 6, 2006, http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/balthasa/coredemp.html]).

[25] Balthasar characterizes this relationship as a kind of "circle," since Mary's "Yes" brings about the Incarnation and yet it is through the Incarnation and cross that Mary can receive the grace necessary in her Immaculate Conception to utter her "Yes." See Balthasar, *TD III*, 297.

[26] Balthasar, *TD III*, 323.

[27] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Who is the Church?" in *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word*, trans. A. V. Littledale and Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 161. "Mary's faith, as the fruitful womb of the Word, is privileged on the two counts. In respect of its origin, it is a faith proceeded from her immaculate conception; in respect of its end, it is a faith destined to bear fruit that is not only Christ's body but also himself as Head."

Mary's motherhood, contingent upon her *fiat*, is the Lukan contribution to Balthasar's thought. Her "let it be done unto me" is a profoundly passive form of consent, an acknowledgement that permits her to be acted upon. Her *fiat* is an imitation, prior historically but secondary theologically, of Christ's own word of assent in Luke (22:24). In Balthasar's words, "Mary's word of assent had from the outset been the reverberation of the eternal word of assent which the Son gives in heaven to the Father's Trinitarian decision to save mankind."[28] Mary's identity is wrapped up in her "let it be done unto me," in much the same way that the Christian is defined by the self-surrender sealed at baptism. The Lukan *fiat* is, in Balthasar's thought, placed with the Mother as she appears in John: "Woman, behold your son!" (19:26). Mary must "let this be" even at the foot of the cross, beholding her Son in profound helplessness. But this helplessness, too, is a form of consent for Balthasar: "Beneath the Cross, her consent becomes the most excruciating affirmation of her Son's sacrifice."[29]

Much of Balthasar's Marian theology focuses on John 19, where Mary stands at the foot of the cross and beholds her Son. He reads Luke alongside John, frequently describing her consent or *fiat* to the cross in John 19 in a manner that echoes Luke more than it does John since Mary is silent in John. The Johannine narrative nevertheless dominates, since the image centers around the cross and since Mary's consent also has roots in the Wedding at Cana: "Do whatever he tells you" (2:5). Balthasar interprets this sentiment as indicating a fundamental,

[28] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Threefold Garland: The World's Salvation in Mary's Prayer*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 70. Or, as Aidan Nichols comments on the matter, "Mary renews her *fiat* from a position of both proximity to the Crucified and distance from him. As we shall see in a moment this is key to the spirit in which Balthasar would accept some form of the Co-redemptrix title and so any hypothetical Church dogma of Co-redemption. At the Cross, Mary is both close and distant . . ." (Nichols, "Von Balthasar and the Co-redemption").

Cf. also: "Mary's obedience is not an obedience that is emphasized, emerging as a theme in its own right alongside the obedience of the Son; rather, it is an utterly secondary obedience which seconds him and is in this sense imitable." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions: On the Church in This Age*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 96-97.

[29] Balthasar, *TD IV*, 395.

unreserved attitude on Mary's part, and this attitude is the content of her consent: God determines the whole of Mary's life, and she gives herself entirely by permitting this to be so.[30] At the cross, wrapped in silence, Mary has nothing but this attitude; she can do nothing to avert the crucifixion, and cannot even affirm it except to stand at the foot of the cross. Balthasar is intent on this vulnerability, and appears unwilling to brook its compromise. A lengthy passage will help to illustrate Balthasar's position:

> At the Cross, Mary's Yes consents to her being totally stripped of power (Mary can do nothing to help her Son); and what is more, she is sent away into utter uselessness: Mary cannot even remind her Son of the mystery of his coming forth from her, for she is handed over to another son. This is the graveyard of all those theories that try to establish a direct connection between the suffering of the Mother and that of the Son, however much the former is subordinated to the latter. God, from the lonely heights of his almighty power, can take the "nothingness" of unfruitful virginity (to which, in the Old Covenant, the odor of shame was attached) and make of it the fruitful motherhood of the Virgin, with a fruitfulness that extends to the whole world. He does this through his divine-human Son who, by means of his Eucharist, embodies the miracle of divine omnipotence and universal fruitfulness and makes it a reality in the Father's entire creation. Here, finally falling silent, the Word is empowered to make his whole body into God's seed; thus the Word finally and definitively becomes flesh in the Virgin Mother, Mary-Ecclesia. And the latter's physico-spiritual answer is more fruitful than all the attempts on the part of the sinful world to fructify itself—attempts that are doomed to sterility.[31]

There is much laden in this passage from Balthasar. *First*, Mary's consent is the hinge upon which the passage turns: the entire meditation centers upon the nature of her Yes. This consent is not understood as a kind of power over the situation of the crucifixion; in fact, Balthasar is so much against this idea that he rejects any lingering link between Mother and Son at the cross. Mary's *silence* in the crucifixion in John 19 is, for

[30] This theme appears in a remarkable number of places, most notably his discussions of the Church, as in *Razing the Bastions*, 40; or in *GL I*, 538.

[31] Balthasar, *TD IV*, 361.

Balthasar, a statement of her profound helplessness *and* her profound agreement. *Second*, Mary's powerlessness is not understood as a negative quality, a defect, or a lack: her "uselessness" is a positive attribution. Mary is ever-virgin, and for Balthasar this means that she always bears a "uselessness" in herself as far as the world is concerned. She has not been fruitful, which Balthasar notes is a source for shame in the Old Testament. Indeed, even the fruit of her womb, her Son, has not violated her virginity, so that, in her, fruitfulness is radically the work of God. The Old Testament barrenness has been intensified and transcended here. *Third*, because Mary's perpetual virginity is both a mysteriously helpless and fecund quality, God can once again make her fruitful not only despite but within her powerlessness: at the foot of the cross, Mary gives birth to the Church. Again, priority is given to God's efforts, as the birth of the Church is primarily the work of Christ, who enables Mary's consent in the midst of desolation to prove eternally fruitful. As Balthasar says elsewhere, "Mary's *fiat* too, uttered vicariously for all and founding the Church as the bride of Christ, is empowered to institute this only by this kenotic *fiat* of the Son (in the 'pre-redemption' of Mary)."[32]

Balthasar's interpretation of John 19 draws from multiple sources. He integrates a long Patristic and Medieval tradition in order to interpret Mary as a type and Mother of the Church.[33] Many of his more specific instincts, such as Mary's helpless yet fruitful silence, draw from the mystic Adrienne von Speyr. Von Speyr wrote a series of meditations on the Gospel of John, and many of her themes find their way into Balthasar's work.[34] It has been suggested that it is impossible to understand Balthasar's Mariology without also understanding von Speyr's.[35]

[32] Balthasar, *GL VII*, 218.

[33] Cf., e.g., *TD III*, 300-312. In determining her character as "type," he draws from figures such as Augustine, Ephrem the Syrian, Origen, Venerable Bede, and Anselm.

[34] Adrienne von Speyr, *The Birth of the Church: Meditations on John 18-21*, trans. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991).

[35] Johann Roten, "The Two Halves of the Moon: Marian Anthropological Dimensions in the Common Mission of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Communio* 16 (1989): 419-445.

I will add that Balthasar's Marian theme also resembles the work of Romano Guardini, about whom Balthasar wrote a book.[36] Note, for example, this passage from Guardini's *The Lord*:

> Mary's vital depths supported the Lord throughout his life and death. Again and again he left her behind to feel the blade of the "sword"—but each time, in a surge of faith, she caught up with him and enfolded him anew, until at last he severed the very bond of son-ship, appointing another, the man beside her under the cross, to take his place! On the highest, thinnest pinnacle of creation Jesus stood alone, face to face with the justice of God. From the depths of her co-agony on Golgotha, Mary, with a final bound of faith, accepted this double separation—and once again stood beside him! Indeed, "Blessed is she who has believed!"[37]

Guardini's sentiment is a helpful summary of Balthasar's own, and like Balthasar his emphasis is on faith that persists even in darkness, with no tangible comfort to hold onto as an anchor.

To return to topic, Mary's immaculate "Yes," uttered throughout her life and finally in the dark shadow of the cross, is absolutely key for Balthasar. He sees Mary's freedom as the "central" mystery of Mariology. This is because her freedom is unique, yet distinguished from Christ's. She is "the prototype who fulfills everything said [in *Theo-Drama II*] concerning the relationship between finite and infinite freedom."[38] Mary is also set apart from her Son, since only he lays hold of his mission and totally identifies with it "from time immemorial" while she "lays hold of her mission in the midst of time."[39]

To place a theological hinge upon Mary's *fiat* is not unique to Balthasar's theological reflections. What *is* unique is the way Balthasar interprets that "Yes," which Mary must speak in ever-increasing separation from her Son. Balthasar posits that

[36] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Romano Guardini: Reform from the Source* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010).

[37] Romano Guardini, *The Lord*, trans. Elinor Castendyk Briefs (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Pub., 1996), 14.

[38] Balthasar, *TD III*, 299.

[39] Balthasar, *TD III*, 300.

Christ's rebukes (Lk 8:21, 11:28; Jn 2:4) are—though not insults—a form of increasing distance from Mary. She must utter her "Yes" in the gulf that widens between mother and Son, as the Son ascends to greater and greater obscurity, lifted on the cross in the most agonizing moment of incomprehensible grace. To the cross, too, she must breathe her maternal *fiat*.

Of particular fascination here is Balthasar's insistence that there is no "direct connection" between Mary's suffering and her Son's. He rejects any hint that they share the same suffering or, more precisely, any theory that would posit a strong, formal link between the two. For Balthasar, Mary cannot grasp her maternal rights and hold onto them as a possession. Rather, her motherhood rests in its unconditional quality, in its total abandonment to the will of the Father. As Aidan Nichols comments, "At the Cross the movement of Mary's continuing consent reaches its climax in her receptive yet supremely creative standing by."[40] To put it another way, at the foot of the Cross, the Annunciation is recapitulated in the darkness of naked faith. Here, divided from him, she is united with him.[41]

The depths of Mary's consent, stripped of everything but its harrowing vulnerability, requires every inch of her capacity to give. She must agree to the sword that pierces her heart, and now it is possible to observe the shape of her obedience: forsaken of every possible comfort, she utters her agreement in silent faith. This is her *kenosis*, her obedient self-emptying in the face of her crucified Son. In other words, it is impossible to fully appropriate Balthasar's reflections about Mary at the foot of the cross without also recalling Paul's theology. Now Mary's *fiat* can be said to conform to her Son's not only by virtue of the fact that both are agreements to the divine saving plan ("let this be . . ."), but also because her agreement requires her total

[40] Nichols, "Von Balthasar and the Co-redemption."

[41] The more traditional understanding of Christ's words of rebuke, that they are in fact a hidden compliment, thus has not been rejected. It has been augmented with a further interpretation: not only do his rebukes point out the depth of Mary's faith instead of his mere physical connection to her (especially, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it" in Lk 11:28), but they further unite her to him in faith by introducing her to an increasingly dark night.

self-surrender. It is this *surrender* that Paul's theology, as Balthasar understands it, helps to describe and to explain. Recall, as illustrated above, how Paul describes Christ as the archetype of the Christian, providing not only an example to imitate, but also giving the believer the ability to imitate him and thereby be conformed to him. Balthasar's emphasis on the "shaping of Christ" in the Christian, drawn as it is from Paul, helps to illuminate Mary's most central qualities. There is no one who better typifies "having in mind Christ Jesus," no one who better displays the unreserved self-gift that comprises faith. Indeed, there is no one who more radically experiences being "buried with" Christ, as happens in baptism, than Mary, who is indeed spiritually crucified and buried with her Son as she observes his crucifixion.

I would like to suggest several insights regarding Balthasar's use of *kenosis* in his Marian reflections. *First*, I will insist that—as much as his reflections are profoundly Johannine, and indeed shaped by the Annunciation in Luke—it is impossible to fully comprehend Balthasar's description of Mary's consent without recollecting his theology of *kenosis*. Mary is obedient, and that obedience is described not simply in Luke's terms, but in fact primarily in Paul's terms: this is the obedience that does not "grasp" its own glory, but achieves it only by relinquishing itself. Balthasar's myriad insistences on Mary's vulnerability, her helplessness, even her separation from her Son, can only make sense in the context of this kenotic sensibility drawn from Paul. Paul's theology juxtaposes obedience to sin with the true obedience of faith (cf. Rom 6), a faith that consists in being conformed to Christ (Rom 8:29; 12:2), and Paul is the key New Testament figure to describe what it means for a Christian to relinquish him- or herself. It is this sensibility, drawn from Christ, that enables Paul to say without reservation: "Even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me" (Phil 2:17-18). He can be glad and rejoice, even if he is "poured out," because Christ was also "poured out" for us.

Second, that *kenosis* plays such a central role in Balthasar's Mariology makes his Mariology profoundly Christological

and—and here is an important note—inextricably ecclesiological. This is deliberate: Balthasar conveys certain suspicions of what he calls "distortions," namely those theologies of Mary that are too one-sidedly Christological, leading to an overemphasis on her distinction from the Church as over and above it.[42] He thinks the Second Vatican Council still left open "the question of her relationship, as one immaculately conceived, to the race of Adam."[43] His theology of Mary's consent, which I am insisting is drawn not only from the Gospels but also from Paul, is presented as the resolution to this question. Mary's self-emptying imitates her Son's, which of course makes the act Christological. Her conforming *kenosis* is at the same time expropriated into the Church as its prime characteristic, and indeed Mary's faith remains not only a model for the Church, but also at its very root. As Balthasar says of the sacraments:

> Could anyone in the Church really grasp and respond to all the grace offered in a sacrament except the Ecclesia immaculate? But the Church includes us imperfect receivers. Therefore, the woman who receives with a perfect Yes must stand behind their often very inadequate receptions.[44]

The Marian *fiat* is foundational to the Church, it is "the full realization of her idea as Church,"[45] and so Mary's faith "stands behind" our own imperfect expressions of faith. Here the perfect and flawed stand side-by-side.[46] Paul's theology of

[42] Balthasar, *TD III*, 312-316.

[43] Balthasar, *TD III*, 318.

[44] Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 111-112.

[45] Balthasar, *Explorations II*, 161.

[46] This is a common idea in Balthasar's ecclesial thought. He will not, on the one hand, call the Church imperfect, since it finds its perfection in Christ and the Spirit. On the other, he will not turn a blind eye to clear historical blemishes in the Church's image. See "The Church's Form: Beautiful and Marred," in *TD IV*, 453-470; cf. "*Casta Meretrix*," in *Explorations II*, 193-288. We should note, with interest, that Balthasar's reflections do not simply encompass a divine-human dichotomy: the divine aspects of the Church being perfect and the human imperfect. Mary is fully human and perfect.

"cruciformity" thus provides the key to understanding Mary not only Christologically, but also ecclesiologically.[47]

Third and finally, Balthasar's emphasis on *kenosis* as a fundamental Christological attribute and therefore as the primary characteristic of Mary and the Church makes his Mariology most unusual: his Mariology is fundamentally Pauline. This is strange because Paul never mentions Mary except to say that Christ was "born of a woman" (Gal 4:4). It is strange because Catholic Marian tradition has tended to prefer the Gospels of Luke and John for the very reason that they discuss Mary, and the association with the woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 12 has a long typological tradition. It is strange, finally, because the Gospels much more easily mesh with the Catholic preference for describing Mary with a rich sense of narrative: her whole biography has long been considered the biography of the Church and of every faithful believer. Letters, static to a situation or problem, are more difficult to incorporate into a set of living images: think, for example, of the rosary and how it functions as a manner of placing one's self into the events of Christ's life. None of the epistles appear in the rosary. Besides, to repeat the obvious, Paul does not discuss Mary. So Balthasar's Mariology makes the odd claim of being profoundly Pauline, and we should indeed consider it rather strange.[48]

Because his Mariology is marked by Paul's theology, he can make a strong argument for a Christological-ecclesiological image of Mary. Her kenotic obedience, understood as imitating the obedience described in Philippians, is precisely what it means to "have in mind Christ Jesus." Paul calls us to look to Christ and to imitate what we see, and in the same epistle he

[47] This ecclesiological-Christological double-anchor is not only a favorite of Balthasar's, but also Ratzinger's. For a series of books on "cruciformity" in Paul, see two books by Michael J. Ghorman: *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001) and *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; W. B. Eerdmans, 2009).

[48] It is interesting to note that a New Testament scholar has made a similar connection between Paul's epistles and Mary; cf. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999).

also calls us to "join in imitating" him (Phil 3:17; 4:9). Or, as he says with even more clarity in First Corinthians, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1; 4:16). It is not difficult for Balthasar to move from Paul's basic exhortation to imitate those who imitate Christ—particularly the Apostles—to the figure of Mary, who imitates Christ both distinctly and best.

V. Synthesis and Critique

Some may take issue with Balthasar's profoundly passive account of Mary and the Church's action.[49] The prerogative remains entirely with Christ, an insistence particularly problematic in the case of feminist interpretations of Mary. With respect to this, Balthasar's theology of the feminine and theology of gender difference have come under a great deal of criticism. Feminists have questioned his essentialist categories as well as his use of gender difference as an analogue for the relationship between God and humanity. Michelle A. Gonzalez has written on Balthasar regarding these topics, reiterating both his theology and critiques of it.[50] Gonzalez questions Balthasar's essentialism, yet also points out that, due to this same theological move, Balthasar can account for embodied sexual difference more readily than modern feminism. At the same time, Gonzalez criticizes Balthasar for unfairly restricting the "dynamism" of sexuality, especially when the rest of his theology is focused so much on relational, dynamic categories. My paper has not, for the most part, dealt with these aspects of Balthasar's thinking. While I sympathize with Gonzalez, I would challenge her to consider whether the rest of Balthasar's theology is really as "dynamic" as she categorizes it. At every turn, Balthasar's relational dynamism is supported by more "static" categories of being. This does not fault Gonzalez so much as Balthasar's scholarship in general, which has yet to fully

[49] An example of a more active account of Mary's participation in redemption can be found in Mark Miravalle, *Introduction to Mary: The Heart of Marian Doctrine and Devotion* (Goleta, Calif.: Queenship Pub., 1997).

[50] Michelle A. Gonzalez, "Hans Urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 566-595.

account for *Theo-Logic*, the last part of his trilogy and his most concerted examination of truth and being. Balthasar's dialogue with categories of relation and categories of being is a strength, keeping his theology "rooted" in nature and yet "dynamic" for that very reason.

Two points will clarify Balthasar's position and perhaps soothe objections against his descriptions of Mary's passivity: (1) Balthasar's sense of "passive" never excludes active participation. Instead, it articulates the "direction" of the action, which is ever and always *received* from God. We are called to Christ by God the Father, and we never call ourselves. (2) Balthasar's "passive" account has the benefit of drawing a clear line of distinction between Christ's sacrifice on the cross (which only he can really accomplish) and the Church's sacrifice (which can only ever be participative). It is not mere word games to insist that Mary truly participates in the cross—not just subjectively—and yet that she does so in a dependent manner. Her *dependence* limits her action and at the same time enables it. Indeed, Mary's participation is a lesson not simply on the dignity of the creature vis-à-vis God, but is also—and primarily—a lesson in grace.

Balthasar's firm insistence that all Mariology is Christological and ecclesiological makes his Christological exegesis govern his Marian exegesis, so that the former must always be described before the latter can be understood. This is, I think, a helpful move on Balthasar's part. It is helpful ecumenically, since it can work to reassure Protestants that Catholic Marian devotion is not secretly unhinged from and set against allegiance to Christ. It also imitates the basic structure of the chapter on Mary in *Lumen Gentium*, which also firmly places Mary in the context of both Christ and the Church. I also think that Balthasar's exegesis imitates the New Testament's own emphasis on Christ, and therefore allows Marian exegetical thinking to imitate Scripture's structure more lucidly.

Despite my affirmations, I think it is still allowable to have a number of concerns about Balthasar's exegesis. The first is that it is so Pauline. While I find this move ingenious, it is not without its problems: Paul's epistles do not in fact discuss Mary, and so a Pauline Mariology—in fact, it would be more accurate to

say a "Johannine-Pauline Mariology"—can only ever be arrived at after a long chain of exegetical and theological arguments, as my essay itself has attested. This does not make a Pauline vision of Mary ineffective or invalid so much as it gives us caution not to spread an exegetical argument too thin, and to recognize indeed the limitations of such a vision. It is still true to say that Paul's observations must lead to insights in Mary, since Paul has provided authentic and lasting insight into the Christian faith that Mary herself exemplifies.

The second is a related exegetical concern, and that is that it is very rare to find Balthasar spending long lengths of time on a single passage in Scripture. Instead, he weaves passages together, carefully skirting the line between creative intercanonical exegesis and proof-texting. While his exegesis for the most part proves self-consistent, it is fair to wonder whether the intensity of his intertextual exegesis can be sustained in theological exegesis, or whether it will eventually fly off the rails into obscurantism. This is why Balthasar's Christocentrism, formed as it is by the major ecumenical councils, is so vital to his thinking. It provides the sufficient anchor for his exegesis, and so it must our own, though I think historical-critical method gives us good reason to retain a strong sense of caution when it comes to freely associating scriptural texts with one another.

VI. Conclusion

The "Christological-Scriptural control" for Mary's participation in the cross is the Person of Christ. The hypostatic union renders Christ absolutely unique, yet allows for Mary's authentic participation. Only he is totally identified with his mission; only in him are the divine will and a human will united ontologically, as hypostasis is an ontological category. Yet, he wills that she, too, participate—concretely. This means that Mary's "Yes," while authentic to her, is only ever uttered in grace. Indeed, her "Yes" participates in his precisely through their distance from one another.

Hans Urs von Balthasar's understanding of Mary's participation in redemption, and therefore of the Church's participation

in redemption, takes on an unusual cast even for a Catholic. His interest in Mary, who is never far from the Catholic imagination, is nevertheless governed by strongly Johannine and Pauline concepts, the second of which is most unusual. Whereas in most cases Luke provides the primary data for Catholic reflections on Mary, here we have a Pauline sensibility, one that would insist on Mary's total obedience, on her emptying herself to the point of being buried with Christ and rising with him. Her total obedience, its shape formed entirely by her Son's own obedience, is the key to her real participation in redemption and its real limit. So, too, in the case of the Church, so that through our total surrender, which is only an imitation of Christ's surrender, we are "crucified with him" (Rom 6:6) and on the cross "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14).